

2026

SANTA CRUZ COUNTY YOUTH SUBSTANCE USE SPOTLIGHT

Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency

About the Researcher

Applied Survey Research (ASR) is a social research firm that helps people build better communities. We do this by creating meaningful evaluation and assessment data, facilitating information-based planning, and developing custom strategies. ASR has the advantage of bringing more than 40 years of experience working with public and private agencies, health and human service organizations, city and county offices, school districts, institutions of higher learning, and charitable foundations. Through our community assessments, program evaluations, and related studies, ASR provides the data-based insights that communities need for effective strategic planning and community interventions.

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Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS I

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 1

INTRODUCTION 2

Project Background 2

Defining 'Substances' 2

Methodology 3

DEMOGRAPHICS OF SPOTLIGHT PARTICIPANTS 7

Youth & Young Adult Survey Participants 7

Youth Focus Group Participants 10

Caregiver Focus Group Participants 10

Key Informant Interview Participants 11

GETTING THE REAL FACTS ON SUBSTANCES 12

Reliable Information 12

Talking About Substances 14

ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS 15

Underage Substance Use 15

Asking For Help 20

PERCEPTION OF HARM 24

Varying Youth Perspectives 24

Caregiver & Provider Concerns 31

GETTING HELP AND SUPPORT 33

Support Services and Positive Spaces 33

School Wellness Policies Overview 37

SCHOOL SUBSTANCE USE POLICIES 40

Perceptions of school Substance Use Responses 40

School Policies on Substance Use 43

WAYS YOUNG PEOPLE GET SUBSTANCES 44

Sources of Substances 45

Perceived Difficulty Obtaining Substances 47

KEY FINDINGS 49
RECOMMENDATIONS 50
Priority Areas for Action 50
Opportunities for Action 51
CONCLUSION 53

Table of Figures

Figure 1. Age of Survey Participants 7

Figure 2. Gender Identity of Survey Participants 8

Figure 3. LGBTQ+ Status of Survey Participants (*Do you identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community?*) 8

Figure 4. Racial/Ethnic Identity of Survey Participants 8

Figure 5. School Location of Survey Participants, by County Region 9

Figure 6. Survey Participant Mental Health Status in the Last 30 Days (*During the past 30 days, how often was your mental health not good?)* 9

Figure 7. Survey Participants: Self-Reported Mental Health Status in the Past 30 Days, by LGBTQ+ Status 10

Figure 8. Caregiver Participants: Ages of Children 11

Figure 9. Key Informant Interviews 11

Figure 10. Survey: *Where do you usually go to get accurate information about substances?* (Top 7 Responses) 12

Figure 11. Key Informant Interviews: Reliable and Unreliable Sources of Information on Substances for Young People and Adults 13

Figure 12. Survey: *What's the toughest part about getting accurate info on substances?* 13

Figure 13. Survey: *How many adults in your life can you talk to if you have questions about substance use?* 14

Figure 14. Survey: *Substance use is accepted/tolerated in my friend group.* (True/False) 15

Figure 15. Survey: *Young people at my school encourage underage substance use.* 15

Figure 16. Survey: *I have felt pressured to use substances by my peers.* 16

Figure 17. Percent of Youth Lifetime Substance Use in Santa Cruz County, by Grade and Substance (2023-25) 17

Figure 18. Percent of Youth Alcohol or Drug Use in the Past 30 Days in Santa Cruz County, by Grade and Gender^ (2023-25) 18

Figure 19. Percent of Youth Marijuana Use in the Past 30 Days Among Grade 11 Students in Santa Cruz County, by Race/Ethnicity (2023-25) 19

Figure 20. Focus Group: *Why do you think young people use substances? Why might they choose not to?* 19

Figure 21. Survey: Young People's Comfort Level with Reaching Out for Help 21

Figure 22. Survey: Young People's Comfort Level with Reaching Out for Help (Responding Comfortable/Very Comfortable), by Age Group 21

Figure 23. Survey: *How comfortable would you feel reaching out for help with a substance use problem?* (Responding Comfortable/Very Comfortable), by Gender Identity 22

Figure 24. Survey: *What are some things we could do in our schools or community to reduce the stigma (negative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes people may hold towards young people who use substances) around substance use?* 23

Figure 25. Survey: *How harmful to your health do you think the following activities are for someone your age?* 24

Figure 26. Survey: *How harmful to your health do you think the following activities are for someone your age?* (Responding Harmful/Very Harmful), by Race/Ethnicity 25

Figure 27. Survey: *People my age know what's in their vapes.* 25

Figure 28. Survey: Perception of Harm - Vaping 25

Figure 29. Survey: *Why is it so difficult for people to quit vaping?* 26

Figure 30. Survey: *Of the five people who are closest to you (family and friends), how many smoke or vape?* 26

Figure 31. Survey: Perception of Harm - Cannabis 26

Figure 32. Perceived Harm of AOD Use: Alcohol – Drink Occasionally, by Grade (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25) 27

Figure 33. Perceived Harm of AOD Use: Alcohol – 5 or More Drinks Once or Twice a Week, by Grade (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25) 28

Figure 34. Perceived Harm of AOD Use: Marijuana – Use Occasionally, by Grade (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25) 28

Figure 35. Perceived Harm of AOD Use: Marijuana – Use Daily, by Grade (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25) 29

Figure 36. Substances Vaped One or More Days in the Past Month, by Grade (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25) 29

Figure 37. Alcohol and Drug Use in the Past Month, by Grade (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25) 30

Figure 38. Methods of Marijuana Consumption, by Grade (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25) 30

Figure 39. Key Informant Interviews: *What are the most common perceptions among youth or adults about how harmful substances like cannabis, vaping, alcohol, or pills are?* 31

Figure 40. Survey Participant Experiences with Receiving Help to Quit Substance Use *(Have you ever received help quitting substances?)* 35

Figure 41. Survey: Getting Help (*How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?)* .. 35

Figure 42. Survey: Getting Help (*How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?)* (Responding Agree/Strongly Agree), by County Region 35

Figure 43. Survey: *If you have tried to get care from a clinic in the past, what challenges have you faced while trying to get confidential services?* 36

Figure 44. Survey: *Where would you look for support if a friend were struggling with substance use?* 37

Figure 45. School Wellness Policies Overview 38

Figure 46. Comparing School Wellness Policy Components 38

Figure 47. School Engagement and Supports: Percent of Students who Report Feeling a Sense of Belonging, Safety, Support, and Connection within their School Community (e.g., School Connectedness*), by Grade and Gender^ (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25) 39

Figure 48. School Engagement and Supports: Percent of Students who Report Having Caring Adult Relationships, by Grade and Gender^ (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25) 40

Figure 49. Survey: School Substance Use Policies (*How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?)* 41

Figure 50. Survey: School Substance Use Policies (*How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?) (*Responding Agree/Strongly Agree), by County Region 42

Figure 51. School Bans Tobacco Use and Vaping (*Does your school ban tobacco use and vaping on school property and at school sponsored events?)* (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25) 42

Figure 52. Comparing School Substance Use Policy Components on a Restorative to Punitive Spectrum of Approaches 44

Figure 53. Survey: *What are the main ways you hear about young people getting alcohol?* (Top 5 Responses and Other/Don't know) 45

Figure 54. Survey: *What are the main ways you hear about young people getting vapes?* (Top 5 Responses and Other/Don't know) 45

Figure 55. Survey: *What are the main ways you hear about young people getting cannabis?* (Top 5 Responses and Other/Don't know) 46

Figure 56. Survey: *What are the main ways you hear about young people getting opioids, pills, and prescription drugs?* (Top 5 Responses and Other/Don't know) 46

Figure 57. Perceived Difficulty of Obtaining Alcohol (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25) 48

Figure 58. Perceived Difficulty of Obtaining Marijuana (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25) 48

Figure 59. Perceived Difficulty of Obtaining Prescription Drugs to Get "High", (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25) 49

Executive Summary

The 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth Substance Use Spotlight assessment was a comprehensive effort aimed at better understanding 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. Below are the key findings that emerged.

Getting the Real Facts on Substances	• Youth and caregivers are navigating a complex information environment where misinformation and mixed messages are common, with youth often relying on social media, peers, and online sources. • Trusted adults and open, nonjudgmental conversations play an important role in helping youth access reliable information and guidance, but caregivers need more resources to navigate these conversations.
Attitudes & Beliefs	• Many young people perceive substance use as common and socially accepted among their peers despite varying experiences with peer pressure. • Youth and caregivers emphasized that stigma and fear of judgment can make it harder for young people to seek help or talk openly about substance use.
Perception of Harm	• Perceptions of harm vary widely across substances, and many youth view cannabis and vaping as less harmful than other substances, despite concerns about addiction and long-term health impacts. • Caregivers and providers expressed strong concern about potency of cannabis products, fentanyl, unknown substances in vapes or pills, and the risks of impaired driving and substance mixing.
Getting Help & Support	• Trusted adults and supportive relationships are central to youth help-seeking and well-being, and youth need more safe, welcoming spaces where they can foster connection, belonging, and where young people can safely and comfortably “just be”. • Barriers such as lack of awareness, transportation, cost, confidentiality concerns, and limited inclusive spaces continue to make support harder to access for some youth.
School Policies	• School responses to substance use vary across campuses, with many schools shifting toward more restorative and support-focused approaches while punitive practices remain. • Substance use prevention is not consistently reflected in school wellness policies, suggesting opportunities for stronger integration of prevention and student support strategies.
Ways Young People Get Substances	• Youth and caregivers described alcohol, cannabis, and vapes as relatively easy for young people to access, and that broader public usage allows for early and potentially frequent exposure. • Peers, social settings, older acquaintances, family members, social media, online platforms, and sources on “the streets” all play a role in youth access of substances.

Introduction

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Santa Cruz County has identified youth substance use and vaping (including tobacco, alcohol, cannabis, hemp-derived products, opioids, and other emerging substances) as an ongoing and evolving public health concern. While a range of data sources exist, there is a need for a more integrated and locally grounded understanding of youth behaviors, perceptions, and risk factors to better inform prevention and intervention strategies.

In response, the County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency partnered with Applied Survey Research (ASR) to develop a comprehensive "spotlight" assessment that brings together both primary and secondary data sources. This effort, funded through a combination of Opioid Settlement Funds (OSF) and Juul Settlement Funds, is designed to move beyond any single dataset by incorporating multiple perspectives, including youth, caregivers, and service provider voices; and existing administrative and policy data.

The project includes a mixed-methods approach consisting of: (1) identification and analysis of key secondary indicators, including a review of school policies related to substance use; (2) primary data collection through youth surveys; and (3) qualitative insights gathered through youth and adult focus groups and key informant interviews. Together, these components are intended to provide a more holistic understanding of substance use patterns, contributing factors, and opportunities for prevention.

This project aims to better understand vaping and substance use-related experiences, perceptions, and needs among youth (ages 13-17) and young adults (ages 18-20) in Santa Cruz County in order to inform prevention, education, and support efforts. The assessment examines a range of factors that shape young people's interactions with alcohol and other drugs (AOD), including access to reliable information, perceptions of risk and harm, stigma and help-seeking, access to support services, school responses to substance use, and the ways youth obtain substances.

By incorporating the perspectives of youth, caregivers, and providers alongside secondary data and local school policy review, the project provides an evidence-based understanding of how young people experience substance use prevention, intervention, and support efforts within their schools and communities. Findings from this report are intended to inform local policies, prevention strategies, education efforts, and resource development to better support the health and well-being of young people in Santa Cruz County.

DEFINING 'SUBSTANCES'

For the purposes of this assessment, a substance is defined as a drug that can be consumed, inhaled, injected, or otherwise absorbed into the body, impacting the way people think, feel, or

behave (i.e., cannabis, tobacco, alcohol, opioids, psychedelics, cocaine, inhalants, over-the-counter or prescription medications, steroids, etc.).

This definition was provided for every data collection activity that was implemented, including on every page of the survey, and at the beginning of the focus group and key informant interview discussions.

Throughout this report, vaping refers to the use of electronic vaping devices to consume nicotine, cannabis, or other substances and is considered a form of substance use within the scope of this assessment.

METHODOLOGY

A collaborative process engaging both ASR and County staff was utilized for the development of data collection tools and strategies, as well as actual data collection outreach and implementation. These efforts spanned over a year and included a formal review by ASR's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Details about the project are outlined in the sections below.

Timeline of Activities

Below is an overview of the timing of Spotlight activities and key events:

- Project Commencement: March 1, 2025
- Data Collection Tool Development: April 1, 2025 – March 30, 2026
- IRB Approval: April 1, 2026
- Primary Data Collection: April 3, 2026 – May 13, 2026
- Secondary Data Collection/School Policy Research: April 1, 2025 – May 29, 2026
- Data Analysis & Report Writing: May 1, 2026 – May 30, 2026

Institutional Review Board

Because this research project involved engaging youth as young as 13 years old, the project underwent a full Institutional Review Board (IRB) review and approval process. The assessment protocol, data collection instruments, recruitment materials, consent and assent procedures, and participant protections were reviewed and approved by the ASR IRB to help ensure that the study was conducted ethically and that participant rights, privacy, confidentiality, and well-being were protected throughout the research process. The IRB review process also helped ensure that participation was voluntary, risks to participants were minimized, and appropriate safeguards were in place when working with youth and other community members.

This report was prepared for the County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency as part of the IRB approved evaluation and reporting activities associated with this project.

