

Substance Misuse Assessment

A report on Youth
Substance Misuse in the
City of Cambridge

2022



Cambridge
Public Health
Department

Introduction

The Cambridge Public Health Department (CPHD) is a recipient of a Massachusetts Collaborative for Action, Leadership, and Learning 3 Part B (MassCALL3B) grant from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) and the Department of Public Health (DPH) since 2021. The grant is designed to support community efforts to prevent misuse of substances of first use (e.g. alcohol, nicotine, and cannabis) among youth. Youth are defined as middle and high school aged people in the city.

These grants are provided to communities with existing capacity, infrastructure, and experience implementing a systematic public health planning process and/or implementing a comprehensive set of evidence-based prevention programs, policies, and practices.

To support efficient and equitable use of this funding, CPHD sought to understand the current landscape of youth substance misuse in the city and what the needs are of this population.

Grant Process



Methods

CPHD engaged with an evaluation team at the Institute of Community Health (ICH) to conduct an assessment to determine trends in Cambridge youth substance misuse and related intervening factors.

The assessment was completed in three phases:

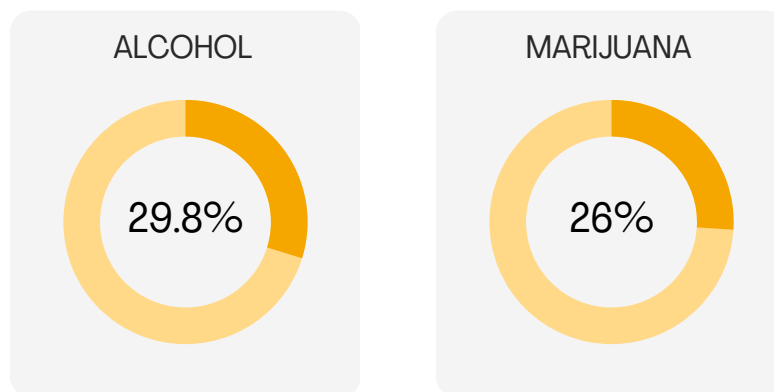
1. A secondary analysis of existing quantitative data on Cambridge youth substance use was conducted.
2. Qualitative data were collected through interviews and focus groups with youth, parents, and other key stakeholders in the community.
3. A participatory mapping process that used a survey to gather community input on community assets

Note: The community members who participated in the primary data collection are not a representative sample of the community at large. We welcome any feedback readers may have about this information.

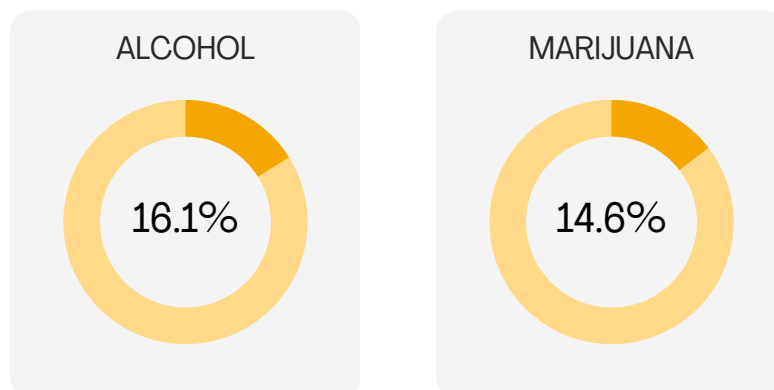
Youth Substance Misuse Trends

Based on data from the 2019 statewide Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) and the 2021 and 2022 Cambridge Teen and Middle Grades Health Survey, the percentage of high school students who reported using alcohol or marijuana in the previous 30 days was higher at the state-level compared to Cambridge.

% OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS REPORTING SUBSTANCE USE IN MASSACHUSETTS

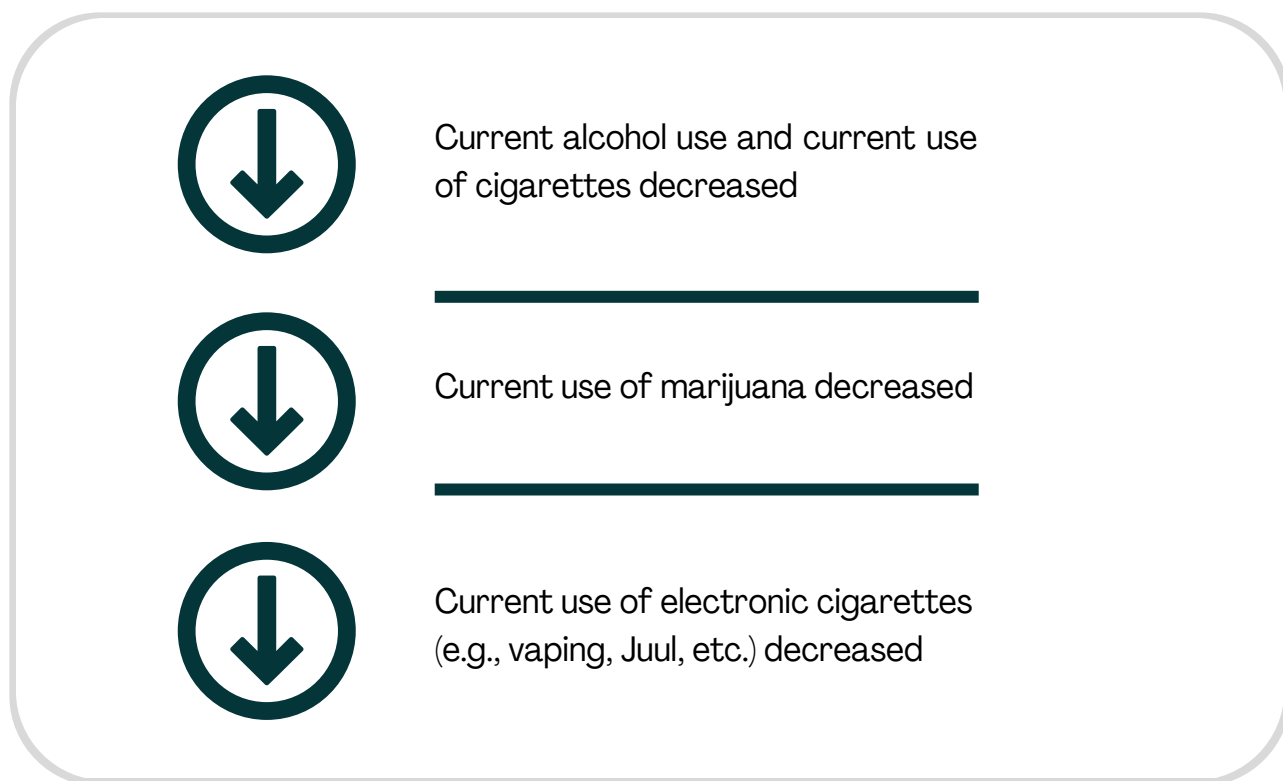


% OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS REPORTING SUBSTANCE USE IN CAMBRIDGE



From the perspective of youth focus group participants and parents, the problem of youth substance misuse seemed to be getting “worse every year.” They had noticed a rise in peers posting content about their substance use on social media, including Snapchat and Instagram, and drew distinctions between online and in-person behavior: young people using substances “care about getting caught in real life, but not online.”

These beliefs from the primary data collection that youth substance use was getting worse over time are in contrast to data from the YRBS, which found an overall decline in rates of substance use among Cambridge youth from 2018 to 2022 (see figure below).



*Current use is defined as using a substance at least once during the previous 30 days

"No one wants to have those conversations, because either they falsely think that if you start talking about substances, then teens are going to use them, or they're just uncomfortable and they don't know how to have those conversations. I don't know. But the conversations aren't happening. So we're just ignoring the problem."

- Adult Focus Group Participant

Student Attitudes & Behaviors Regarding Substance Use, 2021

A total of 2,029 students participated in the 2021 survey (990 middle school and 1,030 high school students)

	Has had 1 or more drink(s) of alcohol in the last 30 days	Has used marijuana in the last 30 days	Reports it would be 'very easy' to get alcohol	Reports it would be 'very easy' to get marijuana	Reports it would be 'very easy' to get prescription drugs	Reports it would be 'very easy' to get illegal drugs
All students	8.9%	7.8%	20.4%	16.9%	5.4%	1.8%
Race						
White	13.7%	10.7%	29.6%	19.5%	5.0%	*
Black	4.9%	4.2%	13.9%	17.7%	5.7%	2.6%
Asian	5.8%	5.8%	14.4%	9.6%	*	*
American Indian/ Alaska Native	0.0%	0.0%	*	*	*	0.0%
Multiracial	7.9%	5.6%	22.9%	14.9%	*	*
Other	*	*	12.9%	*	*	*
Hispanic	9.2%	10.5%	16.2%	18.9%	7.0%	*
LGBT+	12.0%	11.6%	26.8%	19.7%	7.1%	*
Genderqueer	*	*	29.9%	13.2%	*	*
Speaks a language other than English at home	7.3%	6.8%	13.6%	14.5%	5.7%	2.7%
Is in special education	7.2%	9.0%	24.0%	18.2%	13.1%	5.2%
Experienced financial issues in the past 12 months**	14.5%	15.7%	30.7%	28.6%	7.4%	*

