



Focus Group Report

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Introduction

The Prevention Resource Center 11 (PRC 11) is a program of Behavioral Health Solutions of South Texas, funded by the Texas Department of State Health Services. PRC is part of a large network of prevention programs that aim to reduce alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use among adolescents and adults in the State of Texas.

PRC 11 covers 19 counties in the South Texas region, including the Rio Grande Valley and the areas around the cities of Falfurrias, Beeville, Laredo, and Corpus Christi. There are eleven regional Prevention Resource Centers (PRC's) servicing the State of Texas. Each PRC acts as the central data repository and substance abuse prevention training liaison for their region.

It is the task of PRC 11 to compile information relevant to behavioral health and develop a yearly Regional Needs Assessment (RNA) that aims to provide an overview and identify the needs of communities in the region. In an effort to identify risk and protective factors, specific issues and gaps in services, and risks and consequences related to drug use among adolescents existing in the diverse communities in Region 11, PRC 11 developed qualitative data collection tools in the form of focus groups, which ruled out throughout diverse areas of the region. These groups were designed so that they would aid in revealing detailed information and insight about issues related to prevention and treatment of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use.



Methodology

Focus groups were developed by the Prevention Resource Center in Region 11 to target adult populations throughout the region. Each county focus group identified key community leaders representing a broad range of community interests to participate in these focus groups discussions. Community members such as parents, media, health care, mental health, law enforcement, and higher education participated in the focus group.

Focus group sessions were held during the months of November 2020 through March 2021. All sessions were conducted using zoom as the main platform to communicate with the moderator guiding the discussion across the 2 hours. There were 6 groups that included 7-12 participants between the ages of 22-70+. PRC was able to collaborate with community coalitions in the counties of Hidalgo, Webb, Starr, Willacy, Cameron, Nueces, Kleberg and San Patricio. These counties were selected as they represent higher populated and rural areas, as well as strong coalition partnership presence.

PRC 11 provided focus group development tools to community coalitions in Region 11. Guidance and tools comprised of specific guidelines and requirements to conduct adult groups in communities was provided, as well as materials necessary to complete the focus groups.

The purpose of the focus groups was to gather information about Covid-19 and its impact in the prevention field. For example, changes in the following: consumption, accessibility, retail access, and social access. Additionally, the focus groups were developed to also gather information about how community households coped with new challenges during the pandemic. Last, information relevant to local programs and resources was gathered as well as their availability during Covid-19.

COVID-19: Implications for Substance Use Prevention in Region 11

As the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted communities, major challenges emerged and have made it difficult for many substance use prevention providers to deliver their services adequately. This year PRC decided to collect qualitative data through focus group sessions in order to better understand the variety of changes and challenges that counties in region 11 have encounter related to substance use prevention during the pandemic. Below you can find a summary of the topics discussed through the focus group sessions. Each topic is discussed separately in this report.

Summary

The following are topics that were discussed during the focus group sessions. Participants were able to share their knowledge, opinions, and experiences related to these ideas.

1. Alcohol and other drugs consumption
2. Alcohol and other drugs accessibility
3. Challenges and adaptations
4. Effective communication during covid-19
5. Availability of prevention programs and services

Alcohol and other drugs: consumption

The first topic discussed was alcohol and other drugs consumption during covid-19. Specifically, participants were asked to share their experiences and opinions about how impactful Covid-19 is as it relates to alcohol consumption among youth and adults. The following are the most commonly mentioned key points shared by participants from all 8 counties. For the youth population, home schooling and parental leniency were the most commonly themes emerged from the conversations. According to participants' home schooling and parental leniency could potentially be a risk factor for substance use in region 11. On the other hand, for the adult population participants reported that things are slightly different. Alcohol consumption has increased among the adult population due to stress. Alcohol consumption has been used by many as a coping mechanism in trying to cope with stress as well as other mental health problems.

Youth Population

1. Home schooling

Five of the six groups reported that some students who are home schooling, often times lack supervision from both teachers and parents, especially for older middle school students. Participants shared that teachers are not necessarily paying attention to what students are doing; since everything is virtual it makes it harder for teachers to identify if the students are using any substance while attending their classes. In like manner, many students are not being supervised by their parents throughout the day. Some parents work from home and are not necessarily paying full attention to their kids because they are working. On the other hand, parents that have to go to work, leave for the day, leaving their kids home alone. This potentially increases the chances for them to drink alcohol during school hours.

"Middle school kids or even you know our high school students they can already stay at home on their own and they're not going to campus or choosing not to go to school on campus and there still virtual so that accessibility is there if their parents are not home and have alcohol or liquor in their cabinets".

