

Study Assesses Risky Behaviors of Slovak Teens

By Julia Ross

In Petralka, an economically depressed area in the Slovak capital of Bratislava, the availability of illegal drugs has risen dramatically in recent years, and local teenagers have not gone unaffected. A recently completed, AIHA-funded study by Petralka's Aid to Children at Risk Foundation, "Children at Risk in Petralka," is shedding new light on how many of the community's teenagers are actually using drugs and alcohol, and the risk factors that are contributing to this use.

With the assistance of AIHA partner Truman Medical Center in Kansas City, Missouri, the foundation randomly surveyed 816 school children aged 12-18 last September. Questions were aimed at determining the physical risks Petralka's children face in school, rates of cigarette smoking, alcohol use and drug use, and how free time is spent. Results were compiled and analyzed by early February, when health professionals from the foundation traveled to Kansas City to discuss developing community-based interventions based on the study's outcomes.

Among the study's findings:

- * **Smoking:** Sixty-one percent of respondents admitted to having smoked cigarettes. Forty-two percent of 12-year-olds and 96 percent of 18-year-olds had some experience with smoking, while 4 percent of respondents admitted having their first cigarette at age eight.
- * **Alcohol:** Eighty-seven percent admitted to some experience with alcohol use. Occasional consumption was practiced by 71 percent of respondents, and 16 percent said they were frequent users. Only 12 percent reported no experience with alcohol use, and boys reported more frequent use. More than 25 percent of the teens said their first experience with alcohol use occurred at age 9-10--"a very young age," according to the study's authors.
- * **Drugs:** Though actual drug use was reported by 8-12 percent of those surveyed, almost one-half of the respondents said they know someone who is using illegal drugs, with the highest rate in older children. Teens said they usually obtain drugs from peers, and boys aged 17-18 were twice as likely to use drugs as girls in that age bracket. Twelve percent admitted to having tried marijuana, while only 2 percent admitted to having used heroin.
- * **Physical Risks:** Fifty-nine percent of boys said they had engaged in physical confrontation at school in the last year. Although most teens said they felt safe on school grounds, 29 percent said they had personal belongings stolen or damaged at school in 1995.
- * **Lifestyle Patterns:** Twelve percent said they had "serious problems in life," and 20 percent said they had considered suicide in the past year (26 percent of girls and 14 percent of boys). The most popular extracurricular interests were sports (67 percent), music (45 percent) and reading (29 percent).

The study's chief author, Katarina Otisova, PhD, a psychologist at the Aid to Children at Risk Foundation, said, "The findings of this study clearly prove that drug use is a primary problem in our community. The age of children beginning to experiment with tobacco and alcohol is declining." The study's conclusion that children from "dysfunctional" families are at the same risk for drug use as their counterparts is significant, she noted, as is the number of teens who said they had considered suicide: "Suicide as a way of solving serious problems in life is an alarming finding."

Dan Mueller, PhD, project director, Community Health Assessment Resource Team, Missouri Department of Health, said the survey was the first community-based survey targeting teenagers to be administered in Petrzalka. He said the responses indicating feelings of hopelessness and despair among teens were striking: "These are the kinds of issues that politicians don't like to talk about ... What [the Petrzalka partners] have done is to identify these problems by asking the youth themselves, and that's significant."

Based on the study's outcomes, the Petrzalka-Kansas City partners have recommended implementing primary drug abuse prevention programs starting in preschool and providing leadership in developing healthy lifestyles through sports and the arts. Teen crisis hotlines, mentoring programs to prevent teen pregnancy and preschool healthy lifestyles curricula are a few of the US-based interventions that the Slovaks are interested in duplicating, said Mueller. In May, Kansas City partners will travel to Petrzalka to hold a town meeting to further identify which community-based interventions will be successful.