

RURAL HEALTH ADVOCATE

Guest Article

Adverse Childhood Experiences – A Community Outreach Campaign in Lake County, California

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study is one of the largest ongoing investigations ever conducted on the links between childhood maltreatment and later-life health and well-being. The study was originally conducted in 1995-97 as a collaboration between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente's Health Appraisal Clinic in San Diego. Over 17,000 Kaiser members age 18 and older, undergoing a comprehensive physical examination, provided detailed information about their childhood experience of abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction. The survey results indicated that almost 67% had experienced at least one category of adverse childhood experience and more than 20% indicated three or more ACE. In addition, the study demonstrated that as the number of the ACE increased, the risk for a number of behavioral health problems increased, such as alcohol abuse, illicit drug use, overeating, depression, and smoking, as well as a number of chronic health problems and diseases (www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/ace/index.htm and www.acestudy.org).

The Child Abuse Prevention Council of Lake County (otherwise known as the Children's Council) was extremely interested in this research as a means to develop a deeper understanding of the serious, long-term impact of early trauma on children. Lake County is a rural county located northeast of San Francisco, with a total population of approximately 65,000. Children under age 18 make up about 21% of the total population, while 44% of the population is age 45 and older. The county is ringed by mountains with Clear Lake situated in the middle. Residents live in small towns scattered around the lake, in the mountains, and in two incorporated cities: Clearlake in the south with 14,200 residents and Lakeport in the north with 5,000 residents. Transportation is a major barrier for receiving services, especially with the cost of owning a car and buying gasoline, and the dramatic downturn in the economy. The local economy is dominated by tourism and other services (government, education and health). Unemployment is currently at 18.5% (June 2010). Lake County's poverty rate is about 18%, with 64% of children enrolled in the free and reduced lunch programs countywide. About 40% of households in the county are considered to have income below what is needed to be self-sufficient.

The topic of adverse childhood experiences (ACE) became increasingly more significant in light of its bearing on personal, family, and community health and well-being, especially in these tough economic times. The repercussions of ACE are diffuse throughout healthcare and family support organizations. Members of the Children's Council worked daily in agencies serving adults who exhibited a number of the behavioral health problems discussed in the ACE Study:

- Alcohol and Drugs: Lake County has a significant problem with alcohol and drug abuse. Indicators of this issue include: (1) the rate of death due to alcohol and drug use is about 2.5 times higher than that of the state, and (2) the rate of admissions to alcohol and other drug treatment for adults from the county is almost twice the rate for the state.
- Obesity: About 34% of adults in the county have a Body Mass Index (BMI) in the healthy range (greater than 18.5 and less than 25), and 29% were considered obese (BMI greater than 30). The Healthy People 2010 targets are 60% for healthy weight and 15% obesity.

- Mental Health: 11.3% of Lake County residents are likely to have experienced psychological distress in the past year (compared with 8.5% statewide), and about 18% saw a healthcare provider for emotional-mental and/or alcohol-drug issues in past year (compared with 12% statewide).
- Smoking: About 26% of adults in Lake County smoked in the last year, compared with about 15% statewide.

Every day physicians, public health nurses, home visitors, social workers, and educators in the county encountered individuals and families who struggled with chronic and complex conditions that impinge on personal health, interpersonal relationships and family function. In 2009, Lake County Children's Council set forth the goal to increase awareness of ACE among the general public and service providers, and embarked on a two-year Community Outreach Campaign. The campaign used traditional media outlets, including local public radio talk shows specializing in health issues and newspaper articles; and presentations to community leaders, agency personnel and high school students. In all cases, audiences were encouraged to complete a two-page questionnaire including a number of questions on behavioral health issues and demographics, and ten questions related to categories of adverse childhood experiences.

Through its community-wide survey on ACE, Children's Council wished to address two questions:

