

Growing up in the country—in their own words

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Aim: To describe new qualitative evidence from the ARCHER (Adolescent Rural Cohort, Hormones, Health, Education, Environment and Relationships) study related to the adolescent rural experience.

Method: The ARCHER Study is a three-year multidisciplinary longitudinal rural cohort study (n = 342) of adolescents (recruited 10-12 years) from central west NSW. The ARCHER study includes an extensive yearly parent and child questionnaire including the Child Behaviour Checklist and Youth Self Report and a range of qualitative measures. Qualitative data from the ARCHER study at baseline and first year follow up will be coded and analysed statistically. These measures provide new information on the experience of rural life: likes, dislikes, concerns and personal strengths of adolescents and concordance between child and parent responses. Differences in responses are explored emphasising temporal, social and geographic variables including remoteness, age, gender, Indigenous identity, and household socioeconomic status.

Results: Preliminary analysis of baseline data reveals systematic differences in responses across temporal, social and geographic variables of ARCHER adolescents. Indigenous youth were more likely to report facets of the built environment as elements of their experience that they 'liked' whereas non-Indigenous youth were more likely to list facets of the natural environment. It also appeared that younger participants were more likely to 'like' the natural environment than older participants. 'Dislike' of the built environment was more common for older participants. Furthermore, facets of community and relationships were greater 'liked' by Indigenous youth than non-Indigenous youth, and were more likely 'disliked' by males than females. Further analysis will examine relationships between 'likes' and 'dislikes' of country living and characteristics of the children at both baseline and first year follow up. Concordance between child and parent responses related to concerns and strengths will also be explored.

Relevance: Findings are of value to those engaging with rural youth; health professionals, educators, community groups and parents. Such information provides valuable data for understanding rural populations and informs future research and policy that seeks to improve rural health and wellbeing.

Conclusion: This research provides novel information about the rural experience of distinct subgroups within rural populations. Young people in the ARCHER study provided rich information on their perceptions of living in a rural area. There appear to be associations between personal or household characteristics and viewpoints, which may reveal insights into the diversity of the rural experience.