Introduction & Background
Indiana’s adolescents are its most valuable resource -- they will become our workers, taxpayers, and leaders. Yet adolescents in Indiana suffer from a variety of health problems, including obesity, depression, unintended pregnancy and STIs, and alcohol and other substance use, that can interfere with achieving their full potential. The Indiana State Plan for Adolescent Health invests in their future, through coordinating policies related to adolescent health.

Public health theory and practice suggest that programs directed at adolescents are most effective when informed by the perspectives of those served by those programs, adolescents. Successful public health programs need to address a problem that a community considers important, as well as frame that program in a style that is sensitive to the culture and values of the recipients. With these principles in mind, the Indiana Coalition to Improve Adolescent Health sought out the perspectives of adolescents across the state to inform the Indiana State Plan for Adolescent Health.

Methods
Coalition members provided contacts to youth serving agencies across the state. Six focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured guide that included questions such as, “What makes an adolescent healthy?” Focus groups were tape recorded, transcribed, and analyzed looking for common themes. Groups were held in Gary, Rossville, Scottsburg, Indianapolis, and Terre Haute. Participants included youth leaders, Future Farmers of America, a Latino student group, students from an alternative high school, parenting adolescents, and university freshmen.

Results
The health issues identified by adolescent focus group participants were very similar to those identified by the Coalition: obesity, tobacco, alcohol and drug use, unplanned pregnancy and STI, depression and anxiety, violence, and access to health care. While adolescent participants acknowledged an individual’s responsibility for their own health behaviors, they additionally placed these health behaviors in the context of their relationships and environment. The themes of supportive relationships and supportive environments were consistent across geographic locations, demographics, and circumstance.

All groups identified relationships with family, peers, school personnel, youth workers, and other adults as key supports for health-enhancing behaviors. In particular, positive, non-judgmental relationships in which the adult respected the adolescent’s expanding capacities were perceived to support healthier decision-making in all areas and with all groups. Parents were particularly important positive (and negative) role-models and supports.

The broader contexts of adolescent’s lives could either support or hinder healthy behaviors and positive health outcomes. These contexts included the physical environment (school and community resources, green space, safety), the presence or absence of financial stresses, and the accuracy and truthfulness of health information. Participants emphasized the importance of living in surroundings that have supportive adults who trust and value them as adolescents, safe neighborhoods that allow them to work and play outside with undue fear of harm (being shot or attacked), communities that provide opportunities to remain and learn in school, with access to
jobs, medical care, and truthful health education that helps them make safer choices about sexuality, substance use, and alcohol use. Stress and fatigue, the two most commonly cited mental health issues, were linked to financial stressors, time pressures, unsafe physical environments, and lack of adult support. Obesity was linked to lack of adult support for good nutrition and exercise, financial and time pressures, and physical environments that provide no opportunities to be active.

Implications
Adolescent focus groups provided key insights and perspectives on improving the health of Indiana’s youth. These adolescent participants viewed their health as a shared responsibility among a number of players - families, peers, schools, communities, and adolescents themselves. Their surroundings and relationships with trusting, supportive adults who are involved in their lives were viewed as necessary supports for healthy decision-making and better health outcomes. Unfortunately, in Indiana, many adults do not provide either positive role modeling or safe and supportive environments for young people. The Indiana State Plan for Adolescent Health provides Indiana leaders and communities with an opportunity to make a commitment to provide a safe, supportive environment, connect to their adolescents and involve them in decision-making, and encourage healthier behaviors for adults and adolescents alike. Young people expect and deserve as much.

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