## External Developmental Assets and Rural Adolescent Mental Health

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### Abstract

Mental health declines are well-documented across the period of adolescence. Youth in rural and frontier areas can experience additional challenges due to isolation and difficulty accessing mental health services. System-level solutions have largely attempted to address these challenges, including efforts to recruit more rural mental health care providers and training focused on unique rural needs. Although worthwhile, system-level changes take many years for the full effects to be felt and are largely out of the direct control of the affected communities. Thus, rather than relying solely on broader systems to address mental health, rural communities can adopt community-based positive youth development approaches that provide experiences relevant to promoting positive mental health. One possible approach is to focus on the External Assets from the 40 Developmental Assets for adolescents.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the role of external developmental assets in rural adolescent mental health, with attention to differences related to residential contexts. Results suggest the importance of assets in rural adolescents’ mental health varies according to whether youth reside within their communities. Prevention and intervention efforts within rural communities should consider the importance of particular assets and the unique challenges related to where youth reside.

### Background

Approximately 1 in 5 youth live in rural settings in the United States. Some rural communities are also considered frontier: fewer than 7 people per square mile; isolated from population centers and services (e.g. hospitals). Typical characteristics of rural settings include: Small total population, low population density, Agricultural and/or extraction activities. Can be contextually different according to residential area: in town, farm, or ranch, out of town (not on a farm/ranch) e.g. less pronounced gender roles among farm families; grandparents more involved in the lives of farm youth. Rural settings and adolescent mental health: Increased in depression and emotional liability during adolescence in general, especially for girls. More symptoms in rural youth. Problems with access to services: transportation, availability, confidentiality concerns, social stigma. Relevance of external assets: Refers to presence of support structures as well as the degree to which youth make use of various opportunities. Social support and sense of community closely related to mental health and resilience. Peer relationships and leisure activities also important factors.

### Method

Participants
- 4 categories represented, all in frontier counties
- 322 students in 9th-12th grade (98% of enrolled students)
- Age 14-19
- 156 males, 143 females
- Measurement: Rural Adolescent Health Survey (RAHS)

External Assets
- Gender (1 = female, 0 = male)
- Location 3 categories: in town, farm/ranch, out of town
- Mental Health: five-factor Likert-type scale (1 = poor, 5 = excellent)

External Developmental Assets for Adolescents
- Recorded (0 = asset not present, 1 = asset present)
- Sum created in category for each individual if no missing data
- Missing < 3% for each measure, < 4% for each category sum

Analytic
- One-way ANOVAs comparing Mental Health, Total Assets, and subcategories of assets by the bases of Residential Location
- Hierarchical regressions using assets categories as predictors of Mental Health (separate models for each residential category)

### Results

#### Table 1: Items from survey used to create asset category sums

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Asset Category</th>
<th>Asset</th>
<th>Income from Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>1. How important is school to you?</td>
<td>1. How old are you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>2. How many teachers at your school care about students?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boundaries &amp; Expectations</td>
<td>4. How many other adults (not at school or in your family) care about you?</td>
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#### Table 2: Regressions predicting mental health from assets, separately by residential location

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<td>Gender</td>
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<td>47.16***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
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### Discussion

Summary
- Youth living out of town not on a farm or ranch reported fewer:
  - Empowerment assets
  - Girls living on farms or ranches did not report lower mental health than boys, differing from typical gender patterns
  - Empowerment assets only category related to mental health across contexts

Limitations
- Cross-sectional
- Mental health measured using only one item
- Measures of limited

Implications, Questions, and Future Directions
- Rural youth living out of town not on a farm/ranch may be particularly vulnerable
- Most items for Empowerment represent school context, including peer acceptance and bullying behaviors
- School-based mental health interventions could address school-related factors impacting mental health and may help overcome accessibility issues (transportation, service hours, etc.)
- Why is so little variation explained for adolescents living on farms or ranches? What would better predict their mental health?

Important consideration: All youth in the present study were living in frontier counties, and results for rural youth in non-frontier counties may be different

Future directions:
- Measurement of all external assets
- Qualitative or mixed methods research to better understand mental health for adolescents living on farms/ranches

### Acknowledgment

NDSU Department of Nursing, Faculty Development Funds (Secor-Turner, PI)

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**Note:** Unstandardized regression weights.

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