County of Santa Cruz

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Press Release

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NEW REPORT EXAMINES YOUTH SUBSTANCE USE AND PREVENTION IN SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

SANTA CRUZ COUNTY, CA — The County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency, in collaboration with Applied Survey Research (ASR), has released the **2026 Santa Cruz County Youth Substance Use Spotlight**. This report is a comprehensive assessment of local youth substance use including vaping and the use of alcohol, cannabis, opioids, and other substances, as well as factors related to prevention and support.

The report explores young people's attitudes and beliefs about substance use, their perceptions of harm, how they access substances, and where they turn to information and support. It also examines school policies and factors that influence substance use prevention.

The Spotlight is the first youth substance use assessment of its kind in Santa Cruz County, bringing together youth, caregiver, and provider perspectives to shed light on this important issue. The study went through an Institutional Review Board (IRB) process to ensure a rigorous, youth-centered approach that resulted in an inclusive study and credible findings. The IRB process protects participants while gathering honest youth perspectives. In addition to the assessment participants, many community partners and stakeholders contributed to outreach, recruitment, and feedback for this community-wide effort to better understand and support youth well-being in Santa Cruz County.

Data for the report was collected from:

- Survey responses from youth
- Youth and caregiver focus groups
- Key informant interviews with youth service providers
- A review of school policies related to substance use.

Overall, the findings point to a local environment where substance use is often perceived as common and accessible, particularly vaping and cannabis, which may reduce perceived risk and increase social acceptance among some youth.

At the same time, youth, caregivers, and providers emphasized the importance of trusted relationships, accurate information, and supportive prevention efforts to help young people navigate these norms and make informed decisions.

The Health Services Agency will use this data to inform future approaches to substance use disorder prevention.

"Young people and the adults who support them have shared their experiences honestly, and we are listening," said Dr. Lisa B. Hernandez, County of Santa Cruz Public Health Officer. "This assessment gives us a roadmap to address the concerns they raised and to strengthen the prevention work already making a difference in Santa Cruz County."

To access the full Youth Substance Use Spotlight Report in English or Spanish, visit www.santacruzhealth.org.

For mental health or substance use treatment support, call **800-952-2335**. The Health Services Agency Behavioral Health Division Access Team is available 24/7, 365 days a year.

About Applied Survey Research

Applied Survey Research (ASR) is a nonprofit social research organization committed to advancing community wellbeing through rigorous, community-engaged research. By partnering with youth, families, service providers, and local leaders, ASR helps communities generate trusted information that informs decisions, strengthens systems, and improves outcomes

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