



Public Health and Media Literacy

Media Literacy education has been proven a highly effective tool in addressing a variety of public health problems faced by young people. Below is a compilation of data on public health issues confronting youth, and evidence demonstrating that Media Literacy can be part of the solution to these pressing problems.

DRUG, ALCOHOL AND TOBACCO USE

Smoking

Cigarette smoking is the top cause of preventable death and disease in the United States, and studies show about 90 percent of those who died from smoking began as adolescents. Smoking-related mass media messages such as characters smoking in movies and in advertisements, *significantly increases adolescent smoking.* [U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Dept. of Adolescent Health, *Adolescents & Tobacco Trends* <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/adolescent-development/substance-use/drugs/tobacco/trends/index.html> retrieved 2017. Also, "Does Watching Smoking in Movies Promote Teenage Smoking?" T. Heatherton and J. Sargent, *Curr Dir Psychol Sci.* April 2009]

A health curriculum that includes Media Literacy is more effective than traditional anti-smoking lessons (that are effective but do not include Media Literacy) in deterring students from taking up smoking. ["Media Literacy Tops Traditional Education in School Smoking-Prevention Efforts," University of Pittsburgh School of Health Sciences, January 2014 and <http://www.futurity.org/media-literacy-may-trump-anti-smoking-lessons>]

Alcohol use

According to 2009 data, underage drinking in Massachusetts contributed to: 21 homicides, 22,000 violent crimes such as rape, robbery and assault, almost 30,000 crimes against property (burglary larceny and car theft), 13 traffic deaths and 759 non-fatal traffic injuries. Those studies also show underage drinking involved in 357 teen pregnancies, and an estimated 20,000+ teens having unsafe sex. [Underage Drinking in Massachusetts: The Facts, 2011]

Media Literacy can help students make smarter more healthy decisions about alcohol use, including the decision not to drink. ["Effects of General and Alcohol Specific Media Literacy Training on Children's Decision-Making About Alcohol," *Journal of Health Communication*, 2010.]

Drug use

According to a 2013 analysis, 12.3 percent of Massachusetts youth aged 12 to 17 reported using illicit drugs – higher than the national average of 9.8 percent. Research shows that substance abuse and

dependency that begins in childhood is linked to lifelong addiction; prevention and education is key. [Behavioral Health Barometer 2013 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration /HHS]

Incorporating Media Literacy into health education has been shown to be an effective way to empower teens to resist appealing messages about drug use. [Austin E., Pinkleton B. Hust SJ. & Cohen, M., “Evaluation of an American Legacy Foundation/Washington State Department of Health Media Literacy Pilot Study,” *Journal of Health Communication* 18 (1)75 2005.]

OBESITY AND POOR NUTRITION

Although obesity determinants are multiple and complex, widespread marketing and consumption of energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods high in saturated fat, sodium and sugar, (aka ‘junk foods’) contribute substantially to the obesity epidemic.

Marketing of junk food to children is increasing. In 2009 the fast food industry spent \$583 *million* dollars on child-directed marketing primarily through television, up from \$300 million in 2006. [Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, 2010]

Black and Hispanic youth receive a ‘double dose’ of food marketing that promotes products high in sugar, saturated fat, and sodium. Compared to white non-hispanic youth, they are exposed to more food advertising in the media as well as more marketing messages in their communities. [Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, 2010.]

Media Literacy increases students’ knowledge about how unhealthy food is marketed, and to increase students’ knowledge about, and ability to make healthy food choices.

[Center for Media Literacy “CML Pilots Media Literacy Unit for Obesity, Nutrition Education, 2005. Also, “The Impact of Health-Promoting Media Literacy Education on Nutrition and Diet Behavior,” *Handbook of Behavior, Food and Nutrition* pp 3391-3411, January 2011]

“You need *comprehensive* health education, to be helping to learn well, to make healthy choices in our lives.”
Cheryl Bartlett, Former Massachusetts
Dept. of Public Health Commissioner

MENTAL HEALTH, SLEEP DISRUPTION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011. “It’s not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades...There is compelling evidence that the devices we’ve placed in young people’s hands are having profound effects on their lives—and making them seriously unhappy.” [Jean Twenge, “iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood,” 2017.]

