

Is Substance Abuse Prevention a Tool in Fighting Poverty and Other Social Ills?

By Bridget Ingebrigtsen

While research linking substance abuse and poverty is scarce, frontline preventionists see the connection between the two quite clearly – and they also see how prevention efforts play a role in reducing other social ills.

Surprisingly, in the Heartland Alliance’s 2008 Report on Illinois Poverty, which outlines Illinois’ poverty levels, substance abuse prevention was *not* listed as a “meaningful change opportunity” that would help make Illinois communities strong, safe, stable and poverty-free.¹ Nevertheless, Amy Terpstra, senior research analyst for The Heartland Alliance Mid-America Institute on Poverty, said substance abuse is indeed a factor in poverty, but since the report is largely research-based, the organization did not include prevention because of the lack of data supporting its effectiveness.

Still, prevention is a known factor even if it isn’t statistically documented, she said. Among the six “Pathways out of Poverty” outlined in the report – education, employment, health, housing, nutrition, assets – Terpstra said she believes substance abuse falls best into the health category, although it can tie into the other five pathways as well.

The Heartland Alliance’s 2008 Report on Illinois Poverty illustrates how Illinois families struggle to achieve or maintain economic stability. Negative economic shifts, including stagnating wages and rising costs, have taken their toll on people across Illinois, hitting hardest those with the least. The report finds that poverty continues to cast a pall on Illinois’ economic future. Statewide, poverty increased in 74 of Illinois’ 102 counties. It afflicts more than 1.5 million Illinoisans, representing a population large enough to rank it as the nation’s fifth-largest city. Nearly 250,000 additional Illinoisans have succumbed to poverty since 1999, representing a 19 percent increase.

“The research is not conclusive, but it seems a case can be made that substance use affects determinants of poverty including the ability to hold a job,” Terpstra said. “The bottom line is that when substance use is part of someone’s poverty

experience, treatment must be an integral component of the package of services designed to open the doors of opportunity for that person. Without addressing all of someone’s barriers, their ability to get back on track and/or become self-sufficient is compromised,” she explained.

Susan Trudeau, in her position as executive director of Child Welfare Programs for Heartland Human Care Services, Inc., knows very well the connections between drug and alcohol use and poverty. The organization operates the Neon Street Dorm, a home on Chicago’s north side for homeless young men and women aged 18 to 21 where they can live and also learn life skills to help them become independent by finding employment and their own housing. Trudeau estimated that 80 to 90 percent of the people who come to the home are

substance or alcohol users or were users at one time. However, they are not allowed in the home if they are under the influence.

“Alcohol and substance use are definitely contributors to why these kids are homeless,” she said, adding, “Many of the kids think daily marijuana use is normal, but you can’t get a job if you’re using drugs. Also, drug and alcohol use contributes to low academic achievement so many of them didn’t

even finish high school and can’t get a job.” She said the number of people who need the home’s services are doing anything but dwindling. “We always have a waiting list.”

Preventionists see the opportunity to break the link between substance abuse and poverty. Trudeau said prevention is a priority at the Neon Street Dorm, and the staff uses every opportunity they can to educate the residents about substance and alcohol abuse. “You have to explain to them that it’s not normal to drink or use drugs everyday. Many of them just don’t realize this.”

The staff also uses the power of “positive peer pressure” to keep residents on track. When residents see another resident find and keep a job and earn income, they aspire to be like that resident. Some residents are so happy and proud to have jobs, even if they are entry-level, minimum wage jobs, that they wear their uniforms even when they are not working, Trudeau explained.



What lies beneath

Alan Markwood, prevention projects coordinator for Chestnut Health Systems in Bloomington, said despite the lack of direct connection, there is plenty of research that shows substance use is an “underlying contributing factor” to poverty.

