

High-school dropouts in a working-class South African community: selected characteristics and risk-taking behaviour

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The aims of the project were: (1) to document selected characteristics of teenage school dropouts in a working-class South African community; and (2) to compare the prevalence of the risk-taking behaviour of the dropouts with those attending school. Of the 548 teenagers sampled, 15.9% were dropouts; of these 62.1% left school after less than 9 years of schooling. Those still attending school were more likely to engage in suicidal behaviour but less likely to abuse substances and (for girls) to have had sexual intercourse. Intervention needs to begin in primary school and to address the inter-related phenomena of dropping out and risk-taking behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

South African school dropout figures reflect a dismal scenario of inequality, poverty, and wasted human potential. Although official statistics indicate a steady improvement over the years (Central Statistical Services, 1991) premature dropout remains a serious problem. The proportions of students of each population group (as defined by the Population Registration Act of 1950) who began high school but dropped out before completion in 1990 are as follows: Whites, 17.1%; Asians, 32.3%; Coloureds, 60.2%; and Blacks, 33.6% (Central Statistical Services, 1991). The relatively low percentage of black students who dropped out of high school obscures the true extent of the problem in this population group for the following reasons: (1) if primary and high school data are combined, the dropout rate for Blacks spirals to 72.1%; and (2) 24% of Black adults have never attended school at all (Cape Times, 1990).

A high proportion of South African adolescents are thus being exposed

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to the adverse consequences of not completing their schooling. These include: (1) having a low level of academic skills (Alexander *et al.*, 1985); (2) reduced probability of securing steady employment and an adequate income, both in the short and long term; (3) poorer mental and physical health either directly or indirectly (through unemployment and low income) (Ichilov, 1978; Stafford *et al.*, 1980; Donovan and Oddy, 1982; Jackson *et al.*, 1983; Rumberger, 1987); and (4) an increased use of psychiatric and social services due to drug-related problems (Holmberg, 1985). However, it has been suggested that dropping out of school does not necessarily have negative consequences in that some dropouts may choose alternatives that are more fulfilling and rewarding than attending school (Rumberger, 1987; Tidwell, 1988).

Leaving school prematurely also has important negative consequences for society. Examples of this include: (1) forgone national income and tax revenues (Rumberger, 1987); (2) increased demand for social services; and (3) increased crime rates (Rumberger, 1987).

Despite these adverse individual and social consequences, there is a dearth of studies providing basic descriptive data regarding South African high-school dropouts. Clearly, these data are necessary to underpin prevention efforts. Two objectives of the study were as follows: (1) to determine the proportion of teenage children in a working-class South African community who have dropped out of school; and (2) for those who have dropped out of school, to describe some demographic details, the ages at which they stopped attending school, the reasons that they dropped out, and their employment status.

Risk-taking behaviour can have adverse individual and social consequences. This is pertinent since several studies have concluded that dropping of school is a risk factor for risk-taking behaviour such as various forms of substance abuse and violent behaviour (Kandell, 1975; McKirnan and Johnson, 1986; Pirie *et al.*, 1988; Chavez *et al.*, 1989; Eggert *et al.*, 1990). However, almost all studies in which the prevalence of adolescent risk-taking behaviour is described have had sampling frames confined to adolescents attending school. The findings thus obtained are not generalizable to adolescents as a whole. This limitation was present in a recent study in which the prevalence of a wide range of risk-taking behaviour in high-school students in the Cape Peninsula, South Africa, was determined (Flisher *et al.*, 1993a-h). Additional objectives were thus to attempt to redress this deficiency by documenting the prevalences of various forms of risk-taking behaviour of those teenagers who have dropped out of school, and to compare these prevalences with those pertaining to a school situated in that community.

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