Primary Data Collection

Primary data collection activities were designed to gather perspectives directly from youth, young adults, caregivers, and community professionals about substance use experiences, perceptions, and supports in Santa Cruz County. Using multiple qualitative and quantitative methods allowed the project to capture both broad trends and more detailed lived experiences related to substance use, prevention, and help-seeking.

Data collection tools were developed collaboratively by ASR and County staff to ensure the project both complemented existing local data sources and addressed important information gaps. Survey questions and qualitative discussion guides were designed to build upon available data, including the California Healthy Kids Survey, while exploring topics not typically captured in existing datasets, such as stigma, help-seeking, access to substances, perceptions of school responses, and trusted sources of information. Youth input also informed tool development and refinement, including feedback from Youth Council members from Friday Night Live who reviewed and piloted the survey to help ensure questions were relevant, understandable, and youth-friendly.

Community partners played a pivotal role in making this project possible by helping connect the assessment with youth, caregivers, and professionals across Santa Cruz County. Youth-serving organizations and community agencies supported outreach efforts by sharing survey information with the young people they serve, assisting with recruitment for focus groups, and participating in key informant interviews to provide additional community and systems-level perspectives. Their involvement helped expand the reach of the project and ensured participation from a range of communities and lived experiences.

In addition, Youth Council members partnered with the project to support peer-to-peer survey promotion. ASR staff provided training and guidance to youth leaders on the purpose of the project, voluntary participation, and appropriate outreach strategies. This peer-led approach helped increase awareness of the survey and encouraged participation through trusted youth networks and community events. ASR staff also trained County staff to conduct a portion of the key informant interviews to ensure consistency in interview methods, confidentiality practices, and data collection procedures across the project.

YOUTH & YOUNG ADULT SURVEY

The Youth & Young Adult Survey was designed to gather broad, anonymous input from young people ages 13-20 across Santa Cruz County about their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes related to substance use. The survey was administered online through the Qualtrics platform and optimized for completion across smartphones, tablets, and computers. This approach allowed participants to complete the survey using the device most convenient to them. It explored topics such as access to substances, perceptions of harm and risk, school climate, stigma, help-seeking, trusted sources of

information, and awareness of prevention and support resources. The survey provided quantitative data that helped identify patterns, trends, and differences across groups of young people.

FOCUS GROUPS

An online youth focus group was conducted with six young people ages 14-18 to discuss their experiences and perspectives in greater depth and in their own words. Discussions explored topics such as peer norms, substance use perceptions, school climate, prevention messaging, and barriers to support. The focus group helped provide context and nuance to survey findings by capturing how youth make meaning of these issues within their daily lives, relationships, and communities.

The caregiver focus groups were conducted to better understand how parents and caregivers perceive youth substance use and navigate conversations, prevention, and support with young people. In total nine caregivers participated. Two caregiver sessions were hosted, one online in English and one in person in Spanish, and one caregiver submitted their feedback in writing because they could not attend at the scheduled time. Discussions explored caregiver concerns, perceptions of risk and harm, school responses, access to resources, and challenges related to communication and help-seeking. This component helped provide insight into the experiences and needs of adults supporting youth in the community.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Key informant interviews were conducted with educators, school administrators, prevention specialists, and youth- and family-serving providers to gather professional and systems-level perspectives on youth substance use in Santa Cruz County. Interviews explored observed trends, school and community responses, prevention efforts, service gaps, stigma, policy considerations, and recommendations for strengthening local supports. These interviews provided important context about how substance use is understood and addressed across schools, services, and community systems.

Incentives

As a token of appreciation for the time spent participating in the survey, a $20 Target gift card was offered to all survey participants. Similarly, all focus group participants - caregivers and youth alike - were provided with a $50 Target gift card for their time. Gift cards were provided in a number of ways including delivery of e-cards to participant email addresses, picking up physical gift cards from ASR's Watsonville office, and mailing physical gift cards to home addresses.

Primary Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and cross-tabulations, to better understand patterns and differences across key demographic groups such as age, gender identity, race/ethnicity, and region of the county. Cross-tab analyses were incorporated throughout the report where findings offered meaningful insight and sample sizes were large enough to support reliable interpretation. These analyses helped explore how experiences, perceptions, and behaviors related to substance use varied across different groups of young people.

Qualitative data from focus groups and key informant interviews were analyzed using a thematic approach to identify recurring themes, perspectives, and areas of consensus or difference across participants. The data analysis focused on understanding the lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual factors shaping youth substance use, prevention, stigma, help-seeking, and access to support. Findings from qualitative and quantitative data sources were then integrated to identify key patterns and provide a more complete understanding of the local landscape.

Secondary Data & School Policies

Secondary data was also incorporated into this report in order to provide a fuller understanding of the issue of local youth substance use. This data adds broader context to the direct perspectives and experiences captured in the primary data collection effort, by showing how those experiences relate to broader community trends and research. Specific secondary data was primarily sourced from the California Healthy Kids Survey, which is administered to local students at specific grade levels, and was accessed using the Santa Cruz County California Healthy Kids Survey Secondary 2023-2025 Main Report.

In addition, school wellness and substance use policies from selected districts and school sites across Santa Cruz County were reviewed to better understand the policy frameworks that guide prevention efforts, student supports, and responses to substance use in school settings.

Together, these data sources can support more informed decision-making, planning, prevention, and policy efforts by grounding community experiences within a larger picture.

Limitations

This assessment was designed to provide a community-informed understanding of youth substance use experiences, perceptions, and support needs in Santa Cruz County. Findings should be interpreted within the context of several limitations. Participation in surveys, focus groups, and interviews was voluntary, and the sample was not intended to be statistically representative of all young people or caregivers in the county. In addition, much of the data presented in this report is based on self-reported experiences and perceptions, which may be influenced by individual interpretation, comfort sharing, or recall.

Bringing the Data Together

Together, the surveys, focus groups, key informant interviews, secondary data analysis, and review of local school wellness and substance use policies provided a more complete understanding of youth substance use in Santa Cruz County. Combining multiple data sources and perspectives helped identify both trends and lived experiences, while also highlighting areas of alignment and disconnect between youth, caregivers, providers, schools, and broader systems. This mixed-methods approach grounded community-level data in local context and helped identify opportunities to strengthen prevention, education, policy, and support efforts for young people.

Demographics of Spotlight Participants

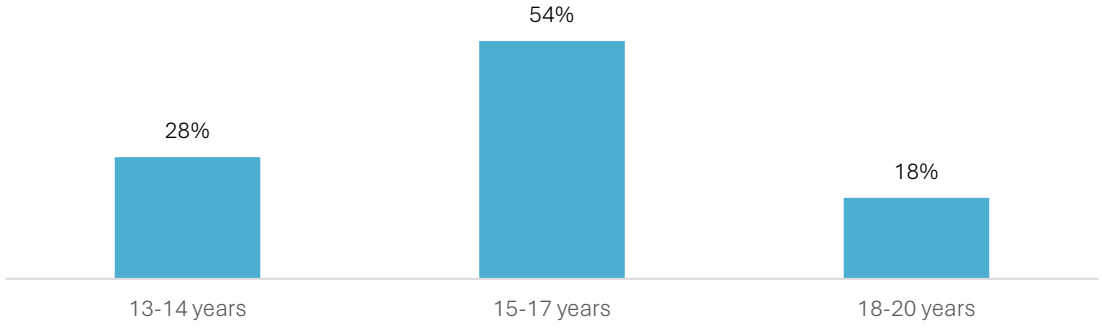
YOUTH & YOUNG ADULT SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

A total of 120 youth and young adults from across Santa Cruz County participated in the survey, representing a range of ages, identities, and school communities. Most (54%) participants were between 15-17 years old, with additional responses from youth ages 13-14 (28%) and young adults ages 18-20 (18%). Participants attend schools across the county, including traditional high schools, middle schools, continuation or alternative education schools, charter schools, and the local colleges.

Survey participants reflected diverse gender identities and racial and ethnic backgrounds. Over half (57%) identified as girls or young women, and about one in five (22%) identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Participants identified most commonly as White (52%) and Hispanic or Latino (42%), with smaller numbers identifying as Black or African American (10%), Asian (3%), and American Indian or Alaska Native (1%).

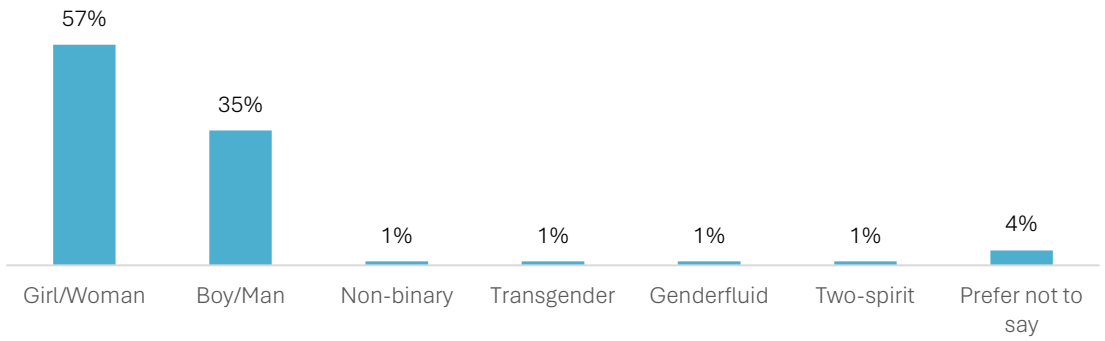
Participants also shared experiences related to mental health and substance use support. Many reported that their mental health had been “not good” at least sometimes during the past month, while only five percent reported ever receiving help to quit substance use.

Figure 1. Age of Survey Participants



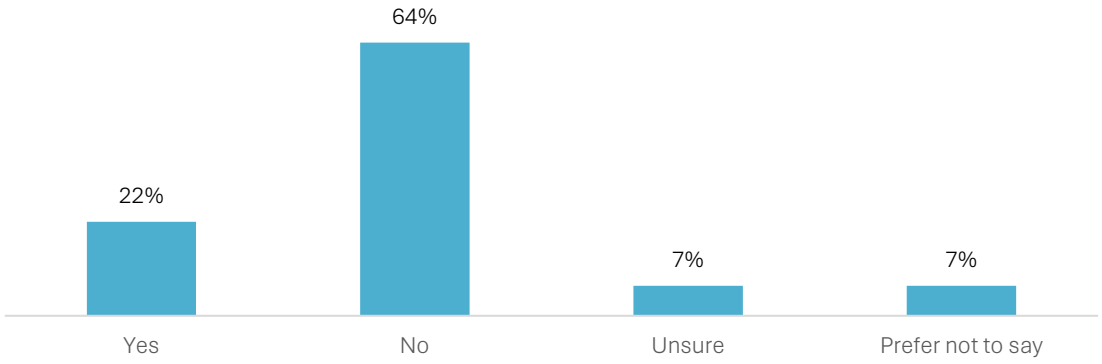
N=87. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Figure 2. Gender Identity of Survey Participants



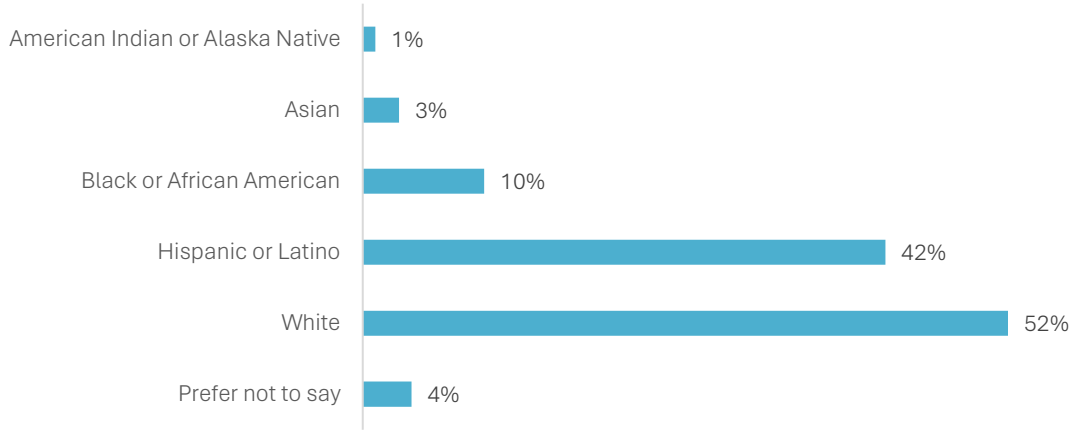
N=103. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Figure 3. LGBTQ+ Status of Survey Participants (*Do you identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community?*)



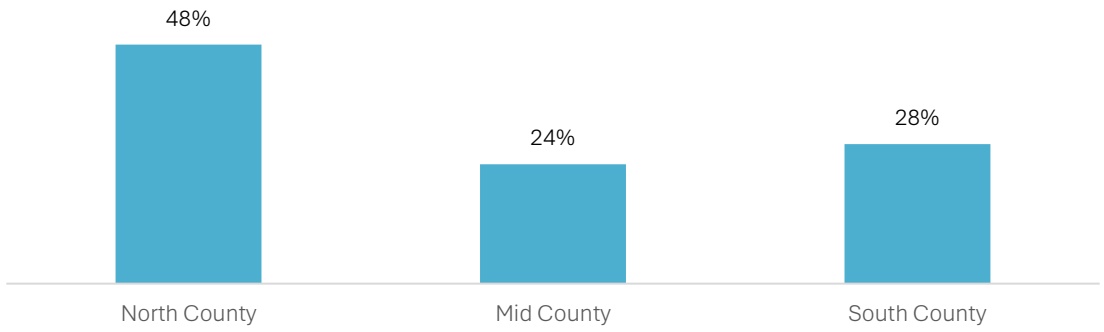
N=103. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Figure 4. Racial/Ethnic Identity of Survey Participants



N=103 participants offering 114 responses. Multiple response question. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Figure 5. School Location of Survey Participants, by County Region

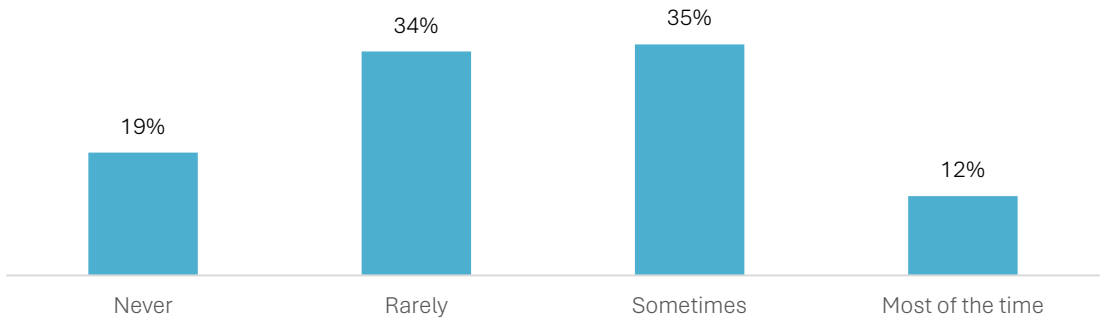


N=93. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey. Note: North County includes Santa Cruz, San Lorenzo Valley, and Scotts Valley. Mid County includes Aptos, Capitola, Live Oak, and Soquel. South County includes Watsonville.

