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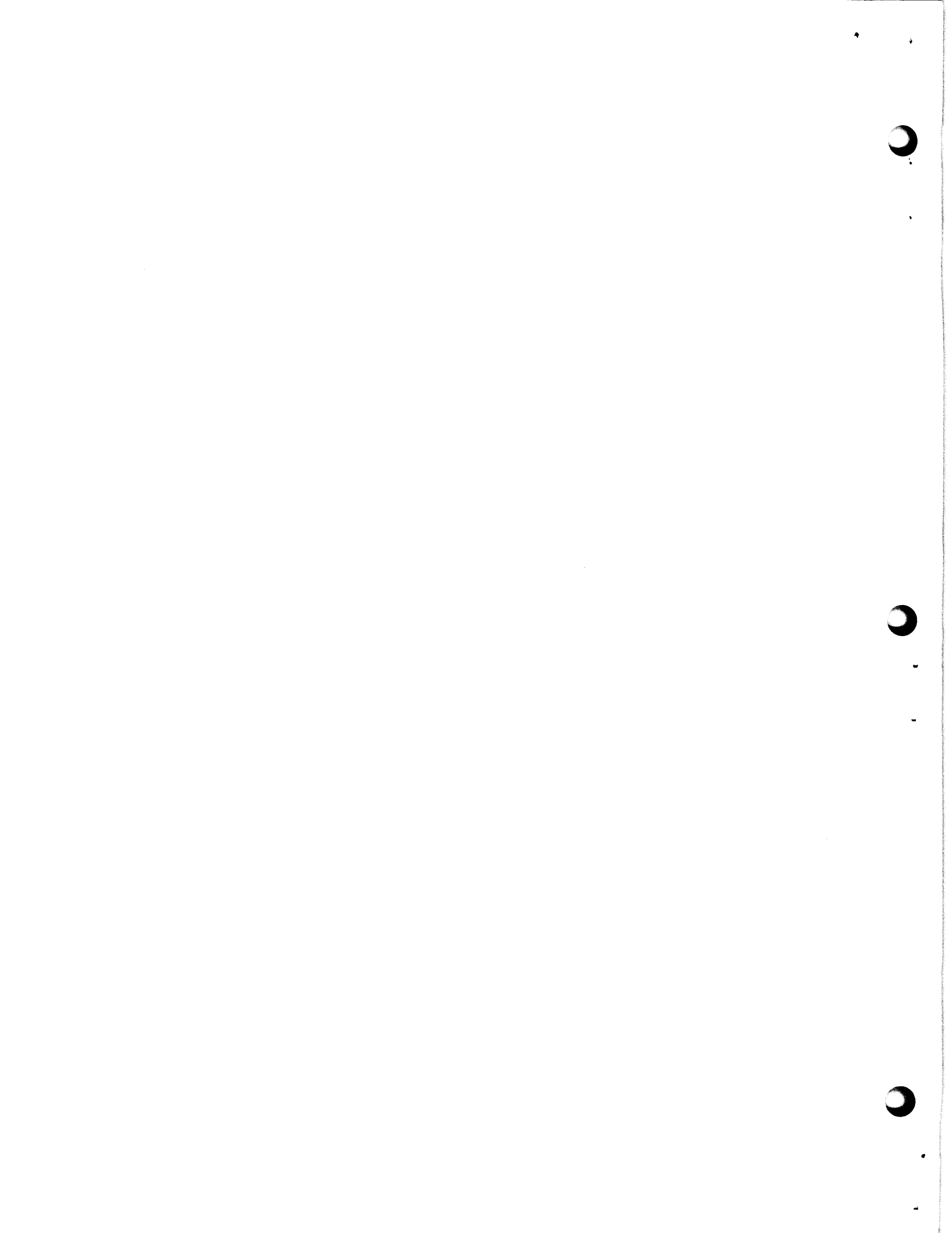
Illegal Drug Use in Rural Areas

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## Illegal Drug Use In Rural Areas

Dispersed farmsteads and small towns have traditionally been viewed in the United States as being desirable places in which to live and rear a family. Nonmetropolitan areas are often perceived as providing wholesome physical and social environments where the best aspects of living can be achieved. It is assumed that low population density, dispersed settlement patterns, similar social characteristics of neighbors and friends, and shared values and beliefs which characterize many rural areas serve to shield rural people from various types of deviant behaviors and social injustices which may be present in the larger society.

