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# Accessing Recovery: An Ecological Analysis of Barriers and Opportunities for Adolescents through Recovery High Schools

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## What is a recovery high school (RHS)?

- Academically focused with recovery support components structured in the school day

### Demographics:

- Approximately 30 exist in the U.S., with 4 in both MN and MA
- 6 – 75 students per school

### Structures:

- Students often must complete formal alcohol/other drug treatment prior to entry
- Students must commit to sobriety while at the school
- Recovery supports include: group therapy sessions, individual counseling sessions, peer support, intentional relationships with staff
- Structure and setting varies across schools and states (e.g., charter, alternative school, private school)

## School Data

### All MA Students<sup>2</sup>



Legend:  
 ■ = Students of color  
 ■ = Non-Hispanic White Students

### All MN Students<sup>2</sup>



### RHSs #1 (N=81)<sup>1</sup>



### District #1 (N=56,037)<sup>2</sup>



### RHSs #2 (N=59)<sup>1</sup>



### District #2 (N=4,251)<sup>2</sup>



### RHSs #3 (N=38)<sup>1</sup>



### District #3 (N=15,828)<sup>2</sup>



### RHSs #4 (N=17)<sup>1</sup>



### District #4 (N=25,213)<sup>2</sup>



### RHSs #1 (N=70)<sup>1</sup>



### District #1 (N=34,934)<sup>2</sup>



### RHSs #2 (N=13)<sup>1</sup>



### District #2 (N=8,347)<sup>2</sup>



### RHSs #3 (N=3)<sup>1</sup>



### District #3 (N=2,866)<sup>2</sup>



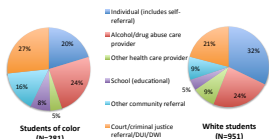
### RHSs #4 (N=6)<sup>1</sup>



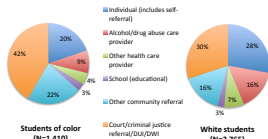
### District #4 (N=7,559)<sup>2</sup>



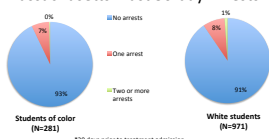
## Massachusetts: Referral Source to Tx<sup>3</sup>



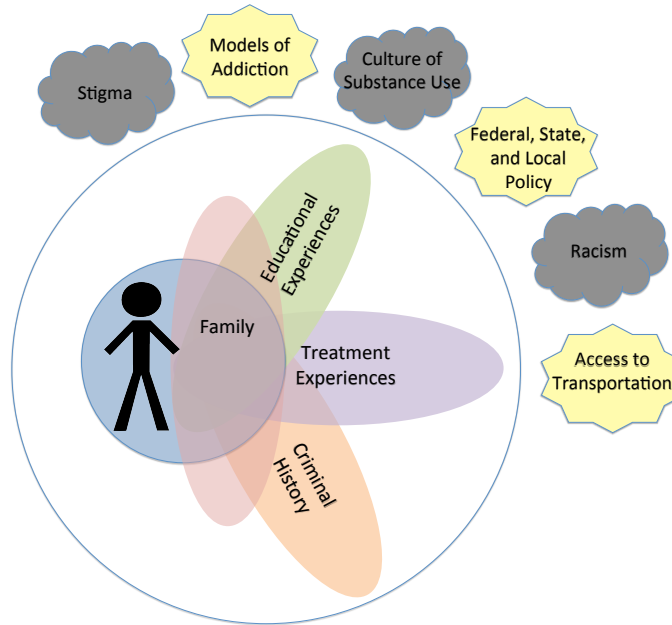
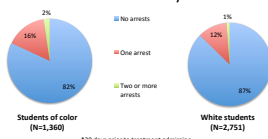
## Minnesota: Referral Source to Tx<sup>3</sup>



## Massachusetts: Past 30-day Arrests<sup>\*3</sup>



## Minnesota: Past 30-day Arrests<sup>\*3</sup>



## Understanding the Ecological Model

**Individual characteristics** influence students' likelihood of entering treatment and later a recovery school: commitment to sobriety, perception of risk or norms, experiences with negative consequences of substance use, etc.

**Family financial situation, parents' opinions** about substance use, willingness to seek outside resources, parents' histories with substance use, and other factors influence one's likelihood of seeking treatment or alternative schooling options

**Educational experiences** and school climate impact whether a student feels safe talking to school staff about substance use problems; school resources – e.g., availability of a chemical health counselor – influences school staff members' ability to respond effectively to student concerns

**Department of Education disciplinary policies** related to substance use in school determine one's path: disciplinary consequences or treatment resources; availability of alternative school choices dictates students' options

**Treatment Experiences** connect students with continuing care resources and can recommend recovery high schools; how consistently this happens determines students' likelihood of accessing these resources post-treatment

**Public Health Department** funding for treatment at a level commensurate with need and the presence of treatment centers with openings relatively close to students' homes impacts who receives treatment

**Criminal History** helps determine whether substance use infractions result in punitive or therapeutic consequences

**Juvenile Justice System** and how willing courts are to divert students are to divert students to treatment programs instead of detention influence who receives treatment and who receives jail time

**Stigma** toward substance use can reduce use, but stigma toward addiction/treatment is a barrier to treatment<sup>4</sup>

**Models of addiction** and whether addiction is considered a disease, psychological, sociocultural, moral, or biopsychosocial issue influences response<sup>5</sup>

**Culture of substance use** at school, in the neighborhood, and more broadly influences norms and use<sup>6,7</sup>

**Federal, state, and local policy** influence all of the more proximal systems – education, public health, and juvenile justice

**Racism** influences substance use<sup>8</sup>, and racial disparities in treatment access and completion are evident<sup>9</sup>; many schools remain segregated<sup>10</sup>

**Access to transportation** predicts higher treatment completion rates<sup>11</sup>; transportation determines actual school choices

## Discussion

- Incidence of dependence or abuse of illicit drugs or alcohol is high among 12-17 year-olds: 7.03% of students in Massachusetts and 6.76% of students in Minnesota<sup>12</sup>
- Recovery high schools are often not demographically representative of the counties in which they are located
- This disparity is observed in recovery high schools, yet the systems that lead to this disparity can be traced back through the individual, family, and larger cultural and governmental systems
- Although these systems at times overlap, clear channels of communication for collaboration are not always evident across sectors
- Therefore, where and how can this disparity be addressed?

## Policy Recommendations

- Increase availability of and funding for treatment and aftercare resources for adolescents with substance use disorders
- Recognize that these seemingly separate systems do interact
- Broadly, we must address these intersections structurally to encourage new pathways of communication
  - Create new policies that assist the Education, Public Health, and Juvenile Justice sectors in communication
  - Enable funding mechanisms that encourage and support this cross-sector collaboration, including employees to help with implementation
  - Reconsider juvenile court responses to first/second/third offenses for youth, including possible treatment mandates
- Recovery schools can play important roles in actively addressing these needs
- The Changing Tracks program seeks to improve life chances for African-American youth affected by substance abuse in Boston by addressing some of these disparities through:
  - Building new stakeholder alliances
  - Building treatment awareness in schools and communities
  - Creating a school-based referral system
  - Creating a city-wide court diversion system
  - Expanding culturally appropriate treatment
  - Combining treatment with wrap-around supports

## References

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## Further Information

For more information, please contact Holly Karakos:  
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 You are also invited to visit our project website at:  
<https://my.vanderbilt.edu/recoveryhighschools/>