Schools attended by survey participants included:

- Aptos High School
- Alianza Charter School
- Branciforte Middle School
- Cabrillo College
- CAC Santa Cruz
- Ceiba College Prep
- Costanoa Continuation High School
- Harbor High School
- Kirby School
- Mission Hill Middle School
- Oasis High School
- Pajaro Valley High School
- Rolling Hills Middle School
- Santa Cruz High School
- Scotts Valley High School
- Seabright High School
- Shoreline Middle School
- Soquel High School
- University of California, Santa Cruz
- Watsonville High School

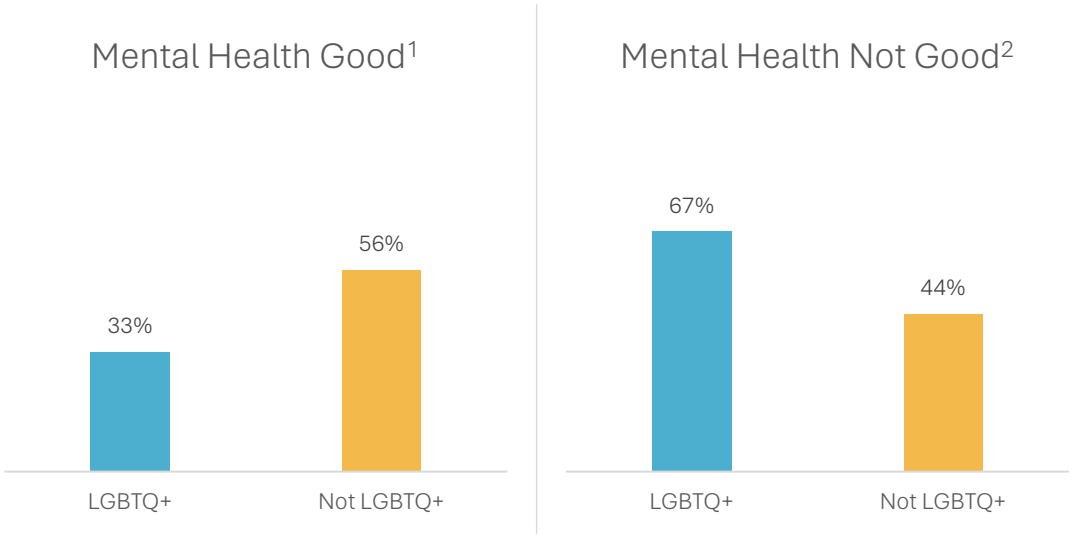
Figure 6. Survey Participant Mental Health Status in the Last 30 Days (*During the past 30 days, how often was your mental health not good?*)



N=91. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

When interpreting differences in mental health outcomes by LGBTQ+ status, it is important to recognize that research attributes these disparities primarily to experiences of stigma, discrimination, victimization, and other forms of minority stress rather than to LGBTQ+ identity itself. Studies have found that affirming school climates, family acceptance, and supportive relationships can serve as important protective factors that improve mental health and well-being among LGBTQ+ youth[1].

Figure 7. Survey Participants: Self-Reported Mental Health Status in the Past 30 Days, by LGBTQ+ Status



N=78. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.
[1] Defined as respondents indicating their mental health was not good 'rarely' or 'never' in the past 30 days.
[2] Defined as respondents indicating their mental health was not good 'rarely' or 'never' in the past 30 days.

YOUTH FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

A total of six youth participated in an online focus group hosted to better understand young people's perspective on issues related to substance use. While demographic information was not formally collected prior to focus groups, participants reported a range of gender identities and ages during the introduction to the session.

CAREGIVER FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

There were a total of nine caregivers, with diverse identities and experiences from across the county, who participated in the efforts to gather caregiver perspectives. Six of the caregivers reside in Watsonville, two reside in Santa Cruz, and one resides in Felton. All six of the caregivers from Watsonville indicated their primary language is Spanish, while the other three indicated their primary

[1] Russell, S. T., Fish, J. N., Grossman, A. H., McGuire, J. K., & Walls, N. E. (2024). Sexual orientation and gender identity disparities in adolescent mental health are largely explained by experiences of stigma, discrimination, and minority stress. Journal of Adolescent Health, 74(1), 12–20. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9936952/.

language as English. They also brought a variety of parenting experience as can be see in the table below showing the ages of their children.

Figure 8. Caregiver Participants: Ages of Children

Caregiver	Under 12 Years	12-14 Years	15-17 Years	18 Year or Older
1	✓	✓	✓	
2		✓	✓	
3			✓	
4			✓	
5		✓	✓	✓
6	✓	✓	✓	
7				✓
8			✓	
9		✓	✓	✓

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

A total of eight key informant interviews were conducted to capture a variety of relevant professional perspectives from across the county. Their identity and agency affiliation are confidential, but the table below outlines the point of view each interview brought to these conversations.

Figure 9. Key Informant Interviews: Participant Perspectives

Count	Point of View
1	Prevention Programming
2	Youth Serving Community-based Organization / Prevention Programming
3	Youth Serving Community-based Organization / Prevention Programming
4	Youth Serving Community-based Organization
5	Behavioral Health
6	Health Provider
7	Education
8	Provider for Justice-Involved Youth

Getting the Real Facts on Substances

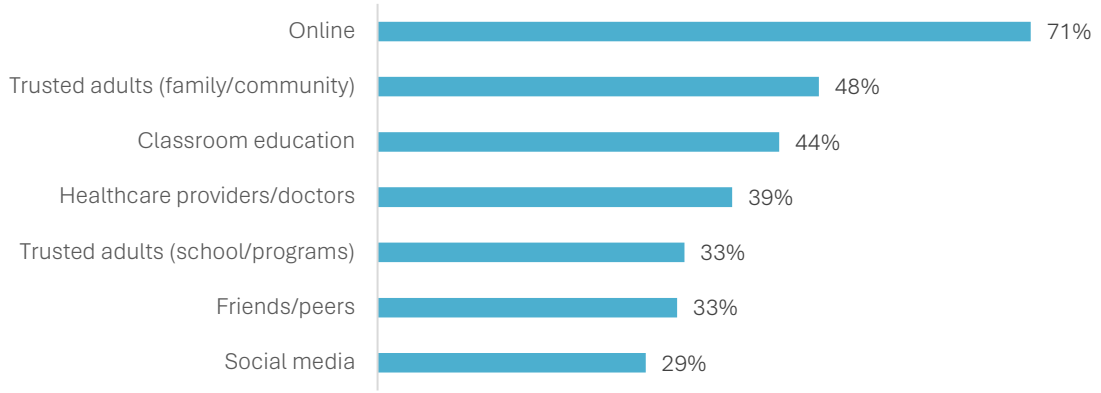
This assessment sought to better understand how youth and young adults learn about substances so they can make informed and safer decisions, as well as how caregivers access information and support conversations with young people about substance use. Findings revealed that both youth and caregivers are navigating a complex information environment where misinformation and mixed messages are common, making trusted relationships and open, nonjudgmental communication especially important.

RELIABLE INFORMATION

Youth are primarily getting information about substances online, despite concerns about widespread inaccurate and misleading information.

Youth focus group participants shared that they get accurate information about substances at school, from their parents, and online including sites like Reddit and PsychonautWiki. While they reported that they often rely on online sources, social media, peers, and trusted adults for information, they still struggle to know which information is truly reliable.

Figure 10. Survey: *Where do you usually go to get accurate information about substances?* (Top 7 Responses)



N=117 participants offering 361 responses. Multiple response question. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Key informants drew strong distinctions between reliable and unreliable sources of information on substances as outlined in the table below. They noted that both youth and parents are often exposed to misinformation or conflicting messages, particularly online, and that many struggle to identify which sources are trustworthy. They also shared concerns about the ways in which unreliable sources, including web-based and social media platforms, normalize substance use or even make it appear to be safe.

Figure 11. Key Informant Interviews: Reliable and Unreliable Sources of Information on Substances for Young People and Adults

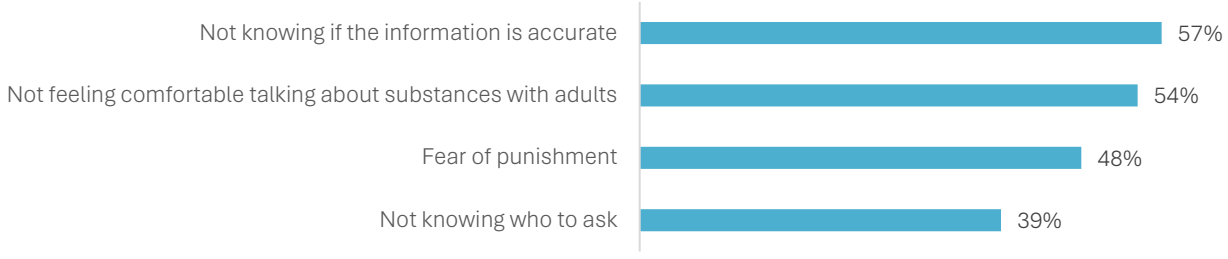
Reliable Sources	Unreliable Sources
• Schools, school newsletters, school programs *(e.g., TUPE),* services that come on school campus • Healthcare providers • County Departments *(e.g., the Health Department or Behavioral Health)*, County hosted SUDS events, County newsletters • Prevention programs and initiatives *(e.g., Diversity Center's harm reduction model, Encompass' ThriveHive group classes, and SafeRx effots with providers)* • Family • Substance Use Disorder (SUDs) Counselors • Peers • Library • News media that shares trend data • Word of mouth • Trusted teachers or advisors	• Online *(e.g., Google, YouTube)*, AI *(e.g., ChatGPT)*, and Social Media *(e.g., TikTok)* • Friends • Movies • Celebrities • Advertisements • Cannabis shops

N=8. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth Substance Use Spotlight Key Informant Interviews. Note: Responses are listed in order from most mentions to fewest mentions.

Interviewees also shared concerns that information provided by schools may not consistently reach or engage the families who need it most or when they need it the most, and that stigma can make both parents and youth hesitant to talk openly with healthcare providers about substance use concerns. Several participants emphasized that family norms, prior experiences with substance use, and levels of trust in institutions can also shape how youth and caregivers seek out and respond to information and support.

Youth focus group participants identified a number of challenges in trying to get accurate information on substances including inaccurate information online or on social media and peers who may be consuming inaccurate information and thinking it is true. They also shared that online searches could lead to confusing search results including advertisements sharing the "benefits" of use.

Figure 12. Survey: *What's the toughest part about getting accurate info on substances?*

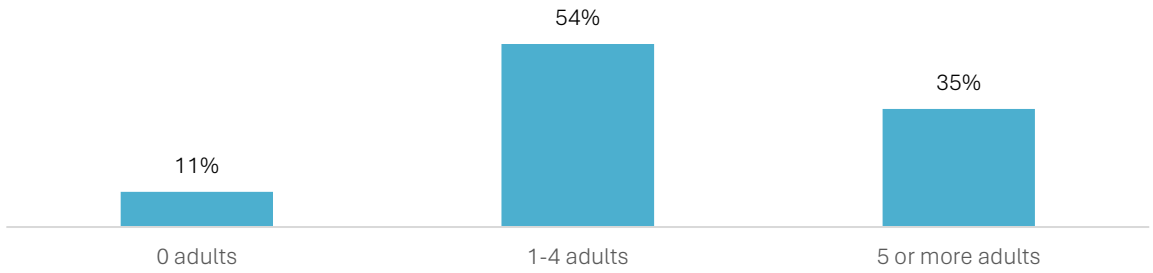


N=115 participants offering 229 responses. Multiple response question. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

TALKING ABOUT SUBSTANCES

Most young people have adults they can talk to about substance use, but caregivers want more resources to support them in these discussions.

