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New survey: Colo. teens increasingly report adults in their home struggle with substance use

Most youth not using substances, but warning signs apparent, statewide survey results show

Colorado teens are much more likely to report that they have lived with someone who has a substance use disorder or is addicted to alcohol or drugs than they were two years ago, according to the latest version of comprehensive survey of youth across the state released today, September 14, 2022.

Two out of five youth now say they have lived with an adult with a substance use issue, up from just a quarter of teens who reported that two years ago. Those youth are twice as likely to have recently misused substances. That's one of the sobering findings of the 2022 Rise Above Colorado Youth Survey of teens statewide.

Rise Above Colorado (www.riseaboveco.org) is a statewide prevention organization that measurably impacts teen perceptions and attitudes about the risks of substance misuse to empower youth to make healthy choices. The online survey of 718 teens was conducted from March-May by HealthCare Research.

Girls impacted most by adult substance use

Female youth are disproportionately feeling the effects of these challenging home environments. The percentage of female teens who report that they live with an adult affected by substance use disorder more than doubled since 2020 from 22% to 47%; this is significantly higher than for their male counterparts.

In addition, female youth who reported spending three or more hours a day on social media were more likely to misuse marijuana, alcohol and pills and they also expressed greater curiosity to try substances. Overall, regular use of all substances by female teens increased compared to 2020.

Warning signs for youngest teens

The survey results also highlight warning signs for the youngest teens:

- Many more youth aged 12-13 reported experiencing challenging mental health days. Three of five report experiencing at least three poor mental health days in a given month.
- Younger teens perceive less risk in regularly using substances compared to 2020. One in three say substance use is just part of being a teen and can help manage stress, significant increases from two years earlier. A lower perception of risk is linked with higher rates of future use of substances.
- Youth ages 12-13 report significantly more direct offers to use substances compared to 2020, including offers of marijuana (49%), cocaine (21%), and prescription drugs not prescribed to them (29%).

Most teens making healthy choices

Despite the challenges that youth are facing, the vast majority are not regularly using substances. Large majorities of youth 12-17 reported that in the past 30 days they did *not* use marijuana (87%), did *not* vape (83%), and did *not* drink alcohol (81%).

In addition, fewer youth are overestimating their peers' use of marijuana and vaping products. Correcting these misperceptions is a proven method for reducing future substance use; the science of social norming has found that youth who understand that most of their peers are not using substances feel more empowered to not use substances themselves.

Although middle school-aged youth are displaying concerning attitudes in some areas, they were the group to show the biggest declines in overestimating peer use, a positive trend. Overestimation of peer marijuana and vaping use declined 19% and 26% respectively among middle school students. Overestimation also declined among high school-aged teens by 16% for both marijuana and vaping use by their peers.

Cause for concern and hope

“It’s concerning that more teens are seeing adults they live with having issues with alcohol or drugs,” said Kent MacLennan, executive director of Rise Above Colorado. “It’s a good reminder to all parents and other adults who live with teens that children are paying attention, and that we are modeling behavior, whether we intend to or not. Drinking and drug use by adults is impacting the kids who live with them.”

“These latest survey results offer cause for both concern and hope. The reduced perception of harm for substance use among the youngest teens and the increase in offers of substances are a big red flag,” said MacLennan. “This data more closely aligns with what we’ve historically seen among older youth. On the other hand, the survey finding that fewer teens are overestimating their peers’ substance use is encouraging because this empowers them to make healthy choices. We must work together to build on that progress.”

High awareness of fentanyl’s risks

Concern is relatively high among teens about the possibility of receiving laced substances, with 90% seeing at least a “moderate amount of risk” associated with taking pills that were purchased online or on the street and 91% at least “somewhat concerned” that a pill may be laced with other substances.

Nearly half (45%) of teens report having a conversation with a parent or guardian about the overdose risks of fentanyl and contaminated pills.

“Substances laced with fentanyl present a significant risk of overdose,” said Colorado Attorney General Phil Weiser. “While it is encouraging that nearly half of teens surveyed reported conversations with someone at home about the dangers of counterfeit pills, and most consider taking a substance acquired off the street or online to be of ‘great risk’, we must continue to raise awareness of the increased risks of fentanyl-laced substances. This information empowers teens to make safe choices for themselves and influence their peers.”

Infographics and the full survey results are available at <https://riseaboveco.org/about.html#research>.

About Rise Above Colorado

Rise Above Colorado is a statewide prevention organization that measurably impacts teen perceptions and attitudes about the risks of substance misuse to empower youth to make healthy connections, decisions, and change. Rise Above Colorado collaborates with teens, educators, community leaders, and prevention partners to provide credible, teen-centered data using the evidence-based Science of the Positive framework to correct misperceptions about substance use. Rise Above Colorado was launched by the founders of the Colorado Meth Project in 2014 and our vision is to empower youth to realize their full potential by gaining the knowledge and skills to make positive choices for their future.

Research shows that 90 percent of addictions start with use in the teenage years. Rise Above Colorado urges increased youth education including science-based information about the developing brain, alternative opportunities to substance use, and the associated risks of using substances during adolescence, as well as skills to cope with stress and resist peer pressure. Youth can find information on these topics at www.IRiseAboveCO.org and the organization also offers resources for educators on its website.

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