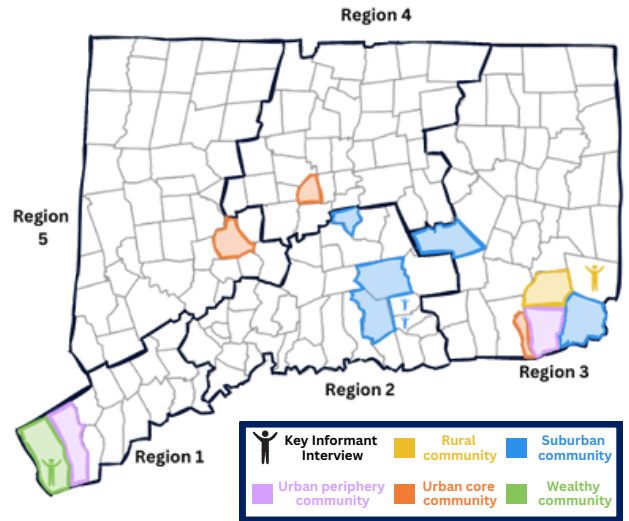


2023 Connecticut Youth & Parent Focus Groups

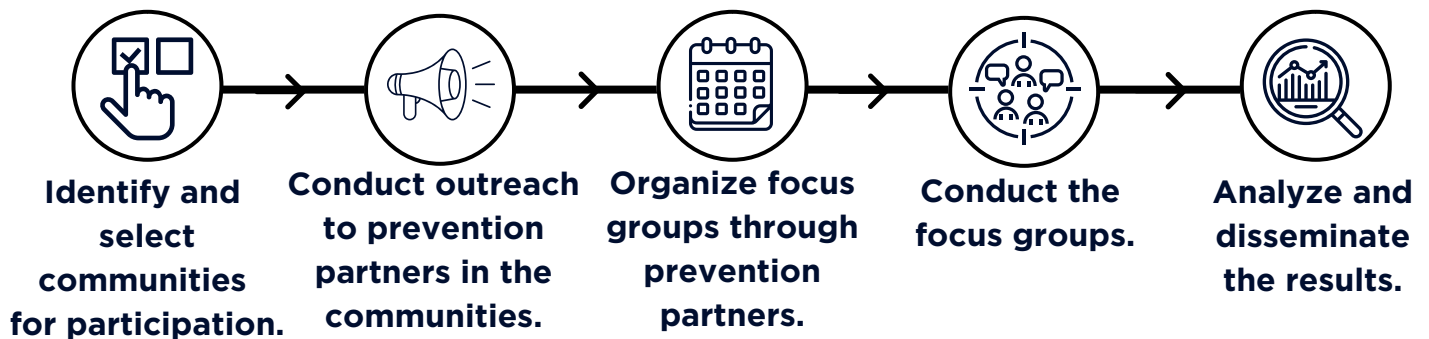
Behavioral Health, Substance Use, & COVID-19

Introduction

The Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) received COVID-19 Supplemental Block Grant funding to collect information about how COVID-19 has impacted Connecticut families and youth regarding mental health and substance use. Between February and June 2023, the DMHAS Center for Prevention Evaluation & Statistics (CPES) at UConn Health conducted **focus groups with 96 youth and 13 parents across 15 Connecticut communities.**



Methodology: An Overview



Participant Demographics



Most of the youth participants identified as female.

61% identified as female, 31% male, 6% self-described, and 2% did not disclose.



Half of the youth participants identified as White/Caucasian.

49% White/Caucasian, 21% Black/African American, 9% Asian, and 9% two or more races. 63% identified as non-Hispanic and 26% identified as Hispanic.



The mean age of youth participants was 15.32.

80% were between 13-18, 12% were 11-12, and 6% did not disclose age.



Most youth participants were in high school.

77% were in high school and 23% were in middle school.



Parent focus groups and key informant interviews were conducted with parents from DMHAS Regions 1, 2 and 3.

To view the full report, visit the CT SEOW Prevention Data Portal:

<http://preventionportal.ctdata.org/products.html>

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Youth Substance Use

Substances & Where Youth Are Getting Them



Across most communities, youth identified **vaping as the most common form of substance use**, followed by cannabis use and then drinking alcohol.



