

New Directions Outcome Evaluation: Based on the VT Youth Risk Behavior Survey 1997 to 2001

What opportunities did the New Directions Initiative provide to Vermont communities?

- Funding to community coalitions as opposed to individual programs
- Encouraged communities to actively engage youth in change initiatives
- Required communities to implement and/or adapt strategies that had been researched and shown to be effective in reducing substance use and abuse in other communities
- Intensive local and statewide technical assistance to community coalitions, including training, evaluation support and regular feedback to the community on their progress
- Bi-monthly meetings with grantees as a whole group so that they could share ideas, successes and challenges with each other
- Steady funding to all 23 coalitions over 3 years with considerable attention paid to future sustainability strategies.
- Collaborative involvement of multiple state agencies in the oversight of the project

What did the VT Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) measure?

The YRBS measures changes in community-wide rates of substance use among 8th to 12th grade youth, as opposed to changes for selected subgroups or individuals. Even small rates of change observed at the community level translate into substantial numbers of students who are successfully prevented from initiating or continuing substance use.

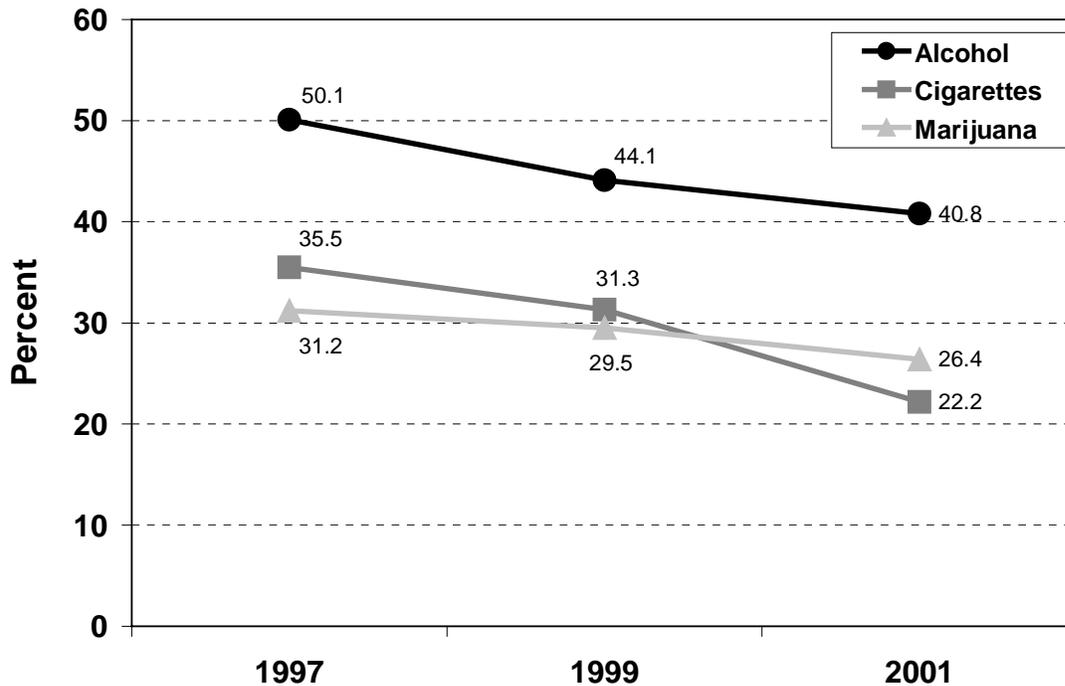
Overall, what did we learn about the impact of the New Directions?

- From 1999 to 2001, when the bulk of funded activities took place, New Directions communities collectively achieved greater reductions in rates of student substance use, relative to the remainder of the state, on nine substance use measures examined through the YRBS.
- The greatest relative reductions were observed for marijuana and cigarettes.
- In general, the greater the percentage of youth served, and the more years that each program component was provided, the greater the reductions in substance use.

What were the outcomes?

- As a whole, the 23 New Directions communities achieved noteworthy reductions in past 30 day prevalence in alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana use for 8th – 12th graders

Figure 1. Percent of Students Grades 8-12 in New Directions Communities Reporting Alcohol, Cigarette, and Marijuana Use During the Past 30 Days



How did New Directions communities compare with the rest of the state?

While New Directions communities achieved reductions in past 30 day use, prevalence rates for alcohol, tobacco and marijuana also declined statewide. This is not surprising, since many communities who were not awarded a New Directions grant frequently carried out multiple prevention strategies with other resources. Therefore, those communities are not considered to be a true control group. However, New Directions communities, as a whole, achieved greater reductions in student substance use relative to the remainder of the state on the following nine substance use measures examined through the YRBS from 1999 to 2001:

- Marijuana use past 30 days
- Alcohol use past 30 days
- Binge drank past 30 days
- Cigarette use past 30 days
- Ever used marijuana
- Ever used alcohol
- Ever smoked cigarettes
- Ever used inhalants
- Ever used other drugs

This consistent pattern of greater reductions in substance use among New Directions communities was not found for the previous interval from 1997 to 1999, which occurred before New Directions activities were fully underway.