One area he specifically cited was low student achievement. Markwood pointed to a California study² that tracked school achievement gains and losses, as well as a large number of non-academic student attributes. The study found that, “Schools with proportionately large numbers of students who reported using alcohol, tobacco, or marijuana during the 30 days prior to the survey or ever being intoxicated exhibited smaller test score gains than other schools.”

The study also noted that its findings had nothing to do with the quality of education at the schools stating, “... for many of the measures considered, substance use has more deleterious consequences for the academic progress of high-performing schools than of low-performing schools.”

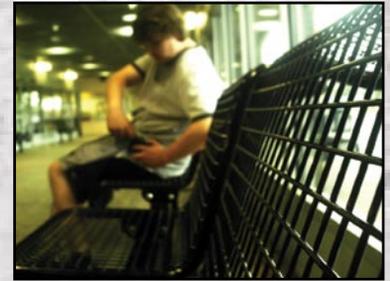
Preventionists who are looking to connect the dots between substance use and poverty need to look at studies beyond those specifically addressing the two together. For example, Markwood pointed to new research confirming that drugs and alcohol harm the brain and, in some cases, can cause irreparable harm. A study³ published in *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* observed, “Serious alcohol use among youth has significant neurological consequences. Alcohol damages areas of the brain responsible for learning and memory, verbal skills and visual-spatial cognition.”

Paying closer attention to the damage drugs and alcohol can cause to an adolescent’s brain could hold the key to preventing many of today’s societal ills, including poverty, says Markwood. After all, students who do not perform well in school may drop out or struggle to succeed in and become a viable member of society. “I think we have to promote high achievement and then avoid the factors that may deter achievement,” he said. “So, alcohol and drugs are obviously deterrents.”

A special report commissioned by the Treatment Research Institute in Philadelphia, Pa.⁴, noted, “Because many teens begin using substances at a young age and because of their possible deleterious effects on the developing brain, the urgency for prevention is real. Delaying the onset of drug use, especially if it is delayed until adulthood, is better for both brain development and for preventing escalation of use. Teenagers who abuse drugs may avoid permanent neurological damage if they can cut down or abstain.”

The young and impressionable

Karen Cole, drug prevention specialist for Bridgeway, said teens are impressionable and when given the proper education and resources, they typically respond. “So many kids are really bound and determined to steer away from drugs and alcohol,” Cole said. “But sometimes, it’s their family situation that makes them want to use drugs or drink because it is the norm in their household and they see nothing wrong with it. Or, maybe they don’t use drugs or drink, but they have to take care of their family members, who may even be their parents, who are users.”



Cole noted that poverty is a big issue right now in Henderson County, where a flood devastated most of the community in June. Poverty already was prevalent in the community before the flood but with the number of people who lost their homes in the flood, the poverty level is expected to escalate. Unfortunately, the pride of many of the county’s residents will prevent them from seeking assistance, she said. Bridgeway is trying to make its services known in any way possible, including distributing brochures at every opportunity, even sporting events.

Although Cole said prevention efforts are paramount right now because of the large number of families in financial despair and students displaced to other schools, she added that the social service community still is in crisis mode putting out prevention messages as they can but mostly tending to those who need assistance.

The other end of the spectrum

Markwood said that while preventing drug and alcohol use among the poor is important, the other end of the spectrum – substance use among the wealthy – needs attention, too.

An article in *Educational Leadership* magazine⁵ noted, “Poor people are no more likely than their wealthier counterparts to abuse alcohol or drugs. Although drug sales are more visible in poor neighborhoods, drug use is equally distributed across poor, middle class, and wealthy communities.”

Markwood said, “When you look at the systematic things that can help reduce poverty, such as public policy, you realize that we have to keep the high-achieving, talented people, who are often from wealthy backgrounds, away from drugs and alcohol as well. To a degree, we depend on them to reduce poverty, too.”

** Sources cited in this article can be found online at prevention.org/forummagazine/currentissue*

Ingebrigtsen is Contributing Editor for Prevention Forum.