Youth Vaping and Drinking
Focus Group and Key Informant Interview Results

Introduction

The rates of youth drinking have typically been high in Meeker, McLeod and Sibley counties. For example, in Sibley County the 2019 percent of 9th and 11th graders who used alcohol in the last 30 days was approximately 20% and 33% respectively compared to 12% and 23% for 9th and 11th graders in Minnesota overall[1]. Likewise, vaping is on the rise across the state and nation to the extent that it has been referred to as an epidemic by many public health professionals. Furthermore, rates are even higher in Sibley County than in Minnesota; in 2019 the overall rate of e-cigarette use in the last 30 days across 8th, 9th and 11th graders was 25% in Sibley County and 17% for the same grades in all of Minnesota[2]. The most recent available data for Meeker and McLeod Counties are from a different source and last collected in 2017, yet the rate of e-cigarette use in the last 30 days for 7th, 9th and 11th graders was already 8.5% in Meeker County and 9.5% in McLeod County[3]. Because of these high and rising rates, Meeker McLeod Sibley (MMS) Community Health Services staff decided they needed to gather qualitative information to understand why youth in MMS drink and vape and generate ideas for addressing these issues. Therefore, they conducted key informant interviews and focus groups with parents, professionals who work with youth and youth.

Between July 24th and September 18th, 2019, MMS staff conducted 10 key informant interviews with adult professionals working with youth and five focus groups: two with a total thirteen youth ages 14-18, one focus group with parents of youth, one focus group with adults who work with youth and one focus group with adult professionals.   In total, they talked with 30 adults, representing law enforcement, parents of youth, staff working in human services and school staff. A standard protocol was used to facilitate the discussions; however, youth and adults were given similar, yet slightly different questions.   The questions were developed by MMS staff and reviewed by a contracted evaluator. The protocol covered questions on reasons for drinking and vaping, barriers and suggestions for reducing use.   The following report is a summary of results from these conversations. Paragraphs are organized with the most common themes presented first, followed by themes and responses with fewer respondents. Because one of the purposes of this project is to gather and generate ideas, almost all ideas are included even if mentioned by only one person.

Results

Education
Some youth shared they have learned about alcohol and vaping in health related classes, while a few others said they have not learned about vaping in any classes. Those that did have exposure to these topics in health related classes, mentioned learning about the effects and consequences of drinking and

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[1] Minnesota Student Survey Interagency Team. Minnesota Student Survey 2019. Roseville, MN: Minnesota Department of Education, 2019.
[2] Ibid.
[3] 2017 Pact for Families SHARE Survey.

vaping, drinking and driving, acting out a court case where someone was killed in an incident that involved alcohol, and learning about drinking and vaping in DARE (5th grade).

Youth Drinking

Adults consider youth drinking to be a big deal.

All adult participants [4] thought drinking is a big deal for youth who are under 18 and most thought it is a big deal for youth who are over 18 (and under 21); one respondent thought less so for youth over 18 because they understand the 'if you can fight for your country (you can drink)' reasoning and in one focus group participants thought marijuana is the 'go to' for youth as it is easy to obtain. When participants were asked why they believed it was a big deal, their responses included:

- Alcohol is a mind altering substance and impairs judgement and they (youth) may do risky things, which is furthered because their frontal lobes are not developed.
- Youth don't know how to be responsible with drinking and driving.
- Drinking can lead to consequences, including permanently existing on social media.
- They could form a habit and/or drinking could lead to other drug use.

Youth use alcohol for a variety of reasons but the leading response was to be socially accepted.

Almost all youth and adult respondents thought youth use alcohol because of peer pressure, to look cool and/or be socially accepted. This is at least partly because social media makes it look cool, normal and fun and because it's socially accepted, role modeled, and often allowed by adults, including parents. Youth respondents reported they see alcohol on social media but not as much as vaping. Several respondents believed youth use alcohol to manage their stress/mental health, which is impacted by social media. Other reasons given for underage alcohol use included lack of family support, alcohol being considered a necessity to have fun/party, youth liking the effects as it helps them to be more social and that youth binge drink because they didn't learn moderation at a younger age.

Social influences are viewed as a significant barrier for reducing youth use; about half of respondents discussed that parental attitudes around use is a barrier because parents allow it or are in denial their kids are drinking. Similarly, several respondents referred to the influence of friends and the desire to be socially accepted and that in general, there is a high social acceptance of drinking. In addition, several respondents said easy access to alcohol is a barrier to preventing youth alcohol use. Youth respondents confirmed alcohol is easy to access saying 'it's everywhere' and parents are a main source as well as older classmates or kids who have graduated. Lack of education for parents and students was also noted as a barrier; one adult said the DARE program is taught in the 5th grade but there is nothing else offered in the remaining grades. Other barriers discussed were lack of organized activities, lack of two parent families, social media, youth attitude of invincibility and defiance and that youth are getting messages (related to alcohol use) from other youth, which is an issue because youth don't want to listen to adults.

Participating in activities and education (about alcohol use and laws) were the top two suggestions for reducing use.

- About half of the respondents proposed keeping kids busy through sports, work, and other extracurricular activities both in and out of school, including more alcohol-free things to do in the area i.e. bowling, mentoring, youth groups. The youth thought more activities would have

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[4] Youth participants were asked about this topic in a different way, shared below in the vaping section.

the biggest impact. One person commented that Meeker County is doing a good job at offering a broader range of activities such as a trap shooting club and a fishing club. However, one adult cautioned groups are effective for those who want to be part of them, but likely those outside of the groups are the ones who need to be part of them the most.