Figure 13. Survey: *How many adults in your life can you talk to if you have questions about substance use?*



N=114. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Caregivers in the focus groups expressed discomfort and fear when discussing substance use with their children, but stressed the need to maintain good communication and open dialogue so that their children will continue to come to them about issues related to substance use. Caregivers pointed to a need for resources that are less clinical and more conversational to help guide these discussions. They also noted the value of strengthening their communication skills so they could approach conversations about substance use with greater confidence and comfort.

> “I’m really glad she feels comfortable. I try to keep the conversation open so that she continues to feel comfortable. That feels like the most important thing to me.”
>
> *- Caregiver Focus Group Participant*

Key informants identified several areas where they felt more education is needed, including understanding THC potency, the impacts of cannabis on the developing brain, and awareness of local prevention and support resources. They highlighted a range of existing local prevention efforts and resources, while also emphasizing the need for earlier prevention programming, stronger socio-emotional learning opportunities, culturally responsive outreach, inclusive and affirming spaces for youth, and more support for caregivers in having open conversations about substance use. One interviewee emphasized that aiding caregivers in improving their communication skills to address this topic would also benefit them in addressing any challenging subject with their children. Additionally, building trusting relationships with young people and incorporating youth peer-led prevention approaches were also identified as strategies for improving engagement and access to reliable information.

Attitudes and Beliefs

This section explores youth, caregiver and provider attitudes and beliefs related to substance use, including perceptions of risk, peer influences, social norms, stigma, and help-seeking. Findings highlight the ways substance use is often perceived as normalized within young people's social environments, while also emphasizing the important role that trusted relationships, nonjudgmental support, and open communication play in shaping whether young people feel comfortable seeking information or asking for help.

UNDERAGE SUBSTANCE USE

Many youth perceive substance use as common and socially accepted, even as experiences with direct peer pressure and actual use vary.

Figure 14. Survey: *Substance use is accepted/tolerated in my friend group.* (True/False)



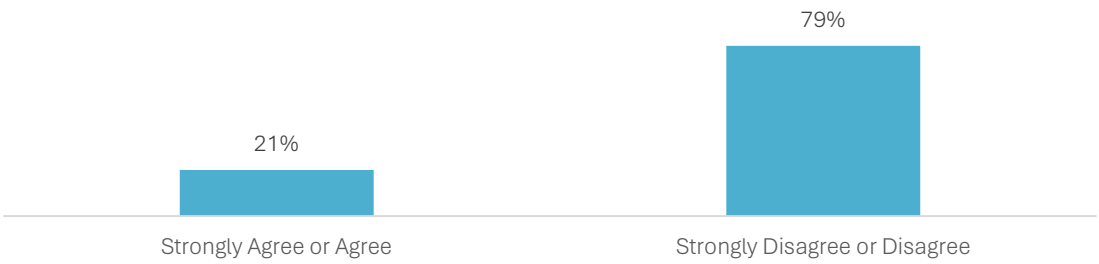
N=80. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Figure 15. Survey: *Young people at my school encourage underage substance use.*



N=70. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Figure 16. Survey: *I have felt pressured to use substances by my peers*.



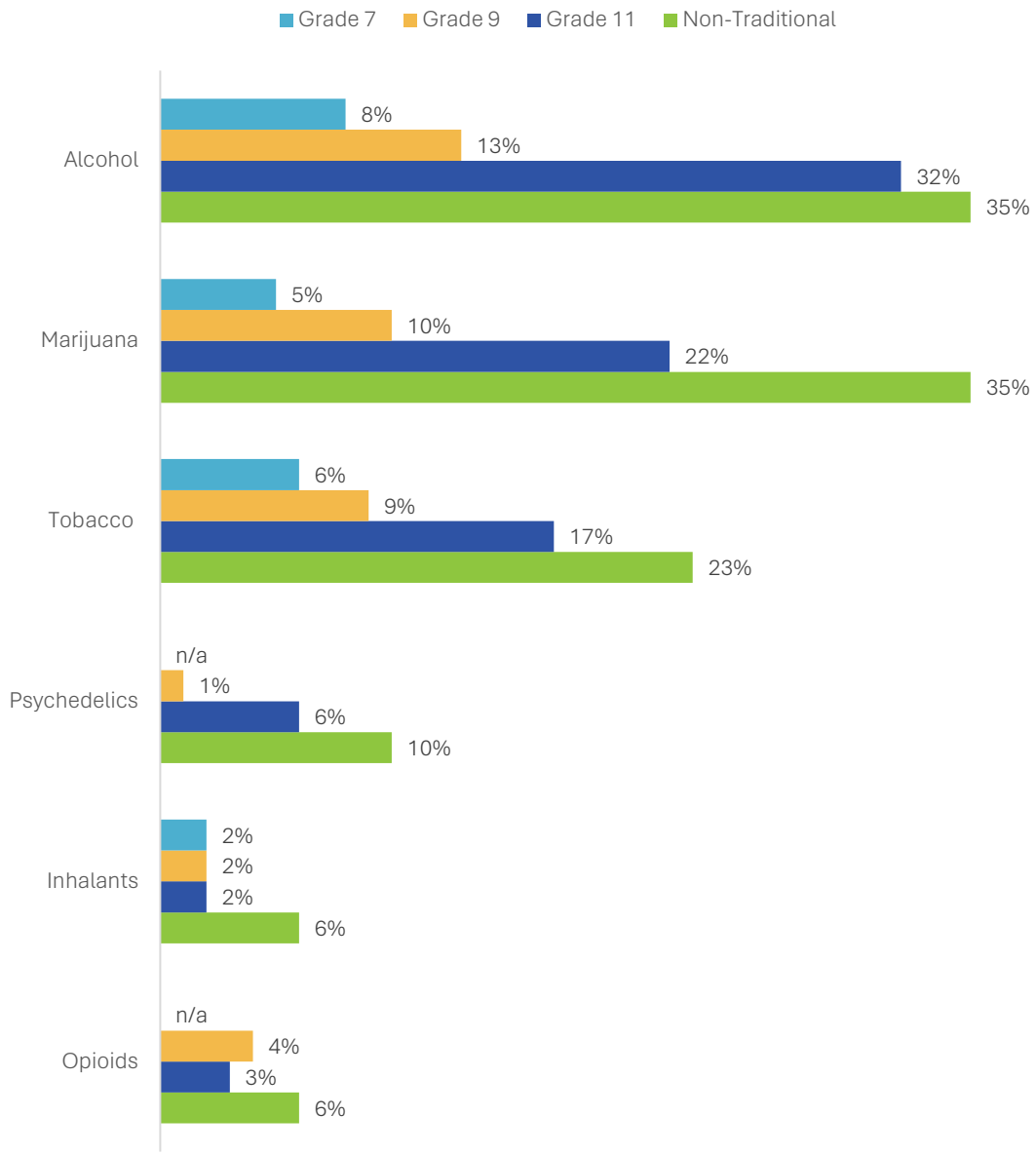
N=94. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

When discussing stigma in the key informant interviews, a consistent theme was the normalization of cannabis, vaping, and alcohol use among youth and adults in Santa Cruz County. Many interviewees described youth perceiving these substances as socially accepted and relatively low risk, particularly compared to opioids or other drugs. Interviewees frequently described youth growing up in environments where cannabis and alcohol use are visible and socially accepted among adults, including within families and the broader community. Participants referenced cannabis businesses, public use, and adults openly using cannabis as contributing to youth perceptions that cannabis is low risk or "not as bad" as other substances. Several interviewees also noted that vaping has become normalized among youth in ways that traditional cigarette smoking no longer is. Participants also described what some perceived as "mixed messages" or hypocrisy from adults, where youth observe adults using substances, while simultaneously being told not to use them themselves.

While interviewees expressed the perception that cannabis use is highly normalized within Santa Cruz County culture, some also described regional and cultural differences within the county. Several noted that cannabis is often viewed in North County as legitimate and relatively safe, while in South County it may be more associated with consequences or getting in trouble.

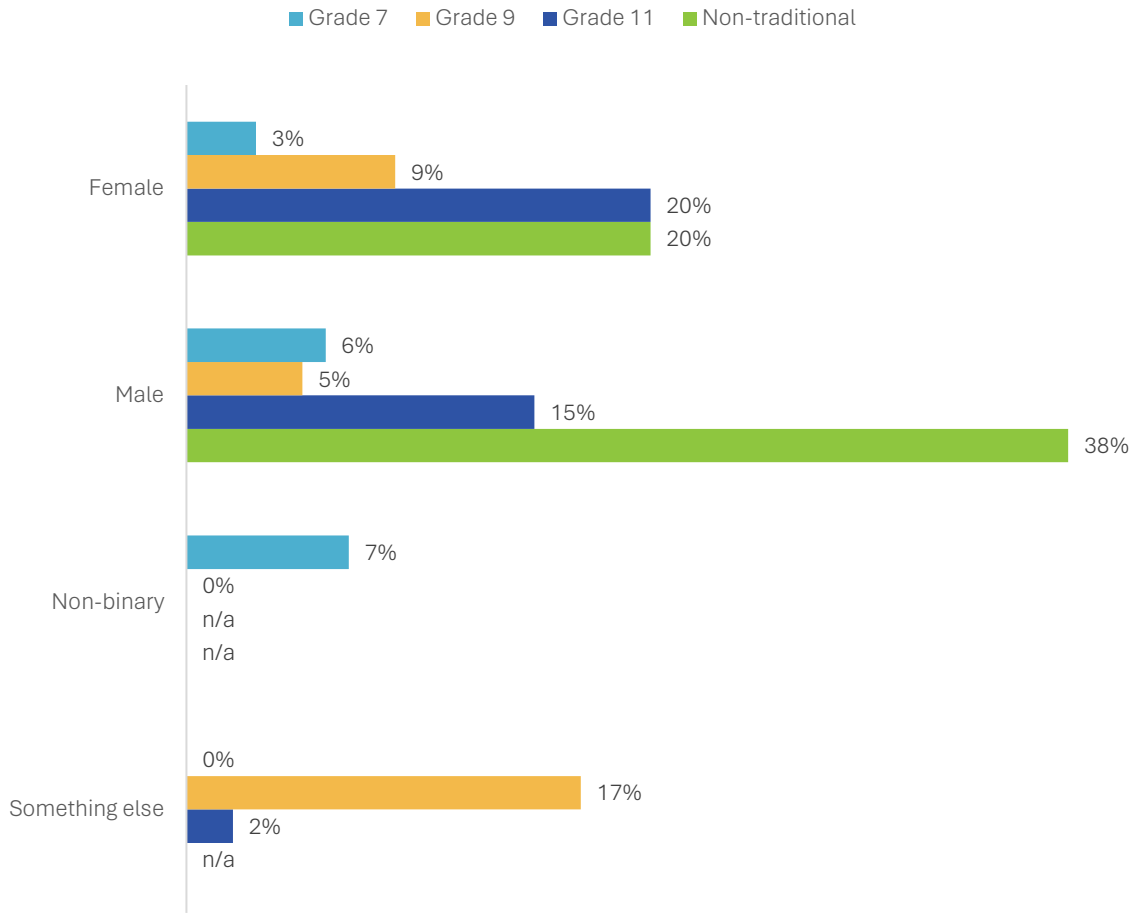
California Healthy Kids Survey data (below) provides additional context on youth substance use patterns and social norms across Santa Cruz County, highlighting differences across grade levels and demographic groups.

Figure 17. Percent of Youth Lifetime Substance Use in Santa Cruz County, by Grade and Substance (2023-25)



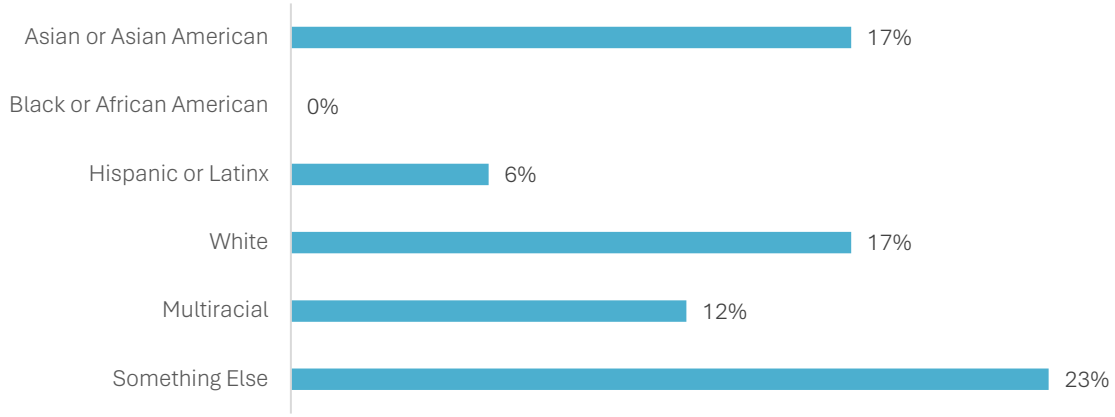
Source: Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.
Note: "n/a" indicates the question is not asked of middle school students.

Figure 18. Percent of Youth Alcohol or Drug Use in the Past 30 Days in Santa Cruz County, by Grade and Gender^ (2023-25)



Source: Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.
Note: Data was not available for all grades for the 'Non-binary' and 'Something else' gender categories.
^ The California Healthy Kids Survey reports data by gender, with response options including *female*, *male*, *non-binary*, and *something else*. While *female* and *male* are commonly used to describe sex, this report retains the terminology and categories used in the original dataset for consistency with the source data.

