

Mercer Island in Focus: The use of photovoice for youth-driven substance abuse assessment and health promotion

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Background: Existing research on substance abuse prevention curricula for youth confirms the need to seek strategies that combine the strengths of researchers with community expertise. Given that youth are the experts on their own lives it is important to include them in all phases of community-based prevention efforts.

Methods: The Mercer Island in Focus project used the community-based participatory action research (PAR) method of photovoice to better understand contributing factors to adolescent alcohol and other drug (AOD) use in the affluent community of Mercer Island, WA. The project engaged a group of 9 high school youth from the community, and asked them to take photographs to answer the question: What contributes to adolescents' decisions to use or not to use alcohol and other drugs?

Results: Participants took a total of 50 photographs, 30 of which they selected for a community-wide exhibit. The 30 photographs were displayed alongside the 9 themes determined most important by the photovoice participants. Photographs reflected the youths' perceptions that in many ways, their families, schools, peers, and popular culture condone or support a local drinking culture among teenagers.

Conclusions: By including youth in the qualitative and participatory data collection of photovoice, the community of Mercer Island was able to gather important information that will improve the already existing community assessment, which was developed by the local Communities that Care Coalition. The expanded community assessment will influence decisions about the most effective response to the elevated incidence of adolescent AOD use in the community.

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This research was partially supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration's Maternal and Child Health Bureau (Title V, Social Security Act), grant # T76MC00011-21-00)