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Rachel A. Sebastian

Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation

Lara M. Gunderson

Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation

Cathleen E. Willging

Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation

Mary M. Ramos

University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center, Department of Pediatrics

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Ambivalence of School-Based Health Center Providers Regarding Adolescent Marijuana Use

Original Completed Research

Authors Rachel Sebastian,¹ Lara M. Gunderson¹, Cathleen E. Willging¹, Mary M. Ramos²

1. Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation
2. University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center, Department of Pediatrics

Keywords Marijuana, counseling, school-based health center, adolescent, substance use, provider education

Abstract (234 words)

Objective. As part of a larger study to evaluate the implementation of Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) at school-based health centers (SBHCs), we interviewed SBHC providers regarding their perceptions of substance use among adolescents seen at their SBHCs, experiences providing care for students with substance use and other mental health issues, and their concerns around marijuana specifically.

Methods. We interviewed 12 primary and behavioral health providers who worked at five SBHCs in New Mexico. The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. Two research team members independently analyzed the transcripts. We undertook iterative comparative analysis of qualitative data specifically related to marijuana and substance use, coding segments of text on key sensitizing concepts.

Results. Six key themes emerged from the provider interviews: (1) marijuana use is indicative of underlying mental health issues; (2) normalization of marijuana use; (3) hesitance to endorse marijuana as a medical treatment for youth; (4) risks of marijuana use relative to alcohol use; (5) tension between building trust with adolescent patients and asserting authority; and (6) knowledge and skills gaps that impact counseling.

Conclusion. Our findings elucidate key domains to address to support providers in their efforts to increase the health and safety of adolescents in a state that is rapidly expanding legislation and acceptance of marijuana. These findings may benefit providers in states that are enacting policies favorable to marijuana use.