



## Assessing Adolescent Sexual Health Risks in Nicaragua

Local health care providers in San Juan del Sur, a small town in southwestern Nicaragua, have been struggling with high rates of adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection (STI) in their community for many years. These providers had previously attempted to put together an effective STI and pregnancy prevention program in their community, but found that they lacked sufficient information regarding the sexual risk behaviors and knowledge of the adolescent population.

2002 Wilbur Downs Fellow Susanna Westbrook, a second year student in the YSN Nurse-Midwifery Specialty, spent nine weeks in San Juan del Sur this summer to conduct a study titled, "Pregnancy Prevention: An Assessment of Adolescent Sexual Risk Behaviors, Knowledge, and Attitudes in Southwestern Nicaragua." The objective of Susanna's study was to supply data to health care providers in southwestern Nicaragua regarding the sexual risk behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge of adolescents in San Juan del Sur and in the surrounding rural areas. Susanna studied a group of 203 adolescents who were 13–21 years old, attended school in urban and rural settings or lived in rural areas, and were no longer attending school. Susanna collected data on their sexual activities, sexual orientation, family childbearing history, history of abuse, attitudes and knowledge of contraceptive use, STI history, and knowledge of STI and pregnancy prevention.

The population of San Juan del Sur and its surrounding communities is 18,000, of which approximately 4,000 are teens, with 40 percent in town and 60 percent in the surrounding rural areas. San Juan del Sur is becoming a popular tourist destination. The influx of tourists contributes to increasing rates of STI, and bolsters the prostitution trade among adolescents. Health care providers in the area report

increasing incidences of gonorrhea, trichomonas, chlamydia, human papilloma virus, cervical dysplasia, and pregnancy in adolescents.

"Poor, rural adolescents are at high risk for contracting sexually transmitted infections," explains Susanna. "Rural adolescents with STIs have little chance to receive treatment because of the expense, difficulty of transportation, lack of telephones, and frequent lack of available treatment."

Susanna's study is the first project to attempt to assess adolescent sexual health in southwestern Nicaragua. "Preliminary data analysis suggests that many adolescents from rural areas of southwestern Nicaragua have a very low level of knowledge about prevention of sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy," says Susanna. "This demonstrates a strong need for a community-based STI and pregnancy prevention program that targets both adolescents and parents."

Susanna plans to build on her experience in Nicaragua by conducting further community-based research. "Prior to coming to Yale, I never thought that clinical research would interest me," she said. "My experience in San Juan del Sur certainly changed that. It made me realize that my work has made a difference in this community and that my findings will be used to change the lives of young people."

Susanna was an invited presenter at the International Symposium on Adolescent Health held in Havana, Cuba from October 28 to November 1, 2002. She presented (in Spanish) research findings from her summer fellowship in Nicaragua to researchers and health care professionals from Latin America, the United States, and Southeast Asia.

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