

Growing up in the country—in their own words

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Aim

To investigate the psychosocial health of adolescents living in rural NSW.

Method

Free text analysis of open answer baseline questionnaire data collected in the Adolescent Rural Cohort Study of Hormones, Health, Education, Environments and Relationships (ARCHER Study) was performed. The ARCHER Study is a three-year multidisciplinary longitudinal rural cohort study (N = 342). The study includes an extensive questionnaire administered annually to participating adolescents and their parent(s)/guardian. This questionnaire includes a range of free text psychosocial measures related to the experience of rural life: likes, dislikes, concerns and personal strengths of adolescents. Free text analysis of open answer baseline questionnaire data was performed and differences between parents and children's concerns and differences between normal weight and adolescents with overweight or obesity (O&O) was specifically explored.

Results

Analysis produced a large body of results with 3,461 unique responses. Two-thirds of adolescents (68%) described concerns about school (predominantly concerns about relationships with other students), and 20% claimed to have "no concerns". In contrast, 99% of adults expressed at least one concern about their child, most commonly "academic" (17%). The data illustrate a greater diversity among parent concerns and a thematic disassociation between the relative type and magnitude of parent and adolescent concerns. Approximately a third of the adolescents were O&O (32%). Parents of O&O adolescents were more likely to be concerned about depressive symptomatology than parents of normal weight adolescents. Analysis of adolescent's description of the best things about themselves reveal that O&O adolescents are more likely to attribute external (rather than internal) aspects (e.g. their friends are the best things), whereas normal weight adolescents commonly recognised their friendliness as a 'best thing'. These findings suggest a weak cognitive style and mental fragility of O&O adolescents growing up in the country.

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 characteristics and viewpoints, which may reveal insights into the diversity of the rural experience.

Presenters

Greg Martin is currently studying Honours in Psychology at the University of Sydney and holds a Bachelor of Communication and Media Studies from the University of Wollongong. Greg joined the School of Rural Health in 2014 as a Summer Research Scholar supported by a scholarship from the University of Sydney Medical School. Greg has a keen interest in population health, international development studies and mental health and psychosocial support programs.

Karen Paxton joined the School of Rural Health in 2007 to develop and coordinate the ARCHER Study (Adolescent rural cohort, hormones, health, education, environment and relationships). Karen has a background in rural nursing and midwifery in the public and private sectors. In the past she has also coordinated other research projects with the School of Rural Health and Division's of General Practice. She has keen interest in rural health, adolescent health and qualitative research.