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Exploring Perceptions of Sugar Sweetened Beverages Among Early Adolescents in Worcester, MA: a Qualitative Study

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INTRODUCTION

- Sugar sweetened beverage (SSB) consumption among youth in the United States is a major public health problem.
- 10-15% of adolescents total calories are from SSBs.
- High consumption of SSBs is associated with weight gain and obesity.
- A range of factors influence dietary behaviors and food choices.
- This study aimed to explore adolescents’ attitudes and knowledge about SSBs, sources of influence, and reinforcements for SSB consumption using focus groups.

METHODS

- Recruited adolescents aged 12-14 years who attended one of the eight Youth Connect Worcester programs.
- Conducted gender stratified focus group discussions between November 2016 – September 2017.
- Semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate discussions.
- Transcripts were transcribed verbatim and double coded.
- Content analysis was conducted using a conceptual framework.
- Repetitive topics that emerged under each key construct were identified.
- Data were coded and managed using Atlas.ti software.

RESULTS

- Five focus groups with 33 participants 12-14 years old (n=16 boys in 3 groups) and (n=17 girls in 2 groups).
- 27% of participants identified as Hispanic, 24% black and 33% white.
- One third speaks more than one language at home and 63.6% consume SSBs daily.
- Qualitative analysis identified additional themes under the content areas of our framework: Attitudes, Reinforcements, Knowledge, and Sources of Influence.
- Adolescents had general knowledge about SSBs and their health impacts.
- Adolescents were not well informed about dietary recommendations around SSBs, they expressed independence around their behaviors, strong feelings about water only being for hydration, and were influenced by peer, media, and adult SSB behaviors.

DISCUSSION

- This research presents a deeper understanding of factors that influence Worcester adolescents’ beverage choices from their own perspective.
- Adolescents’ perceptions around SSBs are multifactorial and this study identifies specific areas that can be targeted to modify perceptions and behaviors around SSBs.
- These findings can inform future public health messaging in Worcester around obesogenic behaviors such as excess caloric intake from beverages.
- Potential Actions: parents, teachers, and coaches are encouraged to refrain from drinking SSBs in front of adolescents; water filters/pitchers may improve the taste of tap water and thus increase water’s acceptability as a drink.