"From what I'm gathering just from reports that I read is that they kind of overbought alcohol and beer to bring into their homes because of the shelter in place and that's how the kids got ahold of it while in attending virtual classes."

2. Parental leniency

Participants also shared their concerns about parental leniency. Participants reported that based on what they know and what they have experienced, many parents are being more lenient towards alcohol consumption during this pandemic. This potentially becomes a risk factor and increases the chances of alcohol use in the households.

I think there might be also more leniency or maybe that's a bad or poor choice of words. Or guidance you know like the parents are addressing these issues at home. Like, 'Hey if you're going to be doing this be careful.'

"I feel that because of the lack of supervision and more leniency there's more freedom in the home. For example, more drug use, more alcohol. My husband is a teacher, and he tells me that some of the kids are home unsupervised, and they're not even logging in or they're playing games on the computer. So, I think that's why there's an easier way to drugs and alcohol. There's a lot that we don't know of that is taking place in the home."

Adult Population

1. Alcohol as a coping mechanism

In all focus group sessions participants reported that alcohol consumption has dramatically increased in some households due to hardships that many families are facing. For example, stress due to loss and grief are common feelings that many adults are experiencing during this pandemic. Although alcohol is not the best option to cope with these feelings, many adults are opting to drink more in order to manage their stress. In the same manner, many adults started to drink more during weekdays and in some cases they started to drink more during work hours since many of them were working from home.

"On social media I have people that are friends of mine of all different age groups, and I did notice several comments over the last year where it's like well can't go anywhere might as well drink at home right uh so that troubled me to see that because if they're going to be at home a lot are they going to be drinking that much more."

2. Mental health problems and alcohol consumption

The outbreak of Covid-19 may be stressful for many. Based on participant's experiences and what they have seen in the community, some adults are dealing with mental health problems and depression is one of them.

"I think it's the depression, I think a lot of people get depressed a lot of more fearful of going out and they are at home day after day some of them don't even want to go outside as I've spoken to some of my patients and they were there even fearful of leaving their houses and I said you can walk outside you can go to your garden you can walk around the neighborhood that's fine to do that's good for your health don't stay stagnated and don't just stay at home, a lot more are affected by depression that's how they resort to alcohol and other things it's depression part."

"Speaking with different providers, different doctors in the Valley have informed me that yes because of COVID they have seen an increase in depression and anxiety so I can see how just haven't you not being able to socialize like they used to can lead and escalate to depression or anxiety."

3. Increased in calls for substance use treatment assistance (Relapsing)

Participants that worked in treatment facilities shared that they noticed an increase in calls related to substance use treatment during the year 2020. This is important to note because although more people started drinking more alcohol during the pandemic, people also search for services that could help them deal with any substance use problem.

"I know at our facility we've been staying pretty busy with calls from substance abuse a lot of relapse mental health issues our adolescent female programs staying pretty busy and I know our sister facilities that deal more with behavioral health they are staying pretty full also."

"People who are relapsing during COVID-19 with the mental stress turning to alcohol or drugs, the increase of people regular people starting to use alcohol to cope uh loss of job all of them are asking for help so our census is double of what it was a year ago at this time an I know COVID definitely has an impact on it."

Alcohol and other drugs: accessibility

Previous research has shown that excessive alcohol use is a common response to stress following traumatic events (DiMaggio, 2009). The Covid-19 outbreak affects all the population and is particularly detrimental to members of those social groups in the most vulnerable situations. In this case, PRC 11 was interested to gather feedback relevant to alcohol and other drugs accessibility among the youth population. For this question, majority of participants discussed the changes in retail and social access during the pandemic providing their thoughts and experiences. In general, majority of participants from all counties agreed that in most cases, retail alcohol accessibility increased during 2020, especially during shelter in place orders.

- **Retail Access**

Participants discussed how retail alcohol access was easier to some minors during the pandemic. Although alcohol has always been easy to access, according to participants, during shelter in place orders many businesses were being affected and their alcohol sales dropped. The only way to survive was to push for more sells and not necessarily paying attention to the buyer.

"You see the lines at some restaurants for free pitcher margaritas with enchilada packages to go. They don't care who they sell it to."

"I think that you know when you have businesses that were hurting so much I think a lot of them are willing to just kind of let things slide."

"COVID-19 has affected in regards to alcohol retail access you know some drive thru never cared to begin with and would pour the alcohol into the cup already prepared. Now with the masks that's just like an added on, they could say oh he looked old enough or you know they wanted to even questioned so that's another thing I can think of."