*Not reported due to small numbers (<10)

**Responded 'Yes' to one or more of the following statements:

- My family had a serious financial problem (such as a parent or adult in your home lost their job even for a short amount of time)
- I was hungry because there was not enough money to buy food for my home
- My family moved because of financial problems

Looking closer, various disparities emerge among youth when examining the data regarding substance use. **Reported use of alcohol and marijuana was highest among youth who have experienced financial hardships.** Despite stereotypes voiced in the focus groups and interviews, students of color appear in the quantitative data to be less likely to use substances than White students. That said, focus group participants noted that consequences seemed to accrue more often to students of color than to White students, both in school and via community policing. **Additionally, a higher percentage of LGBT+ students in Cambridge high schools reported alcohol and marijuana use compared to all Cambridge high school students.**

Risk and Protective Factors

What did people say when we asked what makes young people **more likely** to start using substances? (Risk Factors)

PEER PRESSURE

Seeing peers use substances normalizes it, and other young people don't want to "feel left out."

EASE OF ACCESS

Youth report that "it's so easy to buy drugs" these days, in part because of platforms like Snapchat

MENTAL HEALTH + STRESS

Youth are using substances as many adults do: to "medicate instead of dealing with the issues," or to feel like they are "escaping reality."

ACADEMIC PRESSURE

And over-scheduling of youth's time

FINANCIAL STRUGGLES

or lack of access to basic resources like food

LACK OF ENGAGEMENT WITH FAMILY OR SCHOOL

CURIOSITY OR BOREDOM

To "show off to friends," "have fun," or do "wild stuff"

VIOLENCE + BULLYING

FAMILY SITUATIONS

Such as feeling unsafe at home

EXPERIENCES OF LGBT+ STUDENTS

Higher percentages of LGBT+ high school students reported bullying and mental health issues

RACISM + DISCRIMINATION

What did people say when we asked what makes young people **less likely** to start using substances? (Protective Factors)

POSITIVE INFLUENCE FROM PEERS

Influence of friend groups was just as much a protective factor as it is a risk factor

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

The importance of a "support system"

FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY

Such as work and caring for siblings

CONCERNS ABOUT CONSEQUENCES

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM

STRUCTURE, ORGANIZED ACTIVITY, AND SPORTS

"If the youth are involved in things that require their full attention, that they actually care about, like, they'll still get high, don't get me wrong, but they'll do it after, or they'll do it in a manner that isn't disruptive to them executing whatever they need to do."

-Adult Focus Group Participant

Community Factors

Youth participants were specifically asked about various capacity-related topics like: trusted organizations, institutions, or community leaders, organized activities that young people engage with, and trusted online resources that are or aren't connected to the community. Adult participants were asked about community capacity, local resources, and community readiness to address youth substance misuse.

"I feel like also it goes to show that I've never been in a community where so many people like grew up here in this community. And then like stayed and or came back or, you know, just never left all good things. But I've just never seen that before."

STRENGTHS

Safety and security of the community;
Availability of supportive community resources, activities, programs, and paid work for youth



OPPORTUNITIES

Room for more programs; like ones that fit better with youth interests or are specific for different members of the community

"I just feel like in terms of providing resources, like the resources that are provided, teens don't necessarily, like, enjoy."

"I feel like Cambridge does a pretty good job with a PR in regards to making sure that there are certain aspects of the city life that's not out in the open. But it does exist. It is here."