➢ About half of respondents recommended educating both youth and adults. Educating parents on social host laws, using powerful messages and stories to "scare kids", creating billboards and educating youth before high school and beyond DARE were specific ideas mentioned.

➢ A couple of respondents also mentioned having harsher consequences for drinking. It was thought kids in sports are less likely to drink because of the consequences, i.e. the state rules requiring them to sit out if they drink.

➢ Other ideas shared: Parents need to be engaged and aware they are role models as kids do what they see, parents and other adults should build/strengthen relationships with youth, creating 'conversation starter cards' for parents and having the right people making policy change.

Additional comments
When asked if there is anything else they wanted to share about alcohol use, one person stated Zero Adult Provider (ZAP) and the collaboration has reduced minor consumption in the area.

Youth Vaping
All adult respondents also consider youth vaping to be a big deal for a variety of reasons such as it is:

- hard to detect,
- highly prevalent,
- commonly used/big problem in schools,
- the inhalation of aerosol, not vapor,
- marketed towards youth with flavor and as a safer alternative to smoking,
- the devices are being used by many for controlled substance use and
- the long-term consequences are unknown although we are starting to see how harmful.

Youth in one focus group were asked to comment on this topic by rank ordering alcohol, marijuana and vaping according to which is the biggest problem in their school. Because they thought vaping is easier to use and get away with, they ranked vaping first, alcohol second and marijuana third.

When asked to share one thing they know about vaping several adults commented on the unknowns about the dangers and safety of e-cigarette, while one person further opined "it is more dangerous than the public perceives". Additionally, respondents noted it's hardly noticeable and doesn't smell, it's all over classrooms, schools are not educating on dangers and it is easier to vape (than smoke) due to limited restrictions. The youth were able to respond quickly with a variety of information - they listed that it is easy to hide, comes in different shapes, sizes, has many flavors targeting youth, varying levels of nicotine, worse than smoking, meant to be a positive switch from cigarettes and that 80% of their peers have tried or are using (e-cigarettes).

The most commonly discussed reason why youth vape is to be socially accepted; almost all the conversations with youth and adults consisted of some reference to this. It was also suggested by

multiple participants that youth vape because it is odorless and easy to conceal, both in school and the community, it is safer than other substances and because youth experiment/are curious. One respondent mentioned youth vape because the vapor tastes like candy and another said it is because youth think they are invincible. Furthermore, youth respondents suggested their peers vape to relieve stress. The youth discussed the role of social media and how vaping is all over the main apps they use – the videos/ads make it look fun to try and they shows celebrities doing it (and they want to be like them).

Access to products is perceived by both youth and adults as a barrier to reducing use. Both adults and youth said youth are accessing e-cigarettes from older students. Youth respondents and one adult also cited online avenues as a point of access. Both adults and youth discussed the lack of education as a barrier to reducing use – some youth participants said they hadn't learned anything about e-cigarettes/vaping in class (although as reported above, others did). Furthermore, a few adults also stated there is not enough research on the effects of vaping, and it will take years to get this information. Users being addicted to nicotine, parents or media portraying vaping as better than cigarettes, big tobacco successfully markets to kids and parents not caring or thinking their kids are using were also mentioned as barriers to use.

Education and policy changes were the top two suggestions for reducing use. Education was discussed by a majority of respondents and particular ideas included:
- having a mandated curriculum,
- providing education for both adults and youth,
- showing adults the products because they aren't familiar with them,
- having information at fair, Rotary meetings, Art in the park, summer festival, open houses at schools, youth/church group, Litchfield cable channel, at spaces where parents/adults are required to be,
- having information on the risks,
- having Brett (MMS staff who works on the SHIP tobacco strategy) present at a 'county cop meeting' and
- per the youth respondents, showing pictures of lungs, discussing the effects of vaping and having real victims share their stories.

One person shared how "Hidden in Plain Site" at school conferences was well attended and reviewed by parents.

Specific policy ideas consisted of restrictions in stores and advertising, removing vaping products from the market and Tobacco 21 (raising the legal age to purchase tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, to 21). Other recommendations for reducing use included buying more vape detectors for schools (although funds needed), having more groups/activities to keep youth busy and more parental involvement. Some youth and one adult said schools should have harsher consequences, while also outlining these consequences in the school handbook. On the other hand, another respondent recognized it's a lot of work to manage (vaping in schools).

Additional comments

Several adults commented on marijuana and how it is a problem in the area although not as common as vaping. Also, one person suggested vaping rates are higher in middle schools but in general underreported, one said advertising for vaping is better than for cigarettes and another talked about how the kids avoiding negative peer pressure tend to be more mild, meek kids. A few other adult participants wanted more information, explicitly on the long-term effects of vaping and the effects of secondhand exposure.

Summary

The respondents discussed similar reasons and challenges around underage drinking and youth vaping. For example, social acceptance and the role social media plays were key themes on both topics that arose from the focus groups and key informant interviews. For drinking, it was seen as a social norm for both adults and youth peers, conversely, for vaping the social norms and influences are seen as primarily from peers. Similarly, access to products was viewed as a challenge for addressing both issues, although more so for vaping than alcohol, for which social influences was the barrier discussed even more than access.   To reduce alcohol and e-cigarette use among youth, education, providing alternative activities and policy changes were the key recommendations for both topics.   Despite these similarities, some unique issues were discussed for youth vaping such as lack of information on the harms, how it is odorless and easy to conceal, addictive and specifically marketed towards kids. Public health or other stakeholders should consider these findings along with other pertinent data when determining how to address youth drinking and vaping moving forward.