Figure 19. Percent of Youth Marijuana Use in the Past 30 Days Among Grade 11 Students in Santa Cruz County, by Race/Ethnicity (2023-25)



Source: Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.

Young people in the focus group were asked for their thoughts on why young people use substances, and conversely why they might choose not to, and they provided the following reasons:

Figure 20. Focus Group: *Why do you think young people use substances? Why might they choose not to?*

Reasons to Use Substances	Reasons Not to Use Substances
• Mental health – reduce anxiety or depression • To get their mind off their problems • Escape emotions and thoughts	• Parents and/or school taught them not to • They may not have a lot of problems yet • Choose activities over drugs • Health reasons or potential interactions with medications they take

N=6. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Focus Group.

When caregivers were asked how they felt about underage substance use several themes emerged:

- Caregivers described substance use as a common and often normalized part of young people's environments. They noted that its visibility and accessibility through peers, in the community, and sometimes even within families, can contribute to perceptions that substance use is typical or difficult to avoid.
- Caregivers shared that youth may use substances to fit in socially, manage emotions, or cope with difficult experiences.
- Caregivers expressed concerns about how substance use affects adolescent brain development and overall growth.

- Caregiver responses highlighted the important role of parents and other trusted adults in supporting young people. At the same time, caregivers discussed challenges in preventing substance use, including limited time with their children due to work and economic demands. Caregivers also noted that youth may receive mixed messages when substance use is common or accepted among adults in their lives.
- Caregivers expressed feelings of fear when discussing youth substance use, and they stressed the need to educate youth through early and ongoing conversations about substance use.

Key informant interview participants talked about the impact adult responses to prevention and intervention has on young people, indicating that abstinence-only prevention messaging can increase stigma for youth who have questions or need support. They also discussed the issue of apathy among adults, especially in response to substance use in school, and how that can lead to less supportive responses (e.g., fewer referrals to support services).

ARE THERE MORE VULNERABLE POPULATIONS THAT NEED ADDITIONAL SUPPORT?

The data suggests LGBTQ+ youth may experience elevated vulnerability related to substance use and mental health (see Figure 7). Key informants emphasized that stigma, discrimination, bullying, isolation, and unmet mental health needs can increase risk. Participants also noted that some treatment and support spaces are not always experienced as inclusive or affirming for queer and trans youth, which may create additional barriers to seeking help. Findings reinforce the importance of culturally responsive, identity-affirming prevention and behavioral health supports.

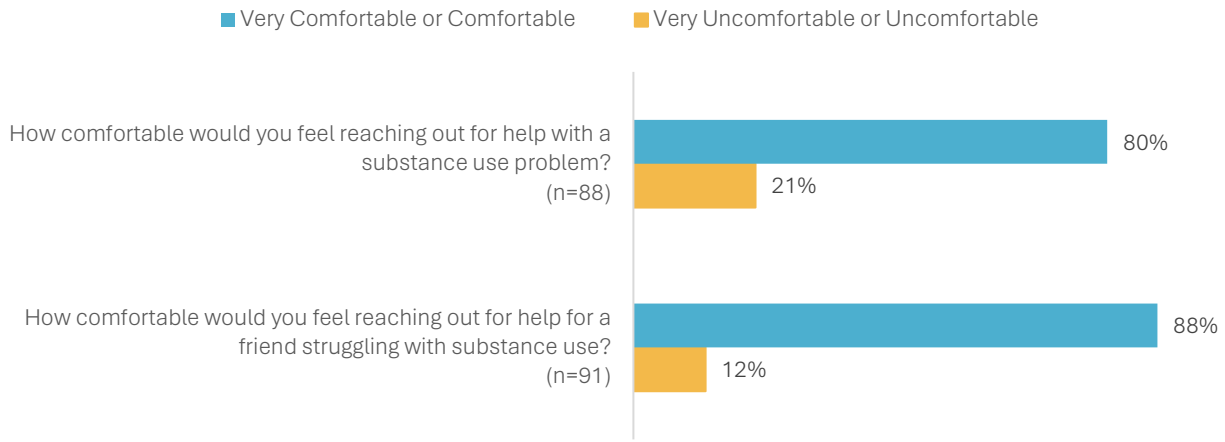
ASKING FOR HELP

Youth are more likely to seek help when they feel safe and not judged.

Young people in the focus group shared that their comfort level in asking for help with substance use for a friend would depend on how close they are with the friend, indicating that the closer they are the more comfortable they would be. They also touched on the stigma that is associated with substance use and how it impacts their comfort level with asking for help.

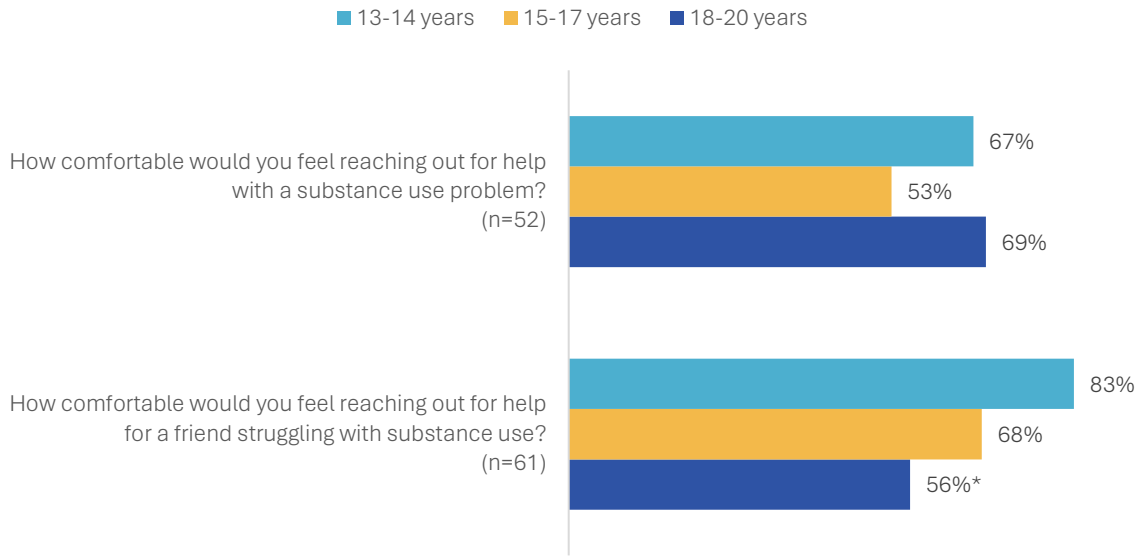
> “There is a stigma that people who use substances are bad people, which isn’t true.”
>
> *- Youth Focus Group Participant*

Figure 21. Survey: Young People's Comfort Level with Reaching Out for Help



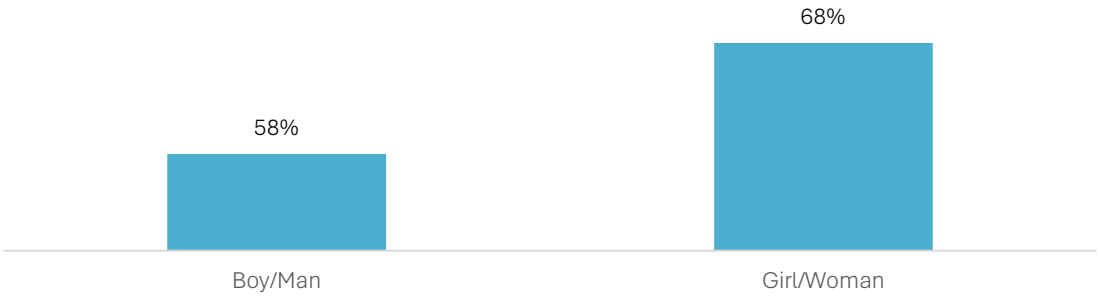
Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Figure 22. Survey: Young People's Comfort Level with Reaching Out for Help (Responding Comfortable/Very Comfortable), by Age Group



Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey. *Indicates an 'n' under 10. Note: Caution should be taken when interpreting data with small sample sizes.

Figure 23. Survey: *How comfortable would you feel reaching out for help with a substance use problem?* (Responding Comfortable/Very Comfortable), by Gender Identity



N=95. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey. Note: The sample size for the other gender identity categories was too small to report.

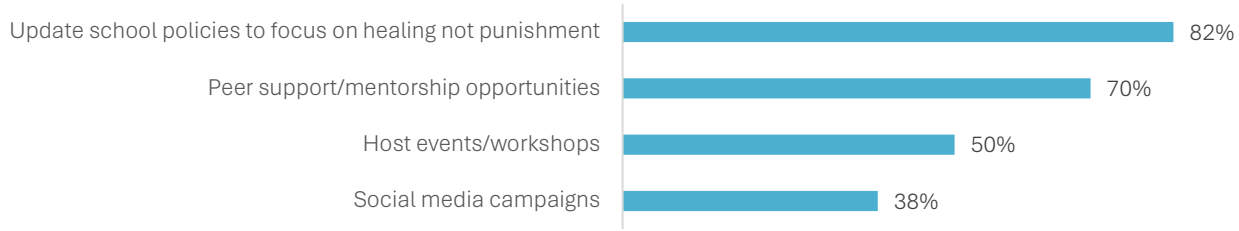
Young people in the focus group described feeling most comfortable discussing substance safety with people they trusted and believed would respond without judgment. Close personal relationships, such as parents, siblings, best friends, and romantic partners, were mentioned most often, with youth emphasizing the importance of feeling understood and supported. Several participants noted they would seek out the parent they felt safest talking to or a trusted adult in their life. Professional supports, including therapists and doctors, were also identified by some youth as trusted sources of guidance. However, perspectives on therapists were mixed, as some expressed concern about being judged or having information shared with parents, highlighting the importance of confidentiality and trust when engaging youth in conversations about substance use and safety.

Caregivers described mixed feelings when asked about discussing substance use with young people, with many acknowledging some level of hesitation despite recognizing the importance of having these conversations. Concerns often stemmed from uncertainty about how to approach the topic, worry about not having complete or accurate information on the topic, and fear of unintentionally encouraging curiosity or experimentation. At the same time, caregivers emphasized the value of open communication, trusted relationships, and support from caring adults in a young person's life. Overall, they viewed difficult conversations about substance use as necessary, even when uncomfortable or emotionally challenging.

When asked about how stigma from peers, families, or larger systems influence how youth or adults talk about substance use, key informants described stigma as a significant barrier to open conversations and help-seeking. Several participants noted that youth may feel more comfortable discussing mental health concerns than substance use, reflecting broader societal stigma around addiction and treatment. They also acknowledged that stigma can exist within healthcare and education systems themselves, including discomfort among some clinicians and school staff in asking youth directly about substance use. Other themes that emerged in the key informant interviews relating to stigma and asking for help are outlined below:

- Interviewees shared that young people may be less likely to ask questions, seek help, or talk openly about substance use when they fear getting in trouble, being judged, or having information shared with parents or school staff.
- Cannabis and alcohol were described by interviewees as increasingly normalized or socially accepted. They also specified that substances such as fentanyl, pills, methamphetamine, and opioids continue to carry stronger stigma which lowers young people's willingness to speak openly about them.
- Many interview participants viewed harm reduction and safety-focused conversations as more effective than punitive or "all-or-nothing" approaches. They emphasized that building trust and creating space for honest dialogue can help young people feel more comfortable discussing substance use concerns.
- Peer relationships were described as playing an important role in shaping young people's attitudes and behaviors related to substance use. Interviewees noted that peer norms can either reinforce substance use or encourage healthier choices, suggesting that peer-led prevention efforts may be especially effective.
- Interviewees shared that safe, non-judgement spaces are critical for supporting youth. Wellness centers and trusted youth-serving organizations were identified as important spaces where youth may feel more comfortable seeking information or help without fear of punishment.
- Interviewees noted that family expectations, communication styles, and cultural norms can influence how comfortable young people feel discussing substance use. They shared that in some cases, stricter approaches may lead youth to hide behaviors rather than seek guidance or support.
- Participants emphasized the need for more practical, realistic education and resources for both youth and caregivers. Topics suggested by interviewees included substance use, mental health, coping skills, the effects of substances on the developing brain, and strategies for healthy family communication.