"I've seen here that a lot of the bars that are closed indoor were allowed to sell to go a lot of them are doing really well specially the wines all kinds of package deals on 6 bottles you don't join a club then you get 6 bottles of wine so yeah they're finding avenues to sell and some say their business is better than it was when it was in person."

"Well again from the police reports it's a gran pachanga all week long while they're sheltered in place so there's a lot of alcohol in front of the kids, from family members and the kids also get to see the minors also get to see the

aunts and uncles and grandparents drinking and maybe imbibing too much.”

Challenges and adaptations

COVID-19 has changed the lives of people in a variety of ways. Many individuals have been forced to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, make difficult choices, and deal with disruptions at home, at work, and in the community. In like manner, there has been adaptation to new ways of learning, working and socializing. In this section, we asked participants to share examples of common challenges and adaptations that community members experienced or are currently experiencing during these times. One major challenge and adaptation that participants reported the most was the sudden use of technology.

- **Technology**

Indeed, the coronavirus pandemic is forcing us to adopt all sorts of new ways of interacting, learning, and working. Majority of people started to use platforms such as *zoom* to communicate, work and socialize. This new transition has changed the live styles of people. Undoubtedly, technology has facilitated things for many youth and adults.

- **The digital divide**

Participants shared how in their experience technology has become a barrier for many individuals. In this question, there was a deep discussion in regards to the existing gap that prevails up to this day in many households. Majority of participants shared their experiences and how technology was and is not available in every household. Many families in region 11 did not have a computer nor internet access. This had an impact not only for parents but the most impacted were the kids. During shelter in place orders, many kids were struggling to attend their classes and were staying behind.

“Well, one thing that I have, this was a couple of months ago, of course we had students that didn’t have the connectivity to the internet at their home. They live North of town and, sometimes, the bus transportation would take out those buses with the wireless connectivity, but, still, their technology still wasn’t sufficient enough. So, school district kind of had to maneuver and, unfortunately, they didn’t want to open, but they had to open for those students. This is one big issue that I’ve seen around the valley. Not only the valley, but, of course, Jim Hogg county. You know, Webb county, Zapata county, and Brooks, and, Alicia, of course. So, that was probably one of the most oppressing issue, is, for sure.”

"I think one of the biggest challenges was for the kids to have access to like Wi-Fi or an Internet connection some of my kids are from like the outside of Laredo it's called Rio Bravo and most of them they didn't have a laptop or a tablet or phone or they didn't even have access to Wi-Fi so it was kind of hard at the beginning to try and work with them because you couldn't get through to them virtually."

Effective Communication During Covid-19

In this section participants were able to share their experiences on how they were delivering substance use prevention messages to the community. They also reported how other organizations and agencies were adapting to these changes. Participants state that they have used different methods to deliver prevention messages. For example, for the youth population organizations have started to use social media as the main platform to deliver a message. On the other hand, traditional media such as radio and TV are still utilized among the adult population.

Youth Population

- **Social media**

"social media is one efficient way that will help us get the message across."

"During these times, I think social media like TikTok, Instagram and maybe YouTube will help us in the prevention field. Undoubtedly, it is a tool we all should use to get the message across."

Adult Population

- **Traditional Media**

- TV and Radio during drive times

- **Community events/ Churches**

- Word of mouth

"I'll go with word of mouth you know you can talk to your friends likely you'll have something in common and then just you know mentioning somebody helped you or that you went somewhere um a lot of our program here with the veterans was word of mouth people saying they experience they had and um it's spreading that way."

Availability of prevention programs & services

The outbreak of Covid-19 definitely impacted the way services were being delivered in region 11. Notwithstanding, majority of organizations continued to provide their services. These services were provided virtually using platforms such as Facebook, zoom and Microsoft teams (just to name a few). Participants reported how providing virtual services at first was a challenge for everyone but as things were progressing, they started to get more knowledgeable using these new platforms. They also shared how community members from different organization came together and helped people that were in much greater need. Overall, participants agreed that although services were still being delivered to people, they still considered very challenging to deliver services to remote areas, especially people that live in poverty. Participants listed local organizations and services in the area that continue to offer their services during the pandemic, especially during shelter in place orders.

Assessing risk and protective factors

This section highlights risk and protective factors that were identified by participants during the sessions. These factors could potentially increase or reduce substance abuse and misuse among youth and adults.

Risk Factors

1. Homeschooling and parental leniency
2. No Access to technology (High speed internet access)
3. Stress
4. Shelter in place orders.
 - Delivery and curbside pickup increased alcohol consumption for both groups
 - Domestic violence
 - New alcohol delivery law

Texas law now allows alcohol to go from restaurants after Gov. Greg Abbott signs bill. House Bill 1024 allows beer, wine and mixed drinks to be included in pickup and delivery food orders, securing a revenue stream made available to restaurants during the pandemic when their dining areas were forced to close.

"I remember once the shelter home order, began some were able to sustain sobriety because they weren't going out. They weren't visiting their typical hotspot points, like bars. There is some decrease use, but on the other side, there was some of my clients who were doing good before. But, because of some of their frustration and the stress related to being at home, a few of them, not working, they did end up using drugs. Not anything too severe, mostly marijuana and that kind of thing. So, its kind been—I've seen both sides of it. Both as a protective

factor, staying at home and not, you know, frequenting bars. But, also as a risk factor, the stress."

"You know since this quarantine has happened; I've been hearing a lot about domestic violence. Especially alcohol related. I'm getting this specifically from Precinct 3 area. This is what I've been hearing."

"I'm sure both have increased tremendously because parent's the stress level is so high right now. Parents are not working. Bills are backed up. I've had—you know—the calls that I've been receiving, they haven't paid their light bill in months. They're about to be evicted. So, I—I'm imagining—of course I don't ask about the alcohol and drugs because they're coming to me for resources. But, I'm sure it's there and I'm sure it's increased tremendously. Just because, like I mentioned before, the stress level is so high."

Protective Factors

1. Technology
 - For those who are able to afford it were able to work, learn and socialize (less isolation).
2. Shelter in place orders
 - Family gatherings
 - More Parental supervision

"For the adults, I think it's easier right now with virtual access because they work and they have kids and they're not available at whatever time we're available for them to come to our office so now with everything virtual I think it's a great way to reach out to our parents and the adults because we are able to work a little better with their schedules and they don't have to find a babysitter or anything like that, it can be done just from their phones from home, so I think working virtually with adults is very effective."

"I do want to mention that we've been having a greater turn out now with our youth coalition trying to deliver those messages of drug prevention through our monthly meetings virtually because now we used to have a problem that the parents wouldn't be able to drive the kids to the meetings physically and now, they just have to just click on to the zoom and they're joined. So, I'm really liking these virtual meetings that we have with the kids."

Summary

- Home schooling and parental leniency could potentially be a risk factor and increase substance use in region 11 among youth.
- Alcohol consumption has increased among the adult population due to stress. Alcohol consumption has been used by many as a coping mechanism in trying to cope with stress as well as other mental health problems.
- Participants that worked in treatment facilities shared that they noticed an increase in calls related to substance use treatment during the year 2020.
- Participants that worked in treatment facilities shared that they noticed an increase in calls related to substance use treatment during the year 2020.
- During shelter in place orders many businesses were being affected and their alcohol sales dropped. According to participants, business started to sell alcohol to any person in the community, ID was not required in many places.
- Majority of participants shared their experiences and how technology was and is not available in every household. Many families in region 11 did not have a computer nor internet access. This had an impact not only for parents but the most impacted were the kids. During shelter in place orders, many kids were struggling to attend their classes and were staying behind.
- Traditional media is essential to get the message across among the adult population (TV and Radio).
- Social Media (TikTok, Instagram) are ways to better communicate messages among the youth population. In order to connect with youth, we should be able to understand what works to get their attention.
- There are lower levels of technology ownership and use among rural areas. This could be a risk factor for the youth populations during a school year.

Moving Forward

COVID-19 has changed our lives. We continue to see incredible levels of adaptation in many different ways. In prevention, we want to help youth and adults and increase awareness of resources that exist in our community. The following are recommendations and needs that could help members in the community to keep receiving the services they need.

1. Increased community engagement through virtual activities that encourage parents and families to come together and learn while being engaged with agencies that provide services in the community.
2. Media awareness campaigns (social media) and messages that promote education and dissemination of information related to consequences of alcohol and other drugs use.
3. Increased virtual trainings to older parents so they can access prevention presentations and other virtual events.
4. Increased parental engagement at the school so that parents become involved with their kids and learn about the dangers of alcohol and other drugs.
5. Need for additional technology (digital) resources in rural areas.
6. Increase access to community resources such as additional funding for more programs and technology that engage in prevention and treatment of drug use among adolescents.

Reference

DiMaggio, C., Galea, S., & Li, G. (2009). Substance use and misuse in the aftermath of Terrorism. a bayesian meta-analysis. *Addiction*, 104(6), 894-904. doi:10.1111/j.1360-0443.2009.02526.x