WEAKNESS

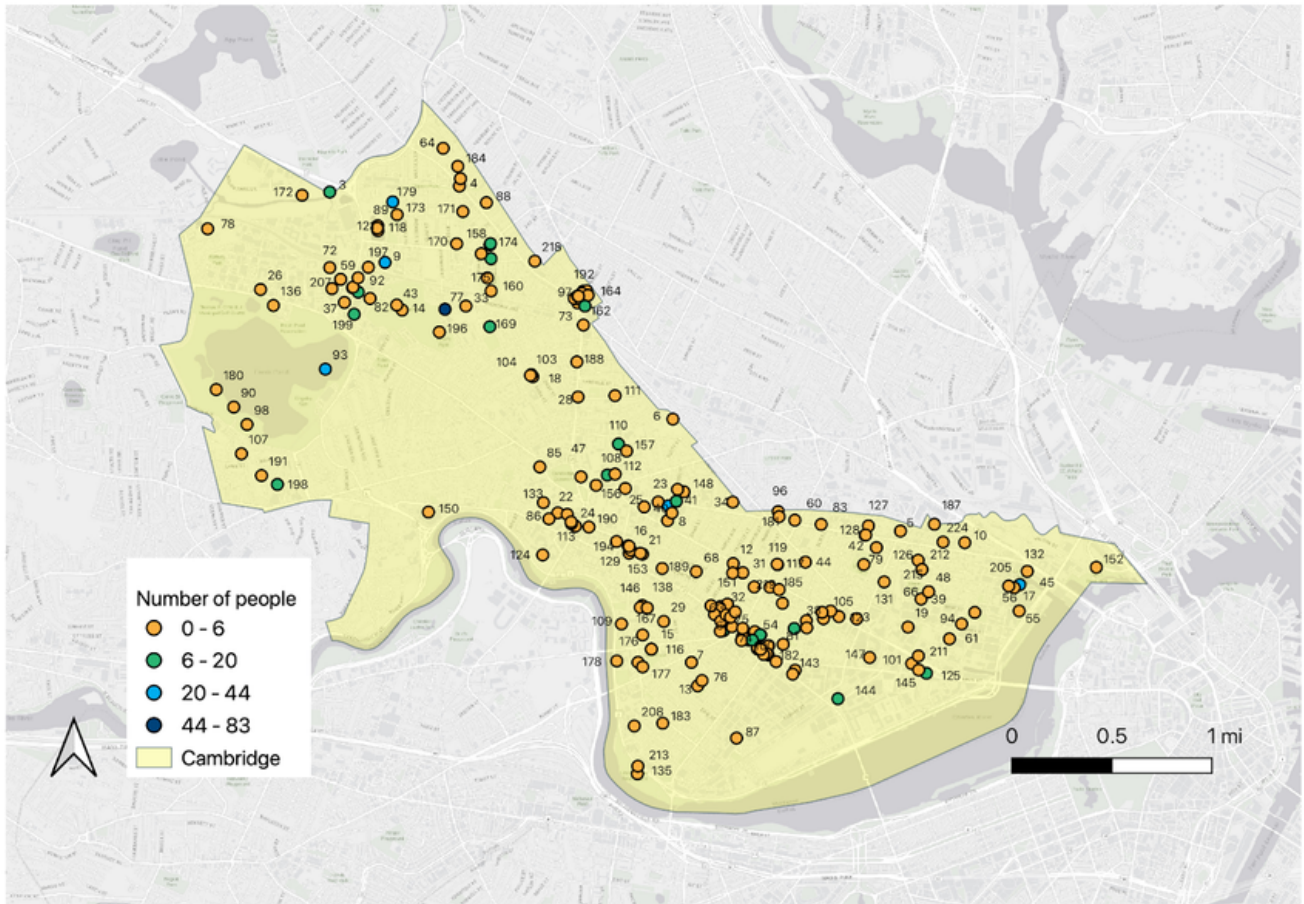
Adults tend to avoid having "difficult" conversations about youth substance use with each other and with children in schools

CHALLENGE

Adults don't understand the challenges with mental health and social acceptance that might lead young people to use substances

"I think they don't understand how like... that kids who do it are not necessarily bad, but they just need help."

Asset Map



In collaboration with community partners, CPHD and ICH asked 65 Cambridge adults and 42 Cambridge youth about the places in their community where they go to school, where they work, and where they like to spend time for rest, recreation, arts and culture, and with friends. We collected this data between August and November 2022. The resulting list of locations was used to create a map of local community assets.

Conclusion

With the completion of the assessment report, CPHD and ICH are seeking to assess the validity of the data and the conclusions drawn through community feedback sessions with youth and other partners. Once this process is completed, top community needs will be identified to create a Strategic Plan to guide interventions in Cambridge.

For more information about the assessment process or to get involved in youth substance misuse prevention efforts in Cambridge, please contact the Youth Wellness Coordinator at CPHD.

Contact

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Cambridge Public Health
Department

➔ [www.cambridgepublichealth.org/services/
youth-wellness](http://www.cambridgepublichealth.org/services/youth-wellness)