

THE COLORADO SCHOOL DROPOUT STUDY

BACKGROUND

Social scientists have found that dropping out of school is strongly correlated with high risk behaviors including: delinquency, violence, teen pregnancy, and alcohol, tobacco and other drug use (ATOD) (Hawkins and Catalano 1992).¹ Hawkins and Catalano's research has suggested that strengthening school bonds is key to addressing these youth problem behaviors.

Between 1994 and 1997, the Colorado Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division (ADAD) contracted with OMNI Institute (OMNI) to conduct *The Colorado School Dropout Study*. The purpose of the research was two-fold: (1) to develop a more in-depth understanding of school dropouts and (2) to identify preventative strategies for high-risk behaviors. *The Colorado School Dropout Study* examined the co-occurrence of problem behaviors among 1,174 dropout youth, and the range of risk and protective factors that distinguished these youth from 769 of their in-school peers.

STUDY DESIGN

The *Colorado School Dropout Study* was comprised of 3 research phases.

- In Phase 1, a comprehensive survey was used to assess the risk and protective factors that influence in-school and dropout youth.
- Phase 2 consisted of focus groups with teachers, counselors, school administrators, and community representatives (e.g. program service deliverers and parents). These focus groups were conducted with the adults most often in contact with dropout youth, in order to further explore reasons for dropping out and factors influencing any return to school.
- In Phase 3, a series of in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with a sample of the dropout youth surveyed in Phase 1. Phase 3 provided insights into dropout youths' experiences and attitudes about risk and problem behaviors, as well as protective factors.

SAMPLING

Little information about the experiences and attitudes of dropouts and other understudied populations (such as the homeless) is available due to the obstacles associated with locating and recruiting study participants. Such limitations have preempted random sampling and have made large samples difficult to obtain.

In order to address these research issues, OMNI employed three purposive sampling techniques. Together, these strategies increased the likelihood that the differences observed between dropout and in-school youth participants would be representative of dropouts and in-school youth in the state.

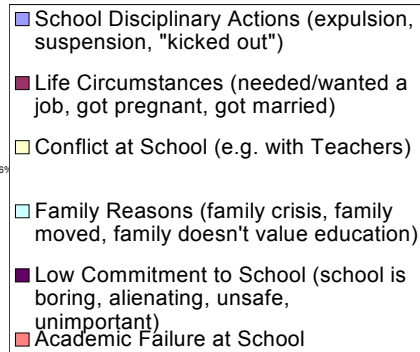
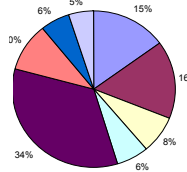
- A community typology was constructed to capture Colorado's cultural, economic and regional diversity. Communities were selected from "metropolitan," "mountain resort," "agricultural," "military-based," "prison-based," and other categories. Dropout lists were collected from school districts in these communities.
- Next, OMNI "data managers" were hired to locate dropout youth, recruit additional study participants from their social networks, and to interview a sample of the dropouts identified. Data managers included retired counselors, dropout retrieval specialists, and other school and community staff in the selected communities. This strategy greatly increased OMNI's access to dropout youth.
- Third, a sample of in-school youth, comparable in age and ethnic composition to dropout participants, was drawn from school districts in the selected communities to participate in the survey.

LOCATING DROPOUTS

An important finding of the *Colorado School Dropout Study* was that a majority of participating dropout youth returned to school. Dropout study participants had tended to cycle in and out of school, rather than permanently terminate their school experience. As a result, most of the youth dropouts included in the *Colorado School Dropout Study* were found in school, often in alternative school settings.

WHY DID YOUTH DROP OUT?

Dropout youth said they dropped out of school for many reasons (see pie chart). The most frequently cited reasons were “Low Commitment to School” (34%), “Life Circumstances,” including pregnancy (16%), and “School Discipline” (15%).



KEY PREDICTORS: WHAT PUTS YOUTH AT RISK OF ENGAGING IN PROBLEM BEHAVIORS?