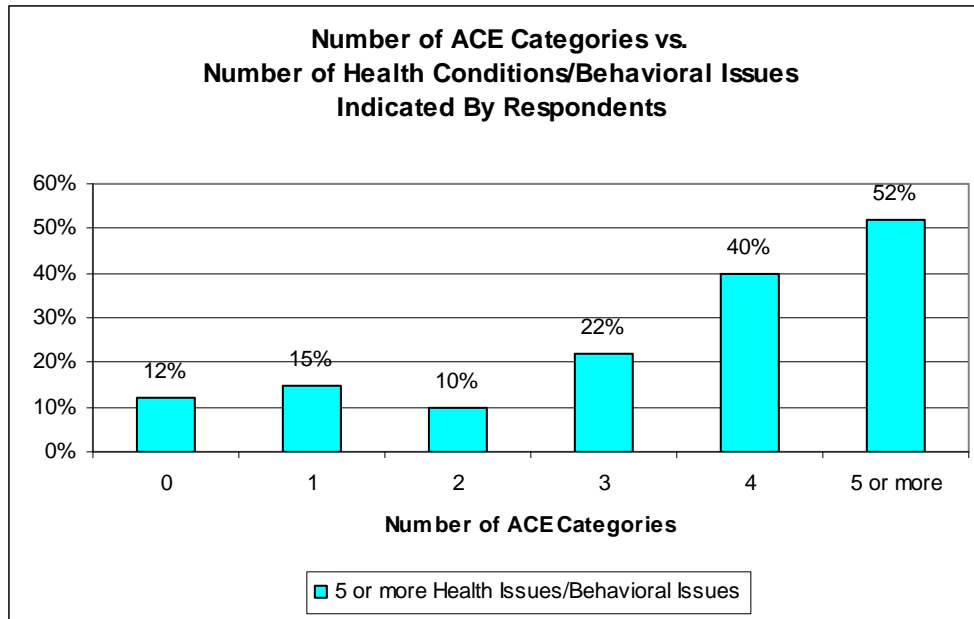
1. Is Lake County reflective of the ACE Study findings?
2. Are there population centers within the county that have a relatively higher number of individuals with a higher number of markers than other areas?

The results would be useful for planning outreach, and prevention and intervention services, both in emphasis and geographically. The survey was available in hard copy and online. Respondents were encouraged to save a copy and to share their findings with their primary health care provider, their family or close friends.

Overall, 82% of survey respondents indicated they had experienced one or more of the ten ACE categories, compared with the original ACE Study results of 67% with one or more ACE. The highest number of Lake County respondents indicated that as a child they had lived with someone who abused alcohol or drugs (53%); had felt a sense of abandonment (52%) and/or experienced frequent humiliation or emotional abuse (48%). The three least dominant ACE categories reported were adults who as a child experienced domestic violence in the home (27%), neglect (24%) or a household member going to prison (19%). It should be noted that the lowest reported ACE category in the Lake County results is still 2 times higher than the national average, with 10% of the population having a close family member in prison.

In addition, 41% of the Lake County respondents indicated they had experienced 5 or more ACE categories, with all population centers in the county having respondents who indicated this high number of ACE. In comparison, 60% indicated 3 or more ACE versus 20% in the original ACE Study.

In the Lake County study as with the original ACE Study, as the number of ACE categories increased, the percentage of respondents with significant behavioral issues or health conditions also increased. This can be seen in the chart below.



These were results were found with:

- Alcohol: 44% of respondents with five or more ACE categories had experienced difficulty with overuse of alcohol as an adult, versus 26% with one ACE.
- Illicit Drugs: 51% of respondents with five or more ACE had used street drugs, versus 24% with one ACE.
- Depression: 64-80% of respondents with four or more ACE categories indicated they had experienced depression as an adult, versus 26% with one ACE.
- Overweight: 56%-64% of respondents with four or more ACE categories had difficulty with their weight as an adult, versus 44% with one ACE.
- Smoking: 47% of respondents with five or more ACE categories had difficulty quitting their tobacco use, versus 21% with one ACE.

After reviewing these results, the Children’s Council agreed that this outreach and educational effort should be continued and that more creative ways were needed to heighten community awareness. A Children’s Council committee has been formed and discussion has commenced on how best to move forward with Phase 2 of the Outreach Campaign. It should be noted that the original two-year community outreach campaign by Children’s Council was conducted solely through the volunteer commitment of its members. It was recognized that Phase 2 will require more than these voluntary efforts, and the Children’s Council is seeking funding to support this next phase of outreach and education.

In addition, social service agencies and health providers in Lake County are looking further at the results of the survey to potentially target specific services to the population centers most in need. The Children’s Council is investigating how to work with the medical community to utilize the ACE questionnaire in a clinical setting. Recent discussions included a number of strategies for “embedding” ACE in the local service continuum.

For further information on Lake County's ACE efforts, please contact Children's Council members: Joan Reynolds at Lake County Office of Education, jreynolds@lakecoe.org; or Tom Jordan, First 5 Lake, tjfirstfivelake@sbcglobal.net.

***Author Bio:** Cathy Ferron, Principal Consultant, Ferron & Associates, Planning & Evaluation Consultants, has over 30 years of professional experience, including 20 years working with the nonprofit and public sectors developing collaborative community-based efforts. In her work, Cathy supports the use of data to plan for, develop, and improve programs and services in areas of child development, education, health, and family strengthening, and has worked in Lake County since 1999. Cathy holds a Masters in Business Administration from the University of California at Berkeley with an emphasis in strategic planning and marketing and a BS in Applied Mathematics from Carnegie-Mellon University.*