

Mississippi State University Study Seeks Lower STD Rates Among

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A Mississippi State University sociologist hopes a \$1.6 million National Institutes of Health grant will help researchers determine ways to reduce the spread of STDs among teenagers.

Through a cooperative effort with the University of Southern Mississippi, the five-year project headed by Angela Robertson, a research fellow at MSU's Social Science Research Center, will focus on about 400 high-risk 12- to 17-year-olds incarcerated at the state's Columbia Training School. "The study will target females exclusively because girls, especially African-American girls, are disproportionately at risk," said Robertson.

Robertson, a former mental health counselor, theorizes that drug and alcohol use, combined with a history of abuse, can be significant predictors of the likelihood for contracting STDs.

In a study completed earlier this year of more than 780 juveniles at a Mississippi detention center, Robertson found that nearly 30 percent of girls 13 and older tested positive for either chlamydia or gonorrhea. "This is a high rate," she noted, adding that many STDs, left untreated, can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility and other health issues.

In the study, a screening for seven illicit drugs found more than 20 percent of girls and more than 40 percent of males tested positive for at least one. Eighty percent of males and females said they were victims of violence, and nearly a third of the surveyed girls also reported at least one pregnancy.

The grant provides for a full-time nurse and two health educators on-site at the training school.

Participating youths will be tracked for a year after the intervention, with researchers collecting behavioral and biological data, said Robertson.

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