A Typology of Prevention Activities: Applications to Community Coalitions

Roger E. Mitchell,1,3 John F. Stevenson,2 and Paul Florin2

Use of community coalitions as a strategy for the primary prevention of tobacco, alcohol, and other drug abuse is justified in part on the prospect that these coalitions will mount comprehensive, multi-level, multi-target intervention packages. To judge the success of such coalitions, reliable and valid means for assessing the content and pattern of their overall prevention efforts are required. This article proposes a typology of prevention activities, discusses the logic on which it is based, and provides examples of useful applications in examining community coalition prevention plans. Evidence for reliability and validity is provided through assessments of inter-rater agreement, and the relation of measures of “scope of prevention activities” to independent ratings of comprehensiveness. The typology can be used in research validating the logic model on which prevention coalitions are based, and it is also demonstrably useful for improving the local planning process.

KEY WORDS: coalitions; prevention; typology of prevention strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Community coalitions are an increasingly popular choice for tackling community problems that have been seemingly intractable to other kinds of approaches. From smoking rates to teen pregnancy to underage drinking and driving, community coalitions are being touted as a key mechanism...
for launching an incredibly diverse array of prevention activities. The logic behind such coalition-oriented efforts seems compelling: local constituencies have the best sense of the kinds of prevention efforts likely to be compatible with local norms and values; broad-based community participation can increase local ownership and improve the chances of programs and activities being sustained over the long haul; and community prevention activities are likely to result in more potent outcomes when they are coordinated to address problems at multiple levels and across multiple constituencies (Butterfoss, Goodman & Wandersman, 1993; Chavis & Florin, 1990; Pentz et al., 1989).

While the general logic of coalition based approaches is clear, the best way to monitor, understand and evaluate such efforts is not. For example, comprehensive prevention programming is increasingly seen as one important standard by which community coalitions should be judged. How exactly does one define success in attaining comprehensive, community-based prevention programming? Comprehensiveness has been variously characterized as: addressing multiple risk factors; involving multiple community systems or channels (e.g., media, family, peers); involving multiple strategies (e.g., information, life skills, alternative activities); and striving toward institutional as well as individual level change (Bernard, 1988; Johnson et al., 1990; Kumpfer, 1989; Manger, Hawkins, Haggerty & Catalano, 1992). The National Research Council's recent review of the research literature, Preventing drug abuse: What do we know?, for example, noted a "growing recognition of the need to support educational interventions on the drug problem with broader policy and environmental changes and to engage parents, community and other social factors" (Gerstein & Green, 1993; pp. 109). However, without common frameworks and decision rules for categorizing activities and programs, i.e., a typology, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand what is happening in this whirlwind of community-based effort. Despite the voluminous (and often compelling) literature on models for prevention initiatives, there has been no demonstration to date of a reliable and valid classification system. It also becomes extraordinarily difficult to draw conclusions across the accumulation of work on community-based coalitions.

The purpose of this article is to: (a) suggest how such a typology can be a useful tool in answering basic questions about the functioning and development of coalitions; (b) discuss some of the challenges in our development of a reliable and valid typology of prevention activities; and (c) demonstrate the potential influence of such a typology on programming and research by creating a common language for talking about prevention activities.