Other recent studies show that more than 2 hours of social media use per day is linked to poor mental health among teens including symptoms of depression, anxiety and suicide ideation. [Sampasa-Kanyinga Hugues and Lewis Rosamund F, *Journal of Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, July 2015, 18(7): 380 – 385]

According to a report by the *American Academy of Pediatrics*, over 50 percent of teens report that they are ‘addicted’ to their social media and their devices. [AAP: “Children, Adolescents and Digital Media,” 2015]

Numerous studies have shown that increased internet and social media use has a significant association with poor sleep quality, which can influence school performance. [Scott, H., Gardani, M., Biello, S., Woods, H.,” #SleepyTeens: Social Media Use, Fear of Missing Out and Sleep Outcomes in Adolescents, 2016; Scott, H., Woods, H. “Social Media Use in Adolescence is Associated with Poor Sleep Quality, Anxiety, Depression and Low Self-Esteem,” *Journal of Adolescence*, August 2016;]

However, many young people, their parents, and even their teachers, are not aware of the relatively new connection between social media use and emotional health.

Through Media Literacy, students learn responsible, safe, and ethical media use, including the dangers of overuse, and the concepts of ‘digital nutrition’ and health consequences of media and technology use. Research shows that a greater awareness of our relationship with social media and its impact allows young people to be more mindful of their use, and to seek more authentic connections. [Joni Siani, “Celling Your Soul,” 2013]

VIOLENCE

Studies have shown that before a child is 18, he or she will have seen 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence on television. [*Parents Television Council*]

*“I believe there are children who are raised in violence and who when they observe violence or other gang activity in the media view the media portrayal as confirmation of what they already know.” *Into the Abyss: A Personal Journey into the World of Street Gangs*, Mike Carlie Ph.D., youth gang violence researcher.*

While violence portrayed in the media is not the only cause of actual violence, numerous studies have shown that repeatedly viewing violence in entertainment media can make a person immune or numb to the consequences of violence, learn to accept violence as a way to solve problems, and imitate violence they see in the media. [Collected in: *TV Violence and Children, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, number 13, December 2014; and *American Academy of Pediatrics, Media Violence*, November 2001, vol. 108 Issue 5.]

Social media and the internet can be unsafe spaces where children are targeted by bullies, pedophiles, pimps or gang recruiters. Currently many internet sites are unwilling to address/remove these dangers, and law enforcement typically can only respond after harm children has already been done.

Media Literacy reduces aggressive response choices by examining students’ media viewing, and discussing healthy reasoned solutions to problems vs. sensational violent reactions seen pervasively in entertainment media. [“Key Facts: Media Literacy, *Kaiser Family Foundation*, October 2003; also E. Scharrer, “Measuring the effects of a Media Literacy program on conflict and violence,” *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, Issue 1, 2009]

Media Literacy has been shown to help students differentiate between real life and media portrayals of sex, including violence and nonconsensual sex, and develop healthy, practical communication skills around refusing sexual activity. [*Journal of Media Literacy Education*, Volume 6: Issue 1 page 1-14, 2014 “A Media Literacy Education Approach to Teaching Adolescents Comprehensive Sexual Health Education,” T. Scull, C. Malik, & J. Kupersmidt]

BODY IMAGE AND HEALTH

Numerous reports have shown that a large majority of children and teens – especially girls – are increasingly dissatisfied with their bodies due to ever-present perfected media images of women (images of women who are surgically altered or images that have been digitally manipulated), which can lead to self-esteem problems, eating disorders, and depression. Even among boys, studies have shown effects of repeated exposure to perfected media images of men can have harmful effects such as steroid use, eating disorders and depression.

A Media Literacy curriculum can help teenage girls' self-acceptance self-confidence and promote more positive attitudes towards healthy eating and self-image, even more confidence in school, college and career success. [National Eating Disorders Association, American Association of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, Girls, Inc.]

Media Literacy helps boys develop skepticism around steroid and risky supplement use, and those (Media Literacy-educated) students reported less intention to use dangerous steroids. ["Effectiveness of a new school based Media Literacy intervention on adolescents' doping attitudes and supplement use," Frontiers in Psychology, May 2017]

Conclusion:

We must update health education for youth to reflect new public health concerns in our contemporary 21st century media and digital environment. Evidenced-based research showing Media Literacy as a vehicle for increased efficacy in health education and prevention should not be ignored, and can lead the way to better health decisionmaking and outcomes for young people into adulthood.

The model Media Literacy bill supported by *Media Literacy Now* and a growing number of education and public health experts, can be the first step to the necessary modernization of school health education.

"There's a role for government...to help put in place policies and practices in education and prevention efforts that will help children to make healthier decisions and to get a good start in life." Massachusetts State Senator Jason Lewis, Chair, Joint Committee on Public Health