



Teens can be encouraged to participate in healthy activities. Photo courtesy Patrick O'Carroll.

# Second Decade Project: Lifelong Benefits of Early Intervention

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**T**he populations on the two sides of the Washington-British Columbia border look a lot alike—similar age distribution, racial and ethnic diversity, educational attainment and income. In some important ways, however, they differ with regard to governmental policies for health and social services.

This presents Pacific Northwest researchers with rich opportunities to conduct comparative research involving populations on both sides of the border. Unfortunately, comparative research using existing data sets is hampered by our inability to do apples-to-apples comparisons, due to differing data collection methods and standards in the US and Canada.

## Our Project

The leadership of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in Region X (Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington) has taken a special interest in health promotion and disease prevention during the second decade—10-19 years of age. The purpose of the Second Decade Project, launched in 2010, is to maximize health and healthy development among people in this age group by coordinating and integrating the many interventions and activities relevant to their health. This project is in coordination with the HHS Office on Adolescent Health, which supports multidisciplinary projects focused on improving adolescent health, collects and disseminates information on adolescent health to health professionals and the general public, and works in partnership with other HHS agencies to support evidence-based approaches to improving the health of adolescents.

During the second decade, adolescents make a wide variety of personal decisions and establish lifelong patterns of behavior that affect health later in life—whether or not to try cigarette smoking, for example, or to experiment with illicit drugs. By age 20, most young people have established fairly persistent dietary and exercise patterns that may be

healthy or unhealthy in the long term. For many adolescents, sexual activity and alcohol use begin during this decade, which can range from relatively low-risk in some circumstances to extremely dangerous in others. Because so many important health-related behaviors have their inception during the second decade of life, helping adolescents make healthy choices and develop healthful behavior patterns during this life stage could have enormous, lifelong health benefits.

## Why Does Cross-Border Research Matter?

Cross-border comparisons hold the promise of evidence-based explorations of which policies are most effective in promoting health and preventing disease, injury, and unwanted pregnancies—whether related to the second decade of life or any other health focus. Such comparative research has been effectively conducted in the past, for example, to compare the impact of firearm regulations on the rate of suicide among adolescents and young adults living in King County, Washington, and the Vancouver area of British Columbia. Myriad important health policy questions remain, of course, such as how teen pregnancy rates and infant health are affected by Canada's universal health coverage as compared to reproductive health services provided via personal health insurance, Medicaid funding, and Title X Family Planning program funds on the US side of the border.

## What Did We Find?

Using the potential for cross-border comparative research in the Pacific Northwest, we explored several key adolescent health indicators (see table for a few of them). In Washington State, trends in adolescent health are monitored through the biennial Healthy Youth Survey (HYS), which collects data on the health risk behaviors of 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students throughout the state. The risk behaviors of British Columbia youth are monitored using the Adolescent Health Survey (AHS), which is administered to 7th through 12th graders every five years.

Based primarily on data from the most recent cycles of the HYS and AHS, we found interesting