- **Dropping out of school was strongly correlated with youth problem behaviors.** Problem behaviors, such as delinquency and ATOD use, were much higher among dropouts than in-school youth. Tables 1 and 2 provide a comparison of the problem behaviors found in the dropout and in-school samples.
- **Dropout youth scored significantly higher than in-school youth on risk factors.** The strongest differences were found in family and school transitions, incidents of school discipline, and academic failure. Tables 3 and 4 compare these risk factors in the dropout and in-school samples.
- **Dropout youth that returned to school were more like persistent or "hard core" dropouts than in-school youth.** Although many dropout youth returned to school, these youth more closely resembled "hard core" dropouts on risk factors and patterns of problem behavior than in-school youth.
- **"Forcing out" behaviors were commonly experienced among dropout youth.** Consistently, adult focus group members and dropout youth interview participants indicated that schools contributed to youths' low commitment and subsequent dropping out. Many dropout youth believed they were “kicked out” of school. The pie chart above and Table 3 below provide evidence of these youth claims.
- **Abuse, running away, violence, and early parenting were common among the dropouts interviewed.** Approximately three-fourths of interviewed dropout youth identified at least one of these risk factors.
- **The strongest correlative factors of youth problem behavior included:**
 - ❑ Hanging out with delinquent peers (supportive of numerous studies – see Elliott, 1994).
 - ❑ Observing rather than participating in sports/recreation.
 - ❑ Participating in unstructured recreational activities, like watching TV, motor-cross/dirt bike riding, playing video/computer games, and hanging out at the mall.
- **Other correlated risk factors included:**
 - ❑ Positive attitudes toward violence.
 - ❑ Feelings of alienation or rebelliousness.
 - ❑ Dysfunctional family and community environments.

PROBLEM BEHAVIORS AMONG DROPOUT AND IN-SCHOOL YOUTH*

Table 1: Personal Substance Use

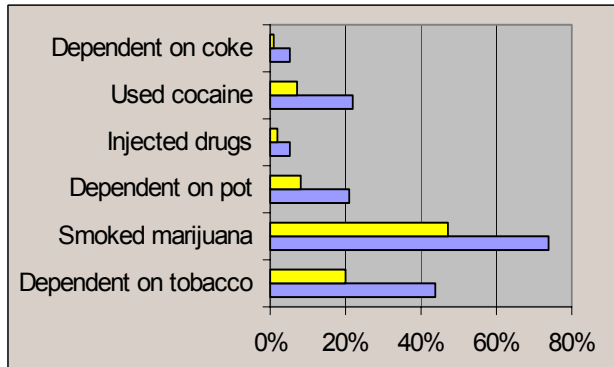


Table 2: Other Problem Behavior

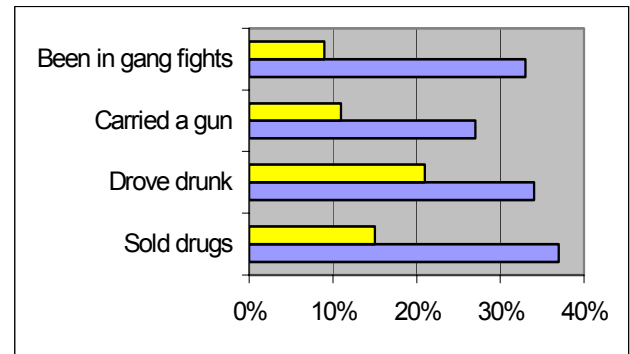


Table 3: School-Related Issues

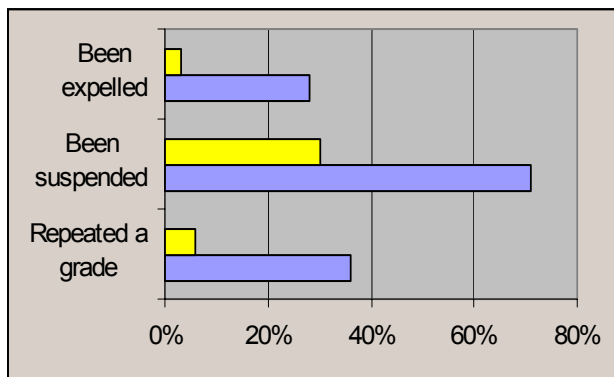
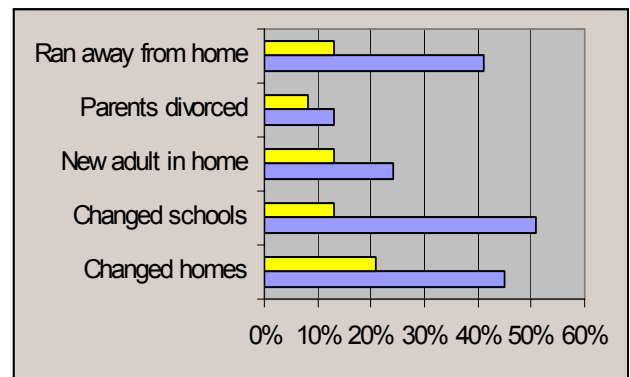


Table 4: Family-Related Issue



*For Tables 1 – 4, the light (yellow) bars represent in-school youth, while the darker (blue) bars are dropout youth.

WHAT PROTECTS YOUTH FROM ENGAGING IN PROBLEM BEHAVIORS?

- **The strongest factors, measured by the survey, that predicted youths' pro-social choices included:**
 - ❑ Playing formal team or individual sports, like tennis, baseball/softball, volleyball and soccer.
 - ❑ Participating in structured “alternative” activities, like school clubs, band, religious/spiritual activities, arts and crafts, cooking/baking, and other hobbies.

- **Other protective factors named in focus groups and follow-up interviews included:**
 - ❑ Caring adults. Often, participants identified alternative school teachers as caring adults.
 - ❑ The flexible schedules, smaller class sizes and personalized attention of alternative schools.
 - ❑ Taking responsibility for life problems and working towards solutions. Evidence of dropout youths' self-reflection emerged in the only open-ended question of the Phase I survey. Unlike their in-school peers, dropout youth :
 - Indicated that exposure to risk and bad choices had helped them learn, adapt and grow.
 - Took responsibility for their bad choices. They seldom blamed others for their hardships.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE COLORADO SCHOOL DROPOUT STUDY

- **Locating and Studying Dropout Youth:** The participation of adults who work with dropout youth in the sampling process greatly enhanced OMNI's ability to locate and engage dropout youth.
- **Dropping Out vs. Staying in School:** Despite reengagement in school, participating "alternative youth" more closely resembled persistent or "hard core" dropouts than their in-school peers on a range of youth problem behaviors. This suggests that the prevention of dropping out may be critical to addressing other youth issues, such as substance abuse and delinquency.
- **Errors and Misunderstandings in School Dropout Estimates:** Many youth who appear on dropout lists are there because of errors in school "paper trails." Others feel compelled to leave as a result of "forcing out" behavior on the part of school personnel (e.g. a youth who is told to "leave and not come back" probably will not come back). These "apparent" dropouts may be prevented by improving school data management and communication.
- **Re-Bonding to School and Capacity for Self-Reflection:** Although dropout youth expressed low commitment to school, most wanted to finish school and were self-reflective about the factors that led to dropping out. Capitalizing on this motivation and ability may increase the success of prevention efforts.
- **Addressing Dropout Youth Troubled Lives:** Youth who dropped out of school often had concurrent adult and adolescent life experiences, such as parenting in high school. Services that help them deal simultaneously with these issues present opportunities to help youth reengage pro-socially.

OMNI Contact Information:

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For additional information about the *Colorado School Dropout Study*, or to request copies of additional reports, contact Suzanne at 303-839-9422 x24. Please indicate which documents you are interested in receiving when you contact OMNI.

____ OMNI Survey Report
____ Focus Group Report
____ Follow-up Interview Report
____ Other _____

¹ Hawkins, David, Richard Catalano and Associates, Communities that Care: Action for Drug Abuse Prevention. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1992.