Figure 24. Survey: *What are some things we could do in our schools or community to reduce the stigma (negative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes people may hold towards young people who use substances) around substance use?*



N=113 participants offering 271 responses. Multiple response question. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Perception of Harm

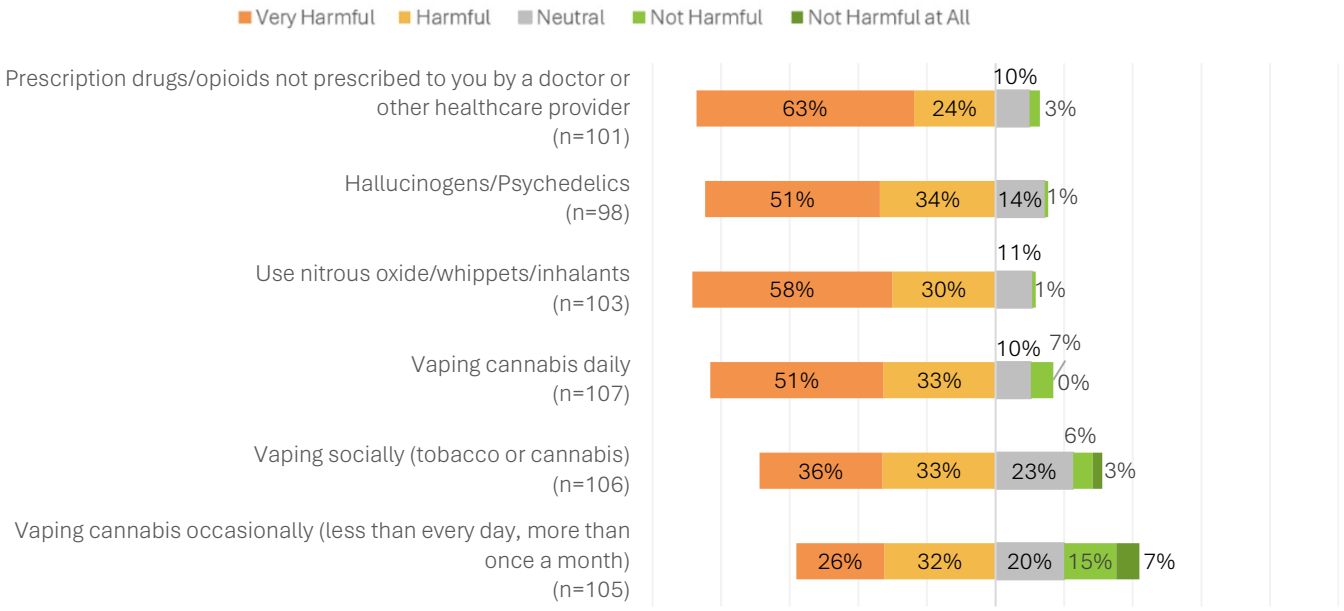
This section explores how young people, caregivers, and providers perceive the risks and harms associated with different substances, including alcohol, cannabis, vaping, pills, and other drugs. Findings highlight a range of beliefs and mixed perceptions about the safety, addictiveness, and health impacts of substances, particularly cannabis and vaping, while also showing concern about unknown substances, fentanyl exposure, and long-term health effects.

VARYING YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

Perceptions of harm vary widely across substances, especially alcohol, cannabis and vaping.

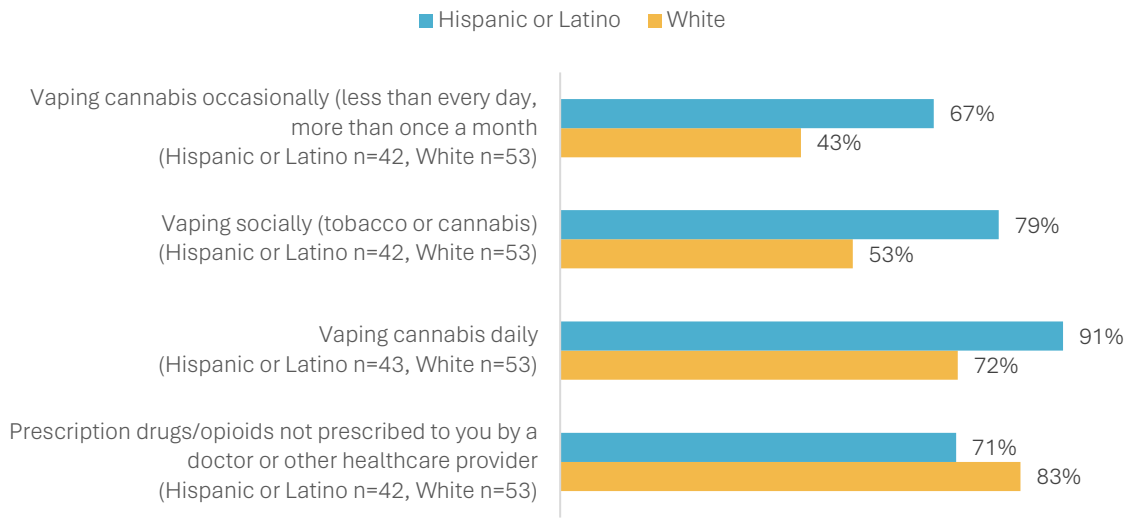
When asked to rank specific substances - alcohol, cannabis, and tobacco/nicotine based on harmfulness and potential for addiction - youth focus group participants had mixed opinions. Half of the focus group participants identified alcohol as addictive and harmful. One-third of the youth in the focus group also indicated that tobacco/nicotine is addictive, and one noted that vaping nicotine can be the most addictive because it is available in a variety of flavors. Half of the focus group participants also indicated that cannabis is addictive, while other participants either didn't rank it at all or indicated that it is "not physically addictive".

Figure 25. Survey: *How harmful to your health do you think the following activities are for someone your age?*



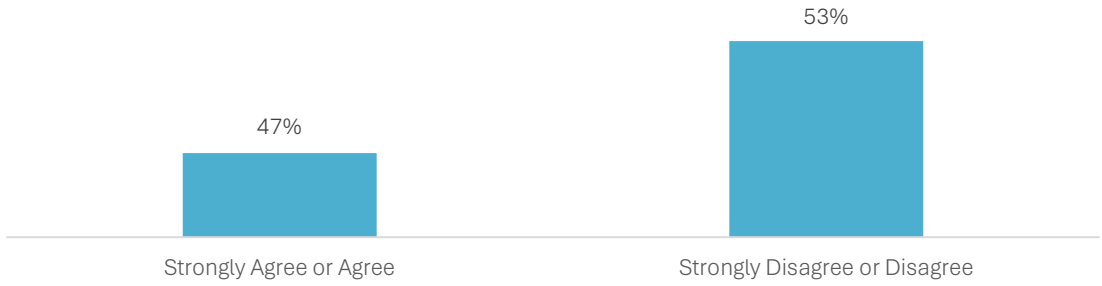
Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Figure 26. Survey: *How harmful to your health do you think the following activities are for someone your age?* (Responding Harmful/Very Harmful), by Race/Ethnicity



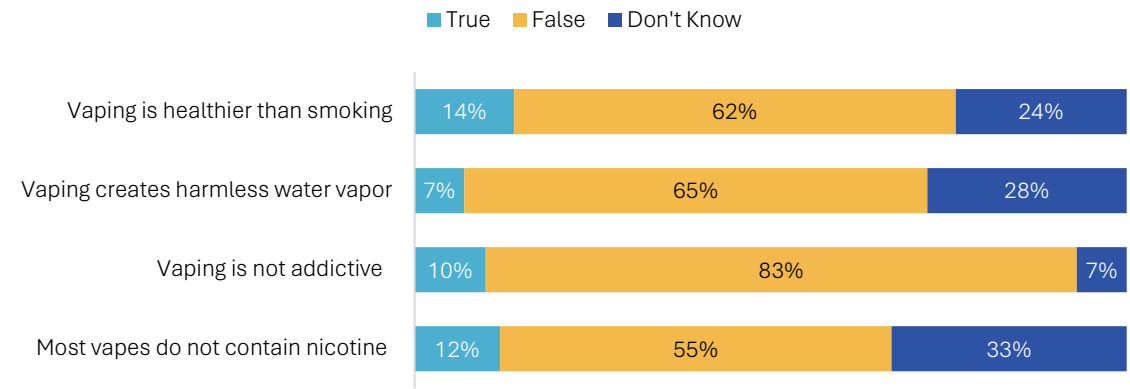
Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Figure 27. Survey: *People my age know what's in their vapes.*



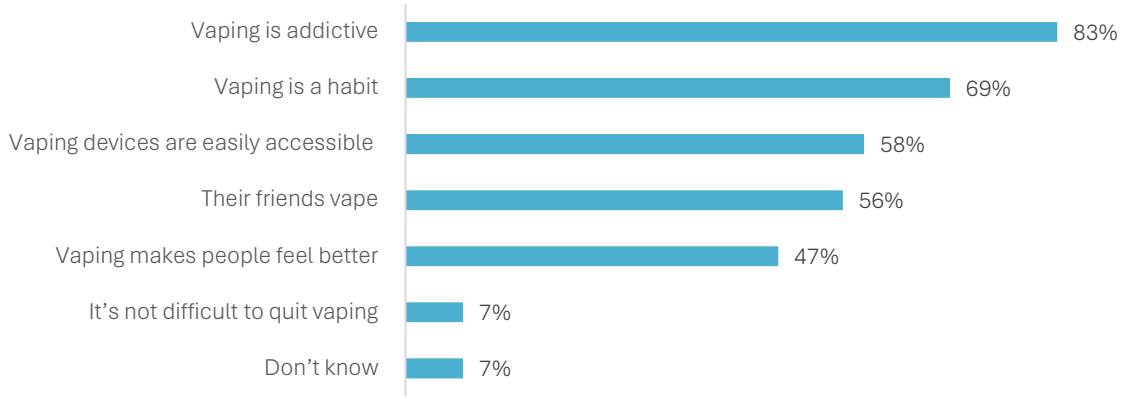
N=77. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Figure 28. Survey: Perception of Harm - Vaping



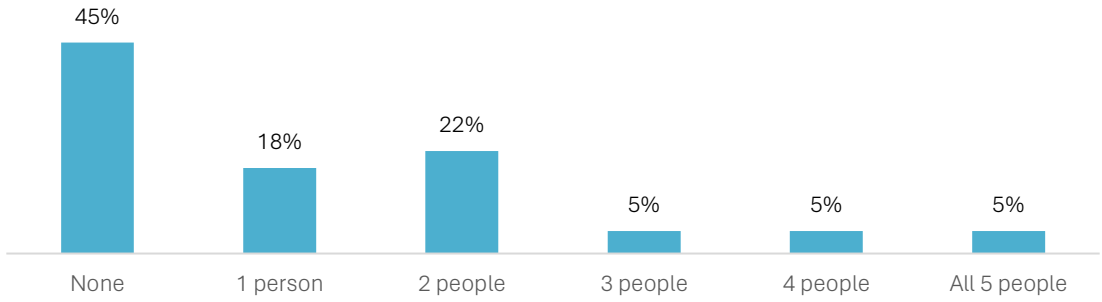
N=106. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Figure 29. Survey: *Why is it so difficult for people to quit vaping?*



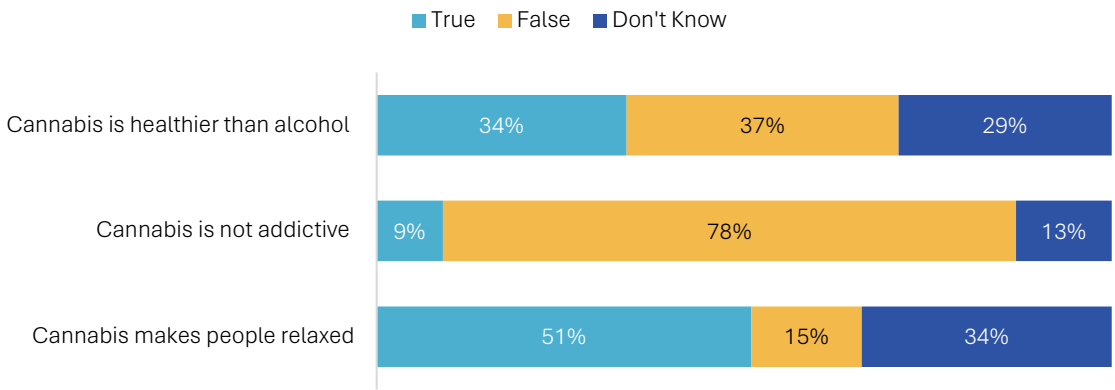
N=110 participants offering 361 responses. Multiple response question. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Figure 30. Survey: *Of the five people who are closest to you (family and friends), how many smoke or vape?*



N=104. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Figure 31. Survey: Perception of Harm - Cannabis



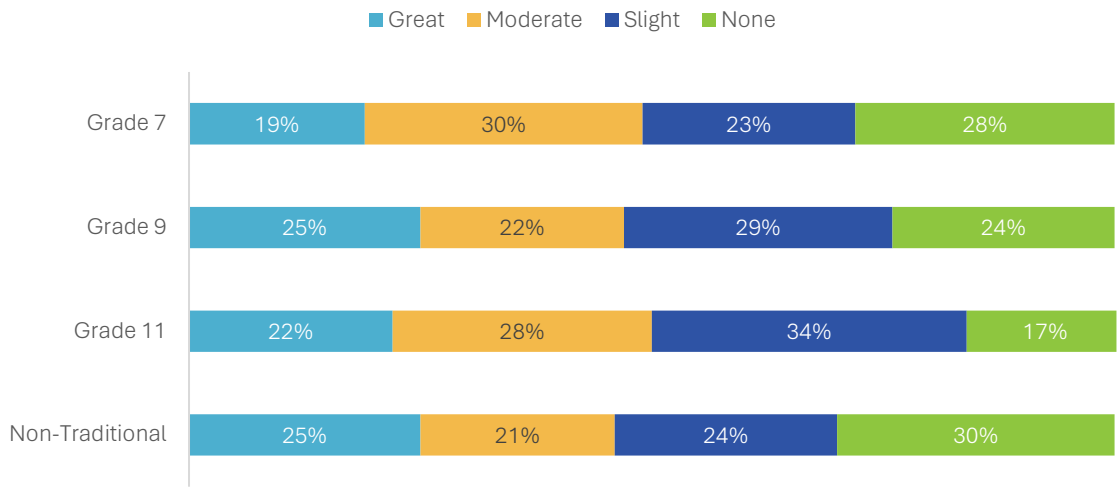
N=106. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

DO YOUNG PEOPLE UNDERSTAND POTENCY OF PRODUCTS AND THE EFFECTS THAT IT CAN HAVE?

Findings suggest that many young people may not fully understand potency or the potential effects of products they are using, particularly with vaping and cannabis products, and some youth in the focus group questioned whether cannabis is physically addictive. The findings point to a need for more education around potency, dosage, product contents, and the risks associated with newer cannabis and vape products.