These perceptions of rural areas had their genesis in early Jeffersonian agrarianism which is a philosophy that was widely embraced in this society in the 1800's and early 1900's. This philosophy portrayed rural life and living in a very idealistic manner and tended to ignore the numerous social problems that were clearly present in nonmetropolitan regions of the society at the time. Social problems such as poverty, disease, lack of public services, environmental degradation, and numerous other social concerns were conveniently ignored. Unfortunately, many of the same problems exist today and are ignored for many of the same reasons. Recent research, however, conducted by social scientists interested in rural people and their problems has demonstrated that many social problems are present in rural areas of the United States which adversely affect the quality of living. It has been shown, for example, that crime is a serious problem, service provision is difficult, small farmers are being displaced from farming, poverty is not being greatly reduced, medical and other professionals have left rural areas and are not being attracted back, drug abuse is widely practiced by rural youth and other social problems exist. Each of these social problems contributes to the erosion of the life-styles in rural areas and is worthy of

corrective action.

While many conditions must be satisfied before any social problem in rural areas can be addressed, the first issue that must be considered is "awareness of the problem." The illusion must be destroyed that social problems are primarily confined to urban areas. People must also have valid information concerning the nature of the problem and be made aware of possible solutions. The purpose of this article is to discuss some of the recent research findings associated with illegal drug use among rural youths and to suggest some possible approaches to address the problem.

The first myth associated with rural drug abuse is the belief that young people in rural areas do not engage in the use of illegal drugs. It has been shown in recent research that high school students in several rural areas of the country are actively engaged in the use of illegal drugs. A large majority of rural youths have consumed alcohol and quite a number of these young people are frequent users of the drug. Cigarettes and marijuana are also quite commonly used while amphetamines and barbiturates are less frequently used. Research conducted in Ohio and Georgia among high school students has shown that approximately 80% of the students studied had consumed alcohol at some time in their life, approximately 50% had used marijuana at least once, about 70% had used cigarettes. In Ohio, over 30% of the students studied had used amphetamines and barbiturates. Data from Georgia revealed that 17% had used amphetamines and 13% had used barbiturates. In sum, the evidence shows that illegal drug use among rural youths is quite high and wide-spread.

Many ideas have been offered to explain why some people use drugs more frequently than others. Several of these explanations were examined to determine if frequency of illegal drug use could be predicted. Many factors were examined and very few were shown to be good predictors of drug abuse.

The factors shown not to be good predictors of drug use are: family size, preceived income, parents' use of alcohol, parents' use of illegal drugs, gender, parents' interpersonal relationships, academic performance, parents' marital status, type of homelife, and race. Three factors were shown to have a slight influence on frequency of drug use. These factors are age, religiosity, and experience with serious problems. The factors shown to be the most predictive of the frequency of drug use are: identification with the drug taking group, dating frequency, participation in shoplifting, and sale of drugs. The research findings show that students who more strongly identify with the drug user group, date more frequently, have participated in shoplifting, and have sold drugs have a much higher probability of being more frequent users of illegal drugs. Also, high school students who are younger, who perceive themselves to be more religious, and who have not encountered serious personal problems will tend to use drugs slightly less frequently. It should be noted, however, that the last three variables influence the frequency of drug abuse very little.

Some of the most interesting findings are for those factors shown not to be predictive of drug use. It has been argued that males are much more likely to use drugs than females but this was shown not to be true. Females are assuming behavioral patterns similar to males in many phases of life so it should not surprise us that females are becoming quite similar to males in terms of participation rates in deviant behavior. This finding suggests that programs to reduce drug abuse must be directed toward both sexes not just to males.

It has been asserted that youngsters are not responsible for their own behavior since they are so strongly influenced by parents' behaviors. The findings do not support that position in terms of drug abuse. How well parents get along with each other, type of homelife, marital status

(married versus nonmarried), and parents' use of drugs did not influence frequency of illegal drug use among the students studied. The belief that a happy homelife will be a major impediment to drug use is questionable. Strong family units with very harmonious interpersonal relationships are almost as likely to have youngsters engaged in illegal drug use as fragmented and strife-torn families. This finding also suggests that programs designed to enhance the social cohesiveness and harmonious relationships of family units will do little to reduce frequency of illegal drug use among youth. In essence, drug abuse permeates all family types.

Similar findings were noted for race, income, and family size. It was once thought that blacks and other minorities composed the user group of illegal drugs. Closely aligned with race was income and family size. It was argued that poor nonwhites with large families were the principal users of illegal drugs. This has been disproved in our research. Illegal drug use affects all income groups, racial groups, and families of different sizes.

