

Volunteering, helping others decreases substance use in rural teens, study finds

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Young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 report the highest rates of substance use and dependence, according to the National Survey on Drug Use & Health. A new study from the University of Missouri found that rural adolescents who engage in prosocial behaviors, such as volunteering and helping others, are less likely to use substances as young adults.

Gustavo Carlo, Millsap Professor of Diversity in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, examined data from surveys given to a group of rural youths from junior high school to young adulthood. Carlo found that prosocial behaviors serve as protective factors against adolescents engaging in risky behaviors. Thus, teens who engage in more prosocial behaviors are less likely to get drunk or use marijuana as [young adults](#).

"Prosocial behaviors are good for society and communities, but also they are a marker of moral development," Carlo said. "Parents want their kids to be kind, selfless, considerate and respectful. We now have evidence that these prosocial behaviors make adolescents less likely to break moral codes and engage in illegal activities like getting drunk and smoking marijuana."

The study focused on rural youths because previous research indicates they may be more apt to use illicit substances earlier, putting them at risk for developing addiction problems as adults. Rural communities tend to be more spread out, making it difficult for adolescents to get

transportation to events and activities. In addition, rural communities often have less access to recreation centers, spaces for meetings, volunteers to run programs and funding for organized activities.

"There is a tendency for youths to take part in risky behaviors if they are not engaged in positive, structured activities," Carlo said. "Many [rural communities](#) have suffered from the economic downturn and are unable to offer opportunities for youth activities. Financial stress can also affect the psychological health of parents making them less cognizant of how children spend their time."

Carlo says the research has important implications for [substance use](#) prevention and intervention programs aimed at teens.

"Research shows that prevention programs are more effective and economical," Carlo said. "If we can develop programs that foster prosocial behaviors, we know the programs will decrease the likelihood that adolescents will use substances in adulthood."

More information: The study, "The Longitudinal Relationships Between Rural Adolescents' Prosocial Behaviors and Young Adult Substance Use," was published in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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