

Effectiveness of Wilderness Therapy Programs on Mental and Behavioral Health: A Rapid Evidence Review

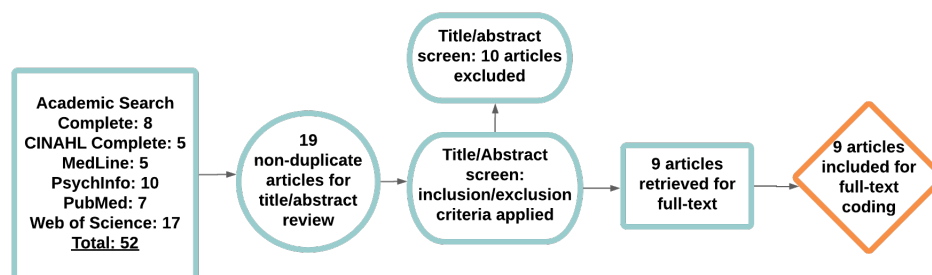
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What is a Rapid Evidence Review?

Rapid Evidence Reviews (RER) are systematic reviews of the research literature that restrict searches by year or topic in order to produce an overview of the published evidence within a short period of time. On behalf of policymakers in Washington State, CoLab and Evidence-Based Practice Institute (EBPI) researchers conducted an RER to answer the following question: **How effective are wilderness therapy programs on adolescent mental and behavioral health?**

Approach

CoLab/EBPI searched the Academic Search Complete, CINAHL Complete, MedLine, PsychInfo, PubMed, and Web of Science databases, finding 52 articles that met the initial search criteria. After removing duplicates and applying pre-determined inclusion/exclusion criteria (i.e., quality, type of study design, wilderness therapy, mental health, children and adolescents), nine articles were included for full-text coding.



Findings

Evidence for the effectiveness of wilderness and outdoor therapy programs on adolescent mental and behavioral health is inconclusive. Multiple reviews note the wide variation in program implementation (i.e., heterogeneity), differences in the target population between studies, and small study sample sizes. We review the effectiveness of these programs by treatment goal listed below.

Mental health: Five of the eight reviews included studies of mental health outcomes. Interventions across all eight studies included licensed mental health providers, but therapy type varied widely. Bettman (2016) reviewed studies with private pay clients in wilderness groups and found medium improvement on clinical measures. Cahill (2020) compared outdoor camps with other activity-based programs (occupational programs, meditation, animal-assisted, yoga, play, sports) and found low effects for outdoor camps (yoga, sports, and the creative arts achieved moderate to strong effects). Gillis (2016) examined treatment effects using a standard measure across wilderness and non-wilderness treatment groups and found large improvements for both groups. These large effects run counter to other published reviews of outpatient mental health treatment. Kraft (2020) reviewed qualitative studies of youth participating in wilderness camps as part of psychological treatment and found youth experience varied across interventions. Lubans (2012) reviewed studies of physical activity and emotional well-being for youth at-risk of depression, finding inconclusive results.

Delinquency, recidivism: Bedard (2004) found small effects of wilderness therapy programs on recidivism for legal-system-involved youth. However, programs focusing on social skills, cognitive behavioral therapy, or family cohesion/reconciliation reported medium effects. This confirms meta-analysis findings from Wilson and Lipsey (2000).

Prevention of risky behavior: Guttman (2015) included a review of outdoor adventure programs within a wider meta-analysis of prevention programs designed to improve social-emotional learning. The outdoor adventure programs had small to medium effects, similar to the effects of mentoring. Social-emotional learning programs achieved small to large effects depending on the program.

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