Of particular interest to me as an educator are the findings associated with academic performance. It has been thought that better students will be immune to drug abuse since they are too intelligent to use drugs or have other pursuits that displace interest in drug use. The existing research suggest that drug users are found in all levels of academic achievement. High achievers are almost as likely to use illegal drugs as low achievers. Ignoring high academic achievers in anti-drug programs would be a serious error.

Examination of the factors shown to have some effect on drug use showsthat experience with stress can slightly affect drug use. This suggests that a large number of young people who experience stress do not turn to drugs to solve their problems. Those who use the "coping with

stress" arguments to explain drug use are probably overstating the case considerably.

Religion has been argued to "block" many types of deviant behaviors but the data do not support such a position in terms of illegal drug use. Persons who were more religious tended to be slightly less prone to participate in drug abuse but not very much. This finding means that the church as a belief building institution is not very effective in influencing young people relative to deviant behavior in the form of drug abuse (also shoplifting and sale of drugs). It may also mean that religious groups have not recognized the extent of drug abuse and have not related religious belief structures to the resolution of the problem. This finding clearly shows that many young people regularly attending religious services and consider themselves to be quite religious use illegal drugs.

The variable shown to be the best predictor of the frequency of illegal drug use is identification with drug users. If young people believe they have a great deal in common with the drug user groups, then they will tend to use drugs much more frequently. This is an important finding and should provide a starting point for the development of programs to reduce the incidence of illegal drug use in rural areas. Programs to influence self-perceptions and group identity appear to be the most fruitful avenue for the development of drug abuse control programs.

Dating frequency is related to illegal drug abuse. Persons who engage in more frequent dating are more likely to engage in illegal drug use. This is consistent with the arguments commonly advanced that peer group pressure will affect drug use. Such findings should not be interpreted as suggesting that young people should be prohibited from dating. It does suggest that young people who are more active with the opposite sex are more strongly influenced by peer pressure. Such an interpretation

implies that dating is not the cause of drug use but that the people with whom the person associates influence behavior.

The remaining two factors which were good predictors of illegal drug use are shoplifting and sale of drugs. Young people must finance their drug use and the means of doing so is by theft and drug sales. Persons who use drugs are more frequently engaged in shoplifting and drug sales. Another source of money is jobs. Some evidence exists which suggests that young people who hold jobs tend to use drugs slightly more than those not employed.

The respondents to our studies were asked to tell us where they did drugs and the most frequently mentioned places were in cars, at parties, at school, and at home. Most people are not surprised at the first two but are often "shocked" at the latter two. Frequently, parents and teachers are not aware that the young people are using drugs at school and at home. This is especially true for parents since they do not suspect their youngsters are using drugs. If parents develop a belief that their children will not be affected by drugs and ignore the issue, they may be creating a situation which could have serious consequences for their children. Programs to enlighten parents and teachers about drug abuse would certainly aid in the identification of the incidence of drug use and provide local groups with information regarding the extent of the problem.

Lastly, students were asked where they would seek help for themselves or for a friend who had a drug problem. A small minority of students indicated they would seek help from a friend, relative, or a drug counselor but a great number of students indicated they would not seek help. Commonly recognized sources of help such as medical professionals, teachers, religious leaders, social workers, telephone "hot" lines, police agencies, and so forth were viewed as very poor sources of help. This finding suggests



that the existing support institutions in the study areas are failing very badly in providing support mechanisms for young people. The support institutions that are supposed to be "serving" the needs of young people with social problems apparently are not perceived by the students as being helpful.

I have attempted in this article to summarize the major findings from two major studies of rural drug abuse with which I have been associated and to relate those findings to other studies conducted in the U.S. Our studies have documented that: 1) illegal drug use is quite extensive in the rural areas investigated; 2) some commonly held explanations of drug abuse are not very useful; 3) identification with drug user groups and peer group influence are important predictors of drug use; 4) illegal drug use is often done with peers and in certain places such as home; and 5) young people are much more inclined to seek help for drug related problems from people their own age and from relatives.

All of this information suggests that easy solutions to the illegal drug use problem do not exist but that certain steps can be taken to address the problem. Some of the suggestions are: 1) creation of awareness programs; 2) creation of programs to enhance young people's self-concept so they can resist peer pressure to engage in deviant behaviors; 3) development of counseling programs that use counselors of the same age group who are well trained in drug abuse; and 4) modernizing existing social institutions in terms of approaches and skills so they may address drug problems (other social problems as well).

Drug abuse cannot be ignored in rural areas because it exists and is extensively practiced. The task is to devise creative mechanisms to resolve the problem.