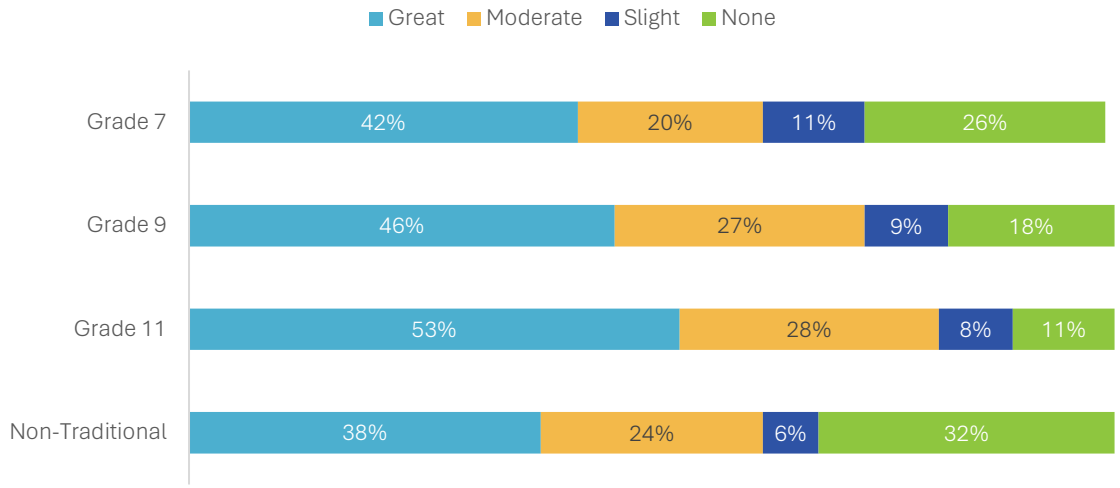
Secondary data, in the figures below, provides additional context on how perceptions of substance-related harm vary across age groups and patterns of use in Santa Cruz County.

Figure 32. Perceived Harm of AOD Use: Alcohol – Drink Occasionally, by Grade (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25)



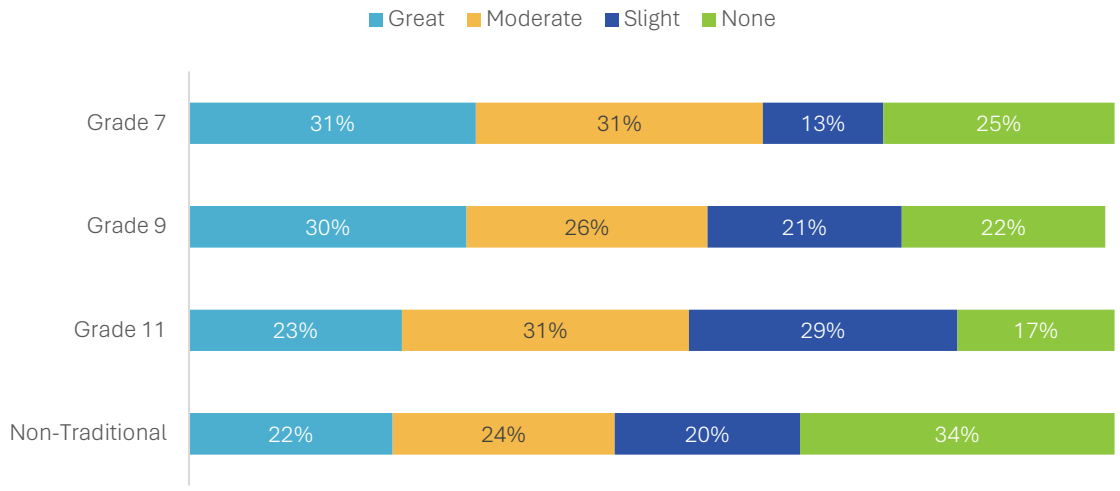
Source: Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.

Figure 33. Perceived Harm of AOD Use: Alcohol – 5 or More Drinks Once or Twice a Week, by Grade (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25)



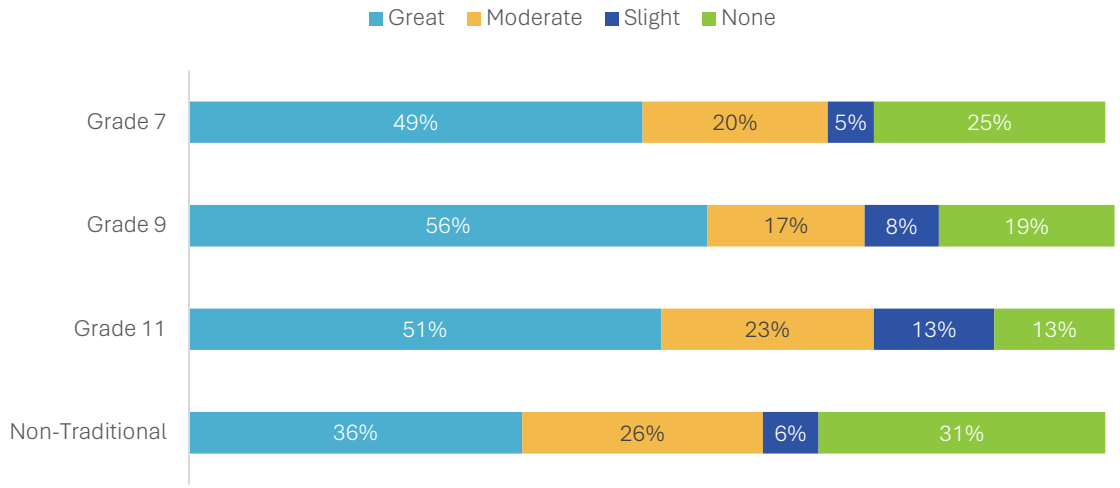
Source: Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.

Figure 34. Perceived Harm of AOD Use: Marijuana – Use Occasionally, by Grade (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25)



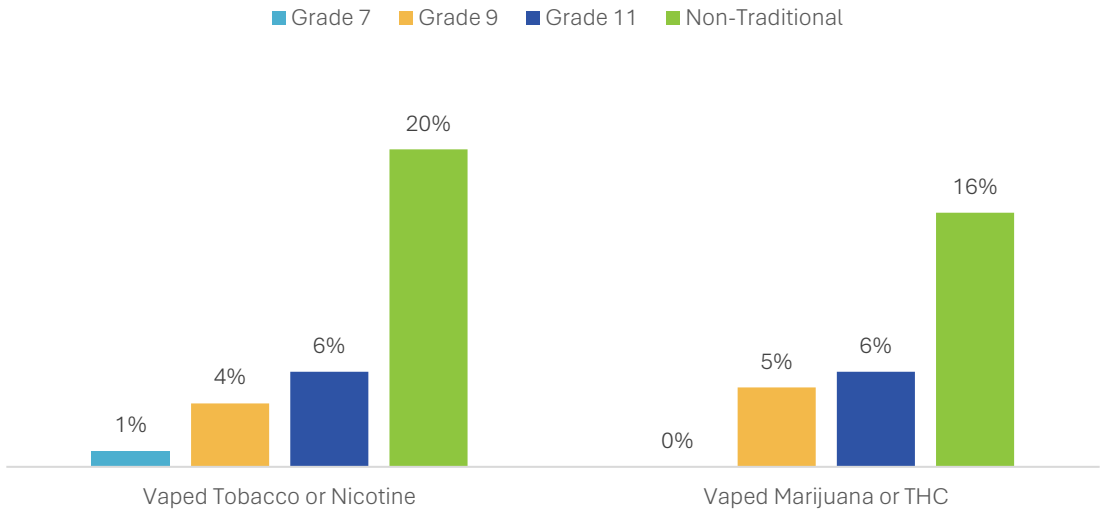
Source: Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.

Figure 35. Perceived Harm of AOD Use: Marijuana – Use Daily, by Grade (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25)



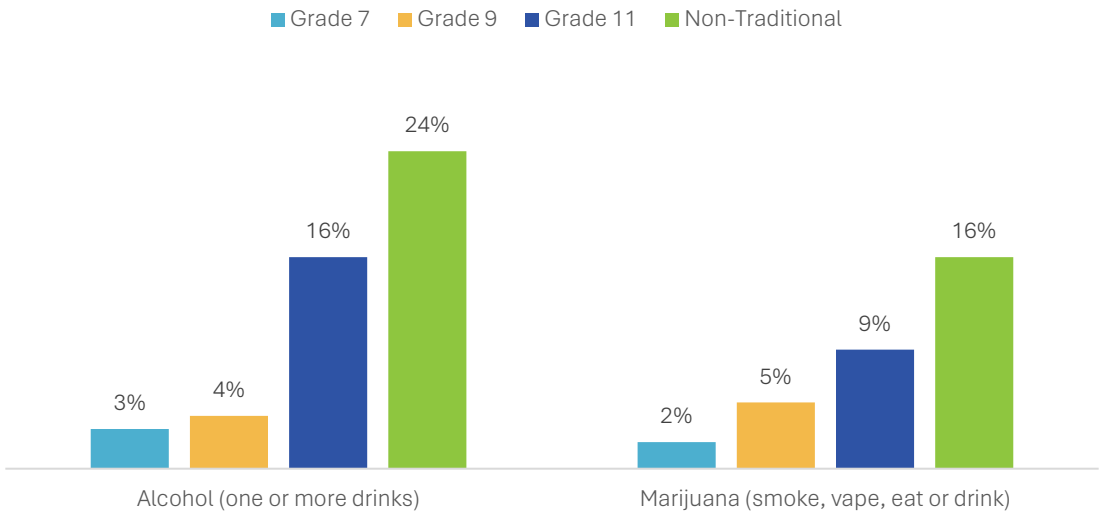
Source: Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.

Figure 36. Substances Vaped One or More Days in the Past Month, by Grade (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25)



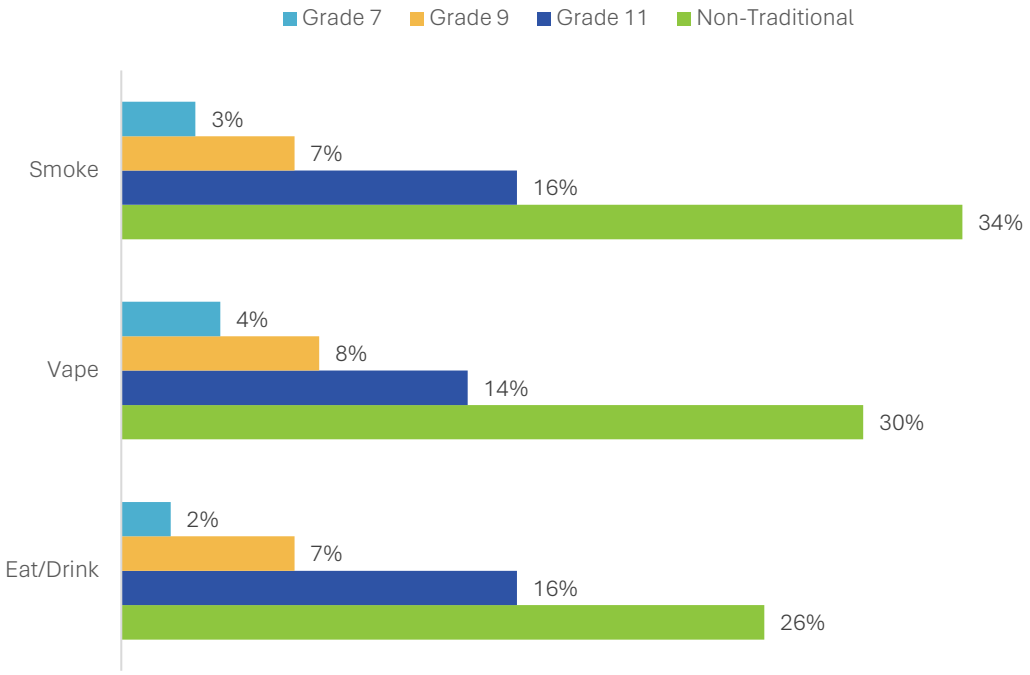
Source: Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.

Figure 37. Alcohol and Drug Use in the Past Month, by Grade (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25)



Source: Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.

Figure 38. Methods of Marijuana Consumption, by Grade (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25)



Source: Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT WHAT YOUTH ARE VAPING, PATTERNS OF USE, AND CO-USE WITH OTHER SUBSTANCES?

Findings suggest vaping is highly normalized among some youth populations, but there are still important gaps in understanding what substances youth are vaping, how use occurs, and the extent of co-use with other substances. Some youth and caregivers discussed nicotine vaping, cannabis vaping, flavored products, and discreet nicotine pouches, while secondary data also showed overlap between marijuana use and e-cigarette use. However, the study did not comprehensively examine simultaneous or co-use of alcohol, nicotine, and cannabis, nor did it explore patterns of use in depth, such as whether vaping occurs during school, at social events, or in isolation. These emerged as important areas for future data collection, research, and prevention planning.

CAREGIVER & PROVIDER CONCERNS

Caregivers and providers expressed heightened concern about fentanyl, laced substances and impaired driving.

Key informant interviewees noted a number of common beliefs among young people or adults about cannabis, vaping, alcohol, pills and injected drugs.