Youth are getting substances from family members, peers, older friends, and stores (e.g., smoke shops without I.D. check or with a fake I.D.).



Social media (e.g., Snapchat) is an avenue for peers to sell/buy cannabis and vaping devices from each other or advertisements.



Cannabis legalization changed some youth's perception of cannabis' accessibility, acceptability, and harmfulness.

"I think that when you're an underclassmen, and when you're even as young as middle school, people think [vaping] is this really cool thing to do because you're not really exposed to alcohol and partying yet."

Parent Perspectives on Youth Substance Use



There was no consensus among parents about the right age to start conversations about substance use and whether they should begin at school or at home. Nonetheless, most parents agreed they felt comfortable talking to their kids about substance use. They also expressed concern with vaping advertisements targeted towards children.

"I know for me, I have an older daughter and she's usually home all the time. But, with all of the social media that they have goin' on, she'll see a lotta posts on like Snapchat-and everything else that they have-of a lotta people that she used to know. They're all drinking and goin' to parties and it's definitely out there."

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Youth Substance Use

Motivations for Substance Use



Youth are using substances because they are influenced by **social norms**, use them as a **coping mechanism**, and are motivated by additional **external and internal factors**.

Social Norms



- Social pressure
- To "look cool"
- Their role models use substances
- To make socializing easier

Coping Mechanism



- Coping with mental illness
- Stress relief from academia/school
- Family issues

External Factors



- Substance use promotion on social media
- Family norms
- Misinformation about substance use

Internal Factors



- Curiosity about substances
- Experimentation
- Boredom

COVID-19 Impacts on Substance Use



Youth cited different reasons for substance use and its relation to the impacts of COVID-19:



Easier access to parents' substances



Boredom due to Lockdown



Easier socializing with friends post-lockdown

“I guess I feel like a lot of the motivators have stayed the same except for [alcohol at parties] helps you talk to other people and like open up more, which I think may have been difficult during COVID 'cause we weren't talking to each other.”

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Youth Mental Health

Mental Health Issues & Stressors



Anxiety, stress and depression are the biggest mental health-related issues among youth. Stressors contributing to these issues include...



Social standards shaped by social media, society, peers, and parents.



School/academic performance and the transition from middle school, high school, and high school to college



Aptitude, or the ability to acquire certain skills and knowledge and living up to a 'standard'



The future in terms of career decisions, college preparation, or uncertainty about the future



"Definitely anxiety and depression... Just 'cause I feel like nowadays a lot of people feel like they have to live up to a standard. Whether that standard is from their parents or from like the internet, they just feel like there's a standard that they need to live up to."

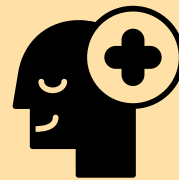


COVID-19 Impacts on Mental Health



The COVID-19 pandemic made these stressors worse and added others, such as:

- Transitioning between in-person and online learning;
- Social isolation;
- Loss of social skills.



Some youth reported improvements in mental health due to spending more time with family during the pandemic and improved social interaction upon returning to in-person learning.

2023 Connecticut Youth & Parent Focus Groups Recommendations for Support

▲ Youth Suggestions for Support



Youth identified ways in which they would like to be supported by their school systems and communities to prevent substance use and promote mental health services.



A designated mental health counselor in schools where youth can confidentially speak without fear of being reported.



Educational talks addressing substance use and misinformation starting at a younger age (e.g., elementary school).



Support and recovery programs in schools for youth who are using substances and want to quit.



Hosting support groups for families, ensuring smoke shops check I.D.s, and having inclusive community centers with up-to-date resources.

“*Just someone asking...questions like why are you doing this and just really checking where you’re at in your life to see what changed, why you started [using substances]. And then just some kind of intervention. But being just more open overall.*”

▲ Parent Suggestions for Support



Parents had similar suggestions to the youth. They recommended more counselors in schools, education on substance use, school programs (e.g., programs teaching life skills), a healthier school-life balance for the youth, and better communication between the school and parents regarding substance use issues. They also suggested more community programs (e.g., free summer school) and community events to learn more about substance use.

“*...the summer of COVID, they had summer school for everyone...those opportunities to get enrichment, socialization... help offset the interruption related to...social development, intellectual development... Because I think the learning, the academic stuff happens. But the social thing is not easy, especially with all the technology...*”