

# UWAC survey finds youth weighing impact of substance use

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — A new survey is revealing the extent to which Addison County adolescents and their families are communicating about substance use disorder, and the results will shape programming to attack this major issue.

It's called the 2021 United Way of Addison County Youth Survey, which garnered 1,000 responses from students in five area schools: Middlebury, Mount Abraham and Vergennes union high schools, as well as the Mount Abe and Vergennes middle schools.

Results included evidence that in the month leading up to the survey, about a quarter of high school respondents had consumed alcohol, about 12% had vaped, and about 8% had used cannabis.

The survey was offered to students last fall as a same-day supplement to the biennial Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey, developed in 1990 by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention as a way of monitoring behaviors contributing to the leading causes of death, disease, injury and social problems among youth. These behaviors include weight, tobacco use, sexual behaviors and use of alcohol or other drugs.

The United Way of Addison County, or UWAC, and its more than 30 nonprofit partners have been keenly interested in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey results, as they help inform the kinds of services needed

to reduce harmful behavior among adolescents. And now the United Way has gotten into the youth survey field itself — not only because it values the information, but also because collecting substance-use rates among youth is one of the conditions for receiving federal grant money.

UWAC is benefiting from two separate federal grants: Partnerships for Success and Drug Free Communities. The two grants are each

five years, by which time they will have brought in nearly \$2 million to Addison County, specifically for substance prevention strategies.

Helena Van Voorst, UWAC executive director, and Jesse Brooks, the organization's director of advocacy, stressed the 2021 Youth Survey was designed to complement, rather than duplicate, the state's Risk Behavior Survey. And United Way officials credited students for completing the assignment — which granted them complete anonymity.

"I was very impressed by participation from the schools," Van Voorst said, adding the more than 1,000 responses makes the data "statistically relevant."

It also helped that each of the three participating school districts (Addison Central, Addison Northwest and Mount Abraham) had a specific point person with whom UWAC could consult on the

youth survey.

"They helped us figure out what would be the best approach," Brooks said, noting the result ended up being an electronic, rather than paper, survey.

Brooks explained the state's Youth Risk Behavior Survey has been successful in collecting data on what substances youth are using or not using. But the UWAC survey goes a step further, gauging how students feel about drug use, which can set off some alarm bells about potential future use.

"That's what we call 'risk factors,'" Brooks said. "So while some students might not be using, their perceptions of harm, or of parental and peer acceptance does contribute to their risk factors. It raises their risk of substance use if they feel their parents are more permissive of their substance use, or if their peers are more accepting of (that use)."

Youth are also clearly weighing potential health impacts when considering substance use, Brooks noted.

"If their perceptions of harm are low for, let's say alcohol and marijuana, they are more likely to use those things," she said. "It doesn't guarantee that they will; it just increases the likelihood."

Here's a sampling of the 2021 UWAC Youth Survey results, which drew responses from 803 high school students and 273 middle school students:

- 93.4% of the responding high school students indicated they believe their parents think it's very wrong for them to have one or two alcoholic beverages each day, while 92.6% of the responding middle school students agreed with that statement.
- 25.2% of high schoolers admitted to having at least one alcoholic drink during the past 30 days, while 5.5% of middle schoolers admitted that level of use.
- 12.4% of high schoolers admitted to having vaped (use of an electronic cigarette) during the past 30 days, while 3.6% of middle schoolers admitted to that behavior.
- 8% of high schoolers admitted to having smoked marijuana "one or two times" during the past 30 days, while 1.8% of middle schoolers admitted to that behavior. 97.8% of middle school students reported no marijuana use during the past month, compared to 83% of responding high schoolers.
- 1.1% of high schoolers admitted to having used a prescription drug inappropriately "one or two times" during the past 30 days, while 0.4% of middle schoolers admitted to that behavior.
- Almost 50% of high schoolers reported having had zero conversations about the potential risks of alcohol or other drug use with a parent or caregiver during the past year. 52.7% of middle schoolers

gave that same answer.

The largest percentage of high school respondents hailed from MUHS (47.7%), while Mount Abe middle school (66.2%) students were the largest group of responders in that demographic.

Results from each of the three local school districts can be found at [unitedwayaddisoncounty.org/substance-prevention](http://unitedwayaddisoncounty.org/substance-prevention).

## ASKING PARENTS

Knowing family dynamics can influence a youth's decision making on substance use, UWAC has also been regularly surveying students' parents. The most recent parent survey (last year) drew 135 responses, compared to 148 the previous year. Here's a sampling of some of the 2021 results:

- 40.2% of responding parents reported having discussed "many times," during the past year, the dangers of riding in a vehicle driven by someone who had been drinking alcohol. 37.5% reported having had the same discussion regarding marijuana use during the past year. 26.5% claimed to have had the same conversation with their children about being a passenger in a vehicle driven by someone under the influence of marijuana.
- 35.6% of parents reported discussing the dangers of alcohol use "a few times" during the past 12 months. 37.5% reported having had that discussion regarding marijuana during the past year. More than 90% of parents reported having discussed the dangers of alcohol use with their children at least once in the past year.

One can clearly see that students and parents aren't on the same page in terms of frequency of substance use discussions.

- 52.6% of responding parents "strongly disagreed" with the statement that it's OK for teens to use marijuana or cannabis occasionally, while 9.3% agreed with that statement.

The United Way is sharing its

survey results with its partner nonprofits, a group called Partners Educating and Empowering Prevention for Success (PEEPS), state and federal officials, and anyone else interested in the stats. Brooks and Van Voorst promised additional surveys during the coming years, at least as long as federal grant funding holds.

Did the survey offer any surprises to UWAC officials?

Not really, but the responses will guide Brooks in putting together substance use programming for local teens and families.

"I think what's interesting is students reported a lower perception of harm and a higher level of parental acceptance and peer acceptance around marijuana use," she said. "That's relevant to us. It certainly makes our (federal) grants relevant, because they target alcohol and marijuana, and informs us on what information we need to put out."

Brooks acknowledged Vermont's recent pattern of decriminalizing, legalizing and commercializing marijuana and cannabis. She believes that's OK for adults who want the choice of using such substances, but it spurs the question of "how to protect the populations that shouldn't be using these things. How do we get information to parents to help them have good conversations?"

United Way has several programs targeting substance use disorder, one of which supplies information to parents so they can be more comfortable and effective in discussing substance abuse issues with their teens, and another that promotes healthy activities for youth and empowers them to make good decisions.

Van Voorst is confident UWAC's prevention programming will pay long- and short-term dividends.

"The reason we're really focusing

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on reducing substance use is we, in working with our funded partners, hear that the needs of the people they serve are made more complex by substance use disorder," she said. "It's a challenge they're working through every day with the people they serve. If we can reduce youth rates as our children grow into adults, we will see improved health education and financial stability — which is what our whole mission is here."

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HELENA VAN VOORST

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