Figure 39. Key Informant Interviews: *What are the most common perceptions among youth or adults about how harmful substances like cannabis, vaping, alcohol, or pills are?*

Substance	Common Beliefs/Perceptions
Cannabis	• Safer than other substances (including nicotine/vaping tobacco), less dangerous than pills and alcohol • Not addictive • Driving high is okay • Useful for treating mental health problems • Potency doesn't change effects • Purchasing from dispensaries creates more safety
Vaping/Tobacco	• Vaping is better than smoking / vaping is just as bad as smoking • Flavored is safer • Vaping is "cooler"
Alcohol	• Okay if not consumed daily • Can cause violence
Other	• Pills are bad, dangerous because they could be laced with other substances • Injected drugs are the most dangerous

N=8. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth Substance Use Key Informant Interviews.

A consistent theme in the key informant interviews was limited awareness among youth, and sometimes caregivers, about potency, long-term health impacts, and newer forms of consumption. Interviewees expressed concern that many young people do not understand THC potency or the addictive potential of cannabis, the risks of binge drinking, or the dangers associated with unknown vape contents and high-potency products. Some indicated that the legalized cannabis industry has led to confusing messaging for young people and adults. Several participants described increasing emergency responses related to cannabis overconsumption among youth, particularly with edibles and high-potency products. Interviewees also noted that youth perceptions of "safety" were often more connected to where and with whom substances were being used rather than the actual health risks or method of consumption.

The interviews also highlighted changing social norms and perceptions of risk over time. Participants described fentanyl awareness campaigns as having significantly increased youth perceptions of risk around pills and opioids, though some felt messaging may have become oversaturated or disconnected from how youth view other substances. In contrast, several interviewees noted that some youth view driving under the influence of cannabis as less dangerous or stigmatized than drunk driving.

WHAT CAN WE SAY ABOUT "NORMALIZED" PERCEPTIONS LOCALLY?

The report findings suggest that substance use, particularly vaping, cannabis use, and alcohol use, is widely perceived by many young people as common and socially accepted within parts of the local youth culture. Across surveys, focus groups, and caregiver and provider discussions, participants frequently described substance use as "normalized," especially vaping on school campuses and cannabis use in the broader community. Youth noted that substances are often present within peer groups and social settings, while caregivers and providers described youth exposure to substance use through peers, public use, and social media. The data also suggest that legalization and visibility of cannabis businesses may contribute to perceptions that cannabis is relatively low risk or socially acceptable, particularly when compared to substances viewed as more dangerous, such as fentanyl or injected drugs.

At the same time, the findings suggest that normalization does not mean all youth use substances or feel pressured to do so. Experiences with peer pressure varied, and many youth also identified reasons for choosing not to use substances, including sports, family expectations, future goals, mental and physical health, and avoiding negative consequences.

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.

Getting Help and Support

This section explores how young people access help, support, and positive connections related to substance use and overall well-being, both within schools and in the broader community. Findings highlight the importance of trusted adults, welcoming social spaces, and accessible support services, while also pointing to ongoing barriers related to awareness, transportation, cost, confidentiality, and inclusion. The section also examines how school wellness policies and school connectedness may shape young people's ability to access support, feel connected, and seek help when needed.

SUPPORT SERVICES AND POSITIVE SPACES

Youth and caregivers value supportive spaces, but gaps in access and awareness remain.

Key informant interviewees were asked about support services or positive spaces that exist for youth who may be using substances or are at risk. Their responses described a range of programs and spaces that help support youth who may be using substances or are at risk, including school wellness centers, counseling services, youth leadership programs, and community-based organizations. Interviewees described these spaces as important sources of support and connection for youth, and emphasized the role trusted adults, including coaches, counselors, teachers, and mentors, play in helping young people feel engaged and supported.

At the same time, interviewees described ongoing gaps in access, awareness, and inclusion. Many felt that youth and families do not know what services are available, while transportation, cost, limited free youth spaces, and uneven access across the county continue to create barriers. Several interviewees indicated that there was zero or limited access to addiction programs dedicated to serving youth within the county, while others noted insurance issues as a major barrier to accessing support services. Participants also raised concerns about funding cuts, staffing shortages, and the need for services that are more welcoming and inclusive, particularly for LGBTQ+ youth seeking support. An especially alarming finding in these discussions was that some practitioners feel unequipped to discuss youth substance use or make referrals to support services, leading to them avoiding the topic when they are treating young people.

In the focus group discussions with caregivers, they too identified a range of social and recreational spaces available to youth outside of school, including youth centers, church groups, after-school programs, sports, dance and music activities, mentoring programs, and community organizations. At the same time, several caregivers felt there are not enough safe, accessible places for young people to simply spend time and socialize, especially outside of organized activities. They shared that programs are more likely to be utilized when families hear about them through schools, churches, or recommendations from other parents. They also suggested that youth spaces should involve young people directly in planning activities and offer programs that reflect youth interests and creativity.

Outreach through schools, community events, flyers, and booths was also seen as important for helping families and youth learn about available opportunities.

Identified local resources for youth to engage in as an alternative to using substances include:

- Azteca Soccer Club
- Boys and Girls Club
- Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)
- Friday Night Live
- London Nelson Community Center
- Luna y Sol Familia Center
- Mountain to Sea
- ParksRx Santa Cruz County
- Teen Centers
- The Diversity Center
- YMCA

When asked where they would first turn for help with a youth struggling with substance use, caregivers most often pointed to trusted supports in their community and schools. These included therapists, school counselors, wellness centers, community organizations, and healthcare clinics. Caregivers emphasized the importance of finding support that could guide both youth and parents in understanding substance use and responding in helpful, effective ways.

Young people in the focus group were asked where they would go first for support or advice if they, themselves, or any of their friends needed help for something related to substance us, and they indicated they would go online, or to a trusted adult or older sibling.

> “(I’d go to) Reddit because there are a lot of people on there who are asking for advice and giving advice.”
>
> *- Youth Focus Group Participant*

When asked about activities they like to do with other people outside of school in their free time, like hobbies, extracurricular activities, things that help them cope, etc., they shared that they enjoyed being outdoors in nature or being with friends. More specifically they mentioned fishing, exploring new areas, walking around town, and riding dirt bikes. Other activities included welding or doing their make-up. One person shared that they believed building their own community was better than joining one that already exists.

Youth described several challenges to participating in activities and social spaces, including not knowing what programs are available and feeling that existing activities do not match their interests or provide spaces to casually connect with others. Participants also emphasized that feeling welcomed, accepted, and able to be themselves is important, noting that concerns about fitting in, being judged, or not trusting a space can discourage youth from participating.

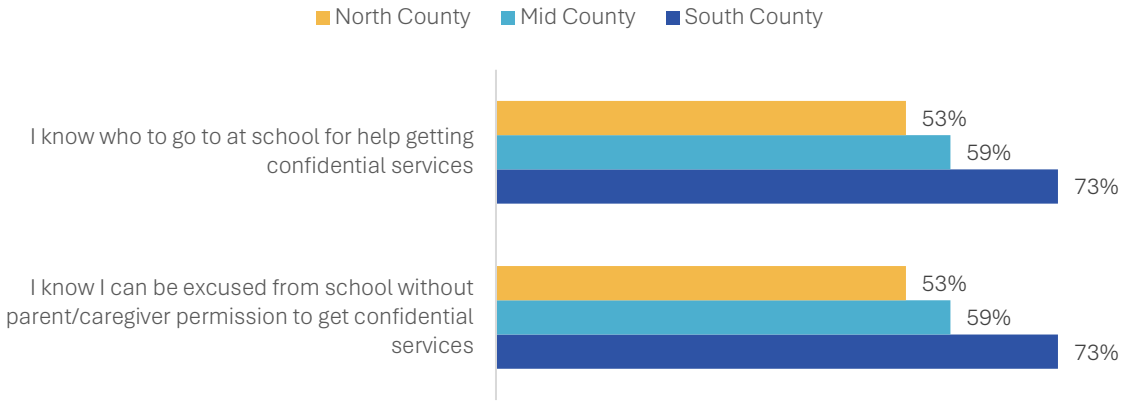
While youth, caregivers, and providers identified a variety of supportive spaces and resources available within the community, the survey data provides additional insight into young people's experiences accessing help for substance use and their awareness of available supports. California's Healthy Youth Act requires schools to provide students with information about their rights to access certain confidential health services, making youth awareness of these rights an important component of help-seeking and access to care[2]. The survey data below explore youth experiences seeking help for substance use, their knowledge of the confidential services available to them, perceived barriers to care, and the people they would turn to if they or a friend needed support.

Figure 40. Survey Participant Experiences with Receiving Help to Quit Substance Use *(Have you ever received help quitting substances?)*



N=102. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

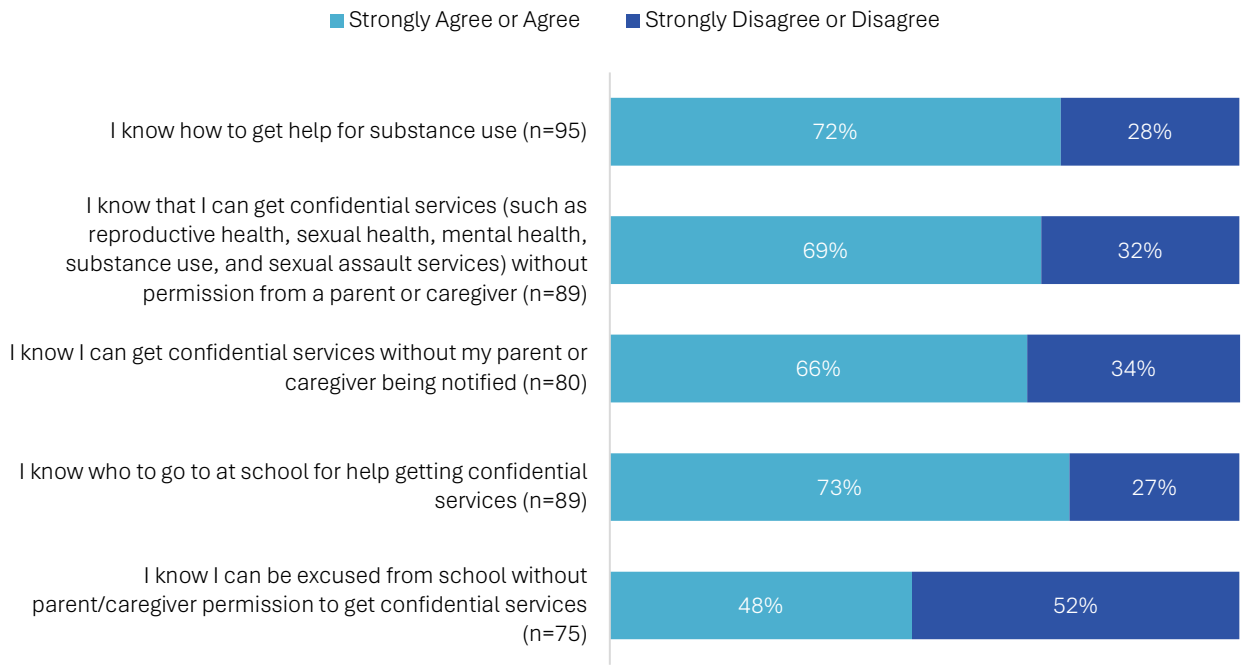
Figure 1. Survey: Getting Help (*How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?)* (Responding Agree/Strongly Agree), by County Region



North County n=45, Mid County n=22, South County n=26. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey. Note: North County includes Santa Cruz, San Lorenzo Valley, and Scotts Valley. Mid County includes Aptos, Capitola, Live Oak, and Soquel. South County includes Watsonville.

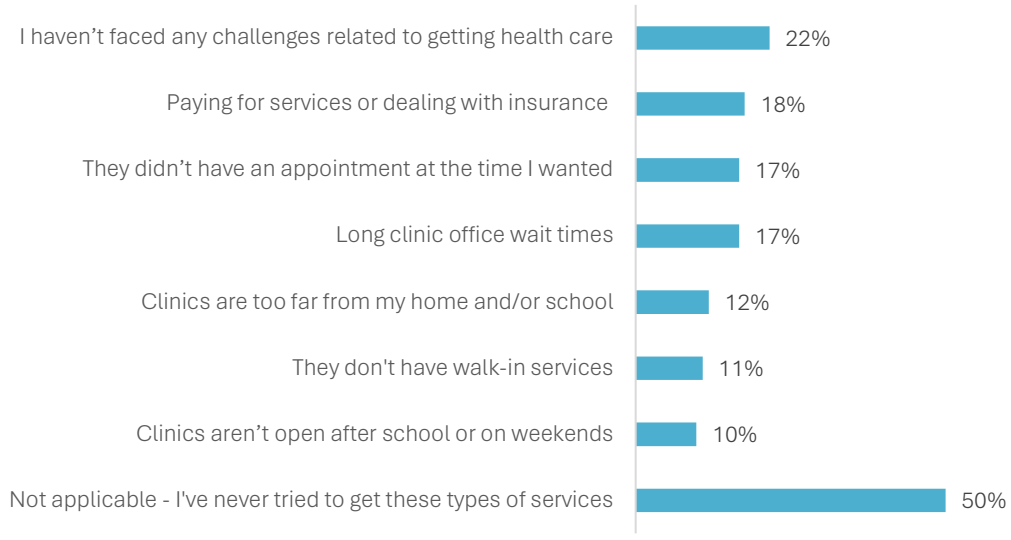
[2] California Legislature. (2025). California Education Code §§ 51930–51939 (California Healthy Youth Act). State of California. https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?sectionNum=51930&lawCode=EDC.

Figure 2. Survey: Getting Help (*How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?)*



