2013 Research at Andrews

Andrews University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/researchbrochure

Recommended Citation

http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/researchbrochure/5

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Research and Creative Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Annual Research Brochure by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact trobtsn@andrews.edu.
The Adventist Advantage:

The Health Risk Study and Adventist Influence

In 1989, two former Adventists, Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart wrote a book called Seeking a Sanctuary, which proposed that the unique subculture of Seventh-day Adventism had successfully replicated the American dream, and had created a world that managed to keep its members protected from many of the risks of the outside world—economic instability, risk behaviors, unemployment and crime.

Much of the research currently being conducted in the Department of Behavioral Sciences is coming to a similar conclusion: there’s something about the Adventist subculture that significantly decreases its members’ participation in what behavioral scientists term “risk behaviors”—drug and alcohol use, unsafe sexual practices—and increases the number of smart life choices young Adventists make.

Herb Helm and Duane McBride, professors in the Department of Behavioral Sciences, have been working on several studies that demonstrate this phenomenon. The first is a new iteration of an ongoing study examining drug and alcohol consumption at Andrews University.

A number of studies have collected data on drug and alcohol use at colleges and universities, but few investigate institutions with prohibitionist drug and alcohol policies. Prohibitionist policies, such Andrews University’s, maintain “a conservative, religious policy against substance use and prohibits use of tobacco, alcohol, or mind-altering drugs” (H.W. Helm et al., 2009). And while a prohibitionist policy radically decreases usage, it understandably will not eliminate all instances of use. Enter the Health Risk Study.

The Andrews University Health Risk Study began in 1990 and recurs every five years. It is sponsored and conducted by the Institute for Prevention of Addictions (IPA), which McBride directs. “Over the years, the study has grown from more of an epidemiology of substance abuse behaviors to include more health risk behaviors and to be more theoretically directed,” says McBride. The 2012 study included several questions about possibly related circumstances, such as family situation, exercise levels, and past traumatic experiences, that could help researchers theorize possible correlations between risk behaviors and external factors.

The survey reached a large percentage of the Andrews student body—between 450 and 800 usable responses in the 2012 edition. The survey asks questions about the students’ health practices such as “Within the past year/30 days, how often have you used [substance]?” “How many drinks do you consume a week on average?” The survey also asked respondents to indicate their reasons for not participating in these behaviors, with reasons ranging from “Concern about my health/academic success/future occupation” to “Drugs cost too much money.”

Past editions of the study suggest that Andrews’ use rate is two-thirds lower than the national average, and initial analysis of last year’s study seems to indicate that that trend continues to hold. Past surveys have also found that overall, low usage rates exhibit a significant correlation to factors of religion, parental bonding, commitment to health and the future, and a lower incidence of traumatic experiences. Additionally, Andrews’ use rates tend to parallel national trends, Helm says. When national drug and alcohol use dips or peaks slightly, so do Andrews’ use rates.

Another set of behaviors that interests researchers across the nation is sexual practices and trends associated with the hookup culture. Within the last 20 years or so, hookup culture has become widespread on college campuses, to the point that 60–80% of North American young adults report having had some sort of hookup experience (Justin R. Garcia, February 2013 Monitor on Psychology). Andrews is the first Adventist campus to investigate sexual behaviors on its campus, and may be the first organization to study sexual behaviors in a prohibitionist environment.

Above: Duane McBride, Herb Helm
In 2012, part of the AU Health Risk Study included questions about sexual behaviors. The questions measured actual practices as well as comfort levels, with questions such as “Which of the listed sexual behaviors would you feel comfortable doing prior to marriage?” and “With how many people have you hooked up with?”

Data on sexual behavior is harder to correlate across the nation, Helm says, “because researchers are asking the questions in different ways and approaching it from various angles.” The Andrews researchers approached it from an angle of risk, investigating possible connections between major life trauma and sexual practices. Initial analysis of these results suggests similar trends as the drug and alcohol study—while some behaviors do occur, their incidence rate is much lower than the national average of 60–80%.

The Health Risk Study investigators originally expected their results to reflect the phenomenon of “cultural leveling,” which occurs when subcultures within a larger society become more like the dominant culture. “That doesn’t appear to be occurring in terms of substance abuse,” Helm says. Adventist college students maintain their low substance abuse rates, even as the American college culture continues to party.

The fact that Adventist college students consistently seem to be making better life choices than many of their peers suggests that Adventist culture does something to shield its young members from harmful behaviors, an intriguing possibility to both the Adventist church and researchers across the nation. The lack of much cultural leveling in Adventist college culture is an anomaly that McBride believes is of further interest: “Sociologically, we’re a functional subculture in a competitive marketplace,” he says. “What we’re doing seems to be working for us, and spiritual involvement seems to be the most important factor in many of these behaviors.”

“Adventist college students maintain their low substance abuse rates, even as the American college culture continues to party.”