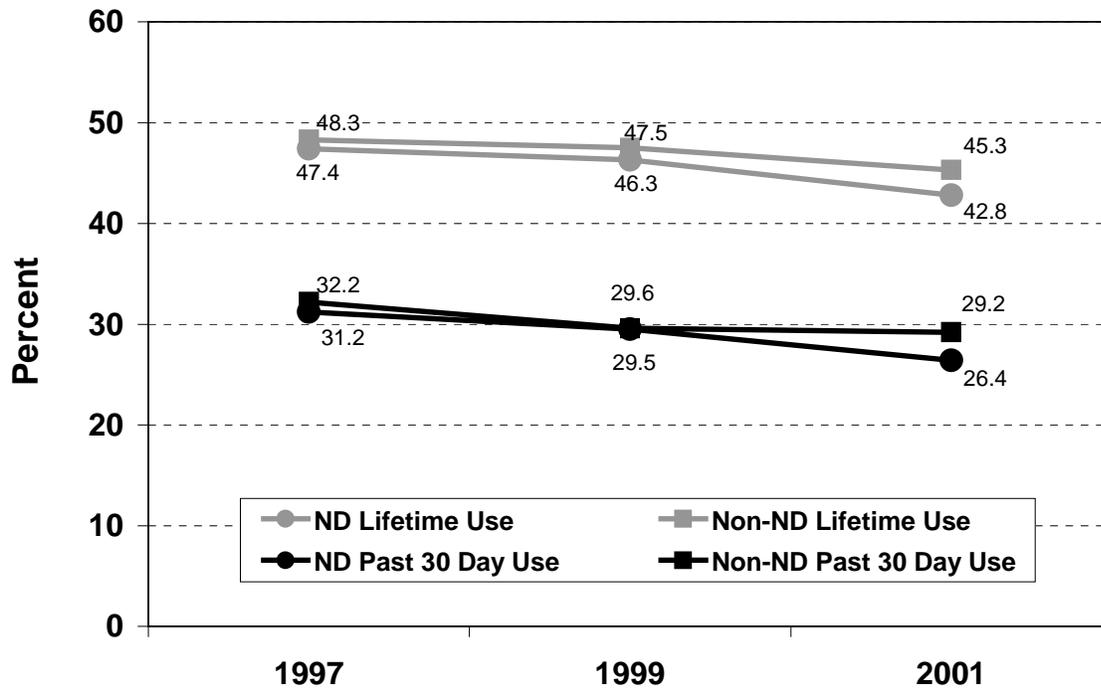
(Note: This analysis is based only on schools that participated in the '97, '99 and '01 YRBS)

Did the outcomes attain statistical significance?

- The relatively greater declines in substance use among 8th through 12th grade students experienced by New Directions communities, when compared with the rest of the state, were statistically significant for past 30-day use of marijuana and cigarettes and lifetime use of marijuana and tobacco.

Example: The figure on the following page shows changes in the prevalence of past month use and lifetime use of marijuana from 1997 to 2001 among Vermont students in grades 8 through 12. Based on the timing of the New Directions sponsored activities in most communities, program effects were expected primarily during the 1999 to 2001 period. Past month use of marijuana use declined 2.7 percentage points MORE in the New Directions communities than the rest of the state. These declines represent hundreds of students who may have been averted from using substances in New Directions communities.

Figure 2. Percent of Students Grades 8-12 in New Directions and Non-New Directions Communities Reporting Lifetime and Past 30-day Use of Marijuana Use, 1997-2001



Were there differences related to student grade levels?

- In general, the pattern of greater reductions in substance use in New Directions communities was seen across all grade levels. This finding may reflect the multi-faceted and community-wide approach adopted by the coalitions, rather than the effects of any one program or activity.
- Effects on initiation of alcohol use (as measured by any use in the lifetime), however, were especially prominent for 8th grade students. Further analysis showed that New Directions communities that implemented Project Northlands, a school and family based prevention program with a focus on transitioning through middle school alcohol-free, showed a 15 percentage point decrease (from 60 to 45) in the percent of 8th graders who had initiated alcohol use. This compares to a 10 percentage point decrease for all New Directions communities and a 5 percentage point decrease for the rest of the state. This is important because the mixed messages youth receive in our culture about youth alcohol use may make it more difficult to reduce than other forms of substance use.

- Relatedly, New Directions coalitions that implemented middle school classroom curricula proven effective in helping to reduce alcohol, tobacco and/or marijuana use had considerably greater success in preventing initiation of substance use by 8th graders than New Directions coalitions that did not implement such curricula. This is important because early first use of substance use has been linked to greater likelihood of developing abuse or addiction problems later on.

Were other coalition characteristics linked to outcomes in youth substance use?

Coalitions varied widely in the levels of change they experienced. Analyses were conducted to identify coalition characteristics most highly associated with change in substance use prevalence measures. The YRBS tells us what the trends are but not why they are happening. Greater declines in use of most substances were associated with coalitions that:

- Provided more opportunities for youth to participate in student assistance programs, drug-free social and recreational programs, and projects designed to change or improve the community message discouraging alcohol and drug use, such as media and community awareness projects
- Served smaller populations, and were able to offer more contact and services per capita.

Programs such as mentoring and family education programs that are designed to have a very strong impact on a small group of people in the community did not appear to impact substance use levels as determined by the YRBS. That does not mean that those programs had no effect. It does suggest that impacts of these programs should be measured using tools other than the YRBS, which is designed to measure community-wide trends in rates of student use. When programs, particularly those targeted to a smaller group of high risk youth, are implemented, change needs to be captured either by conducting evaluations with those youth specifically, or by using community-wide measures that will be more sensitive to the impact that such programs might have on the community.

Conclusion:

These findings suggest that collaborative community-based efforts implemented within a supportive framework such as New Directions can have an impact on the prevalence of substance use by students who live in these communities.

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