

Understanding How Young Adults in Greater Sudbury Perceive Health

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

The *Understanding How Young Adults in Sudbury Perceive Health* report provides a summary and results from the 2019 study that examined the perceptions of young adults on the social determinants of health (SDoH). Understanding how young adults perceive health will help public health practitioners develop more effective communication campaigns when disseminating health information.

Main Research Question

What are the values, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes of 18–29-year-old university students in Sudbury about the social determinants of health?

Methods

A qualitative approach was chosen for this research project to meaningfully engage post-secondary students. Qualitative data was collected through five focus group discussions about health and the factors that influence health. The focus group interviews were divided into four sections:

- > The first section allowed the students to broadly discuss their understanding of health and the factors they believe influence health.
- > In the second section, participants were asked to watch a portion of a YouTube video that provided detailed information about the SDoH and its effects on Canadians.
- > The third section of the discussion focused on dialogue related to responsibility and solutions for good health, allowing the researcher to determine the values, beliefs, and assumptions that shape individuals' perceptions of health.
- > The fourth section asked the participants to reiterate what they found most important about the discussion.

In total, five discussions were held in Spring 2019 and the only demographic information collected was on the programs in which participants were studying.

Participants

Twenty-nine (29) participants - English-speaking Laurentian University students - took part in this project. They ranged in age from 18 to 29 years of age. Ten (10) participants were from the Faculty of Science, four (4) were Engineering students, nine (9) were from the Faculty of Health, four (4) participants belonged to the Faculty of Management, and two (2) were from the Arts department. One of the groups was made up of six international students who spoke English as a second language. Participants were compensated for their time with a meal of pizza or sandwiches.

Results

Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) strategies were used to pull themes out of the group discussions. Six main themes emerged from the thematic analysis. These included:

- > **Definition of Health** - A balance between a number of different interconnected factors that, when achieved, contributes to “whole-body health”.
- > **Factors Influencing Health** – The factors are varied, interconnected and can affect all aspects of an individual’s health.
- > **Understanding of the SDoH** – Individuals in Sudbury do not have equal opportunities to be healthy. The reasons cited for this inequality were socio-economic factors such as accessibility (i.e., geographic proximity to services, services provided, transportation to services), education, childhood development, culture/religion, knowledge, societal values, and income.
- > **Individual Control** – Participants wanted to ensure any health solutions proposed or implemented provide a number of options, giving individuals choice and control over their situation.
- > **Social Values** - The beliefs and values we hold as a society have a strong influence on the health of individuals and communities.
- > **Responsibility for Good Health** - This theme can be split into three sub-themes a) Social Responsibility b) Agency and Governmental Responsibility c) Individual Responsibility.

Discussion

The findings of this research study showcase that young Sudburians have a more robust definition of health than other audiences; recognize health inequities and understand their source but have rarely heard of the term “social determinants of health”. The findings also demonstrate that participants believe open discussions are beneficial to improving their understanding of the social determinants of health; and most participants gravitated towards an individual model of thinking where health is ultimately within the individual’s control and autonomy.

Key Recommendations

This research proposes recommendations that will enable public health practitioners to draft intentional public health communication campaigns that increase student understanding of the SDoH, and their acceptance of public health policies aimed at resolving health inequities.

- > Reinforce the public’s definition of health.
- > Reinforce the public’s understanding of the influence of social factors on health.
- > Shift public thinking away from an individual model of thought.

Conclusion

The intent of this research was to understand the perceptions that young adults living in Sudbury have towards health and the SDOH, with the intention of providing empirical data to aid Public Health Sudbury & Districts in developing effective messaging campaigns to raise awareness of the SDOH. Future research is needed to develop and test message frames that align with the findings of this research and to determine which message frames are most effective. However, these base findings are an important addition to the current body of research on public health communications. While specific to the young adult population attending university in Sudbury, this preliminary study can provide a baseline for similar research focusing on developing effective public health messaging for a variety of audiences across Canada and around the world.