Bimonthly updates to Congress on RAND’s work in child policy.

November 2003

HOT TOPICS

Geographic Disparities in Children’s Mental Health Care

A RAND study, led by RAND economists Roland Sturm and Jeanne Ringel, takes a new approach at explaining variations in mental health services for children. The study finds that the state in which a child resides exceeds the effects of either race/ethnicity or income in determining the availability and use of mental health services. While the need for mental health care is similar across states, the use of such services can vary greatly.

Differences across states exist not only in the overall rates of service use, but also in how effectively services are delivered to the most needy children. The researchers find that in some cases, states with a low use rate and a high need rate are still able to reach a target population of children with the greatest need for mental health services.

Income level often affects the need of a child for mental health care, but it does not necessarily correlate with the child actually receiving services. In some states, the researchers note, children from low-income families are more likely to receive mental health services than children from high-income families.

The study concludes that state policies and health care market characteristics are more likely causes of significant differences across states in both meeting the mental health service needs of children and the rates of use.

Full article: Geographic Disparities in Children’s Mental Health Care


Project ALERT Helps Curb Adolescent Substance Abuse

Project ALERT, a school-based drug prevention program for middle school students, is effective at reducing drug use, even among high-risk adolescents. High-risk youth who benefit from the program include those who have already started smoking or drinking alcohol, a subset that many believed were beyond the reach of any prevention efforts. Cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana are the drugs of choice among adolescents. A RAND study finds that Project ALERT curbs the use of these substances among all eighth grade students in participating schools, as well as among the high-risk adolescents. By curbing alcohol misuse, the program may also lessen the occurrence of related high-risk behaviors, such as drinking and riding in the car with a drunk driver and having sex because of drinking. The lead author of the study is RAND senior researcher Phyllis Ellickson.

Read more: Project ALERT Helps Curb Adolescent Substance Abuse

A Nation at Rest: The American Way of Homework

Over the last two decades, beginning with the publication of A Nation at Risk, few issues related to schooling have been as universally endorsed as homework; anecdotal reports in the media suggest that homework has increased dramatically. RAND researchers used several national surveys to provide a 50-year perspective on time spent on homework. In fact, the average time spent on homework has not increased substantially over the last twenty years, and the great majority of American children—at all grade levels—spend less than one hour studying on a typical day. Moreover, high-school students in the late 1940s and early 1950s studied no more than their counterparts did in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Changes in educational opinion on homework over the last half century have had little effect on student behavior, with only two notable exceptions: a temporary increase in homework time in the decade following Sputnik, and a new willingness in the last two decades to assign small amounts to primary-grade students. Since World War II—whether prevailing educational opinion opposed or supported homework as a cure for the nation’s educational ills—the American way of homework has generally involved only mild demands on most students.

Read more: Homework: What Do We Know?

PROJECT UNDER WAY

Treatment of Adolescent Depression in Primary Care

Depression in adolescents, if left untreated, may result in serious consequences for adolescents, their families, and society. A forthcoming RAND study will inform efforts to improve treatment of adolescent depression in primary care settings. Researchers will study the ways that adolescent depression affects functioning, evaluate the impact of family and provider feedback and education on receipt of treatment for depression, and investigate factors that help or hinder adolescents from receiving appropriate care.

For monthly email updates on all new RAND child policy publications and research projects, sign up for the Child Policy Project mailing list at www.rand.org/child.

For more information, go to RAND Washington External Affairs or contact us at wea@rand.org or 703.413.1100 x5431.

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world.

http://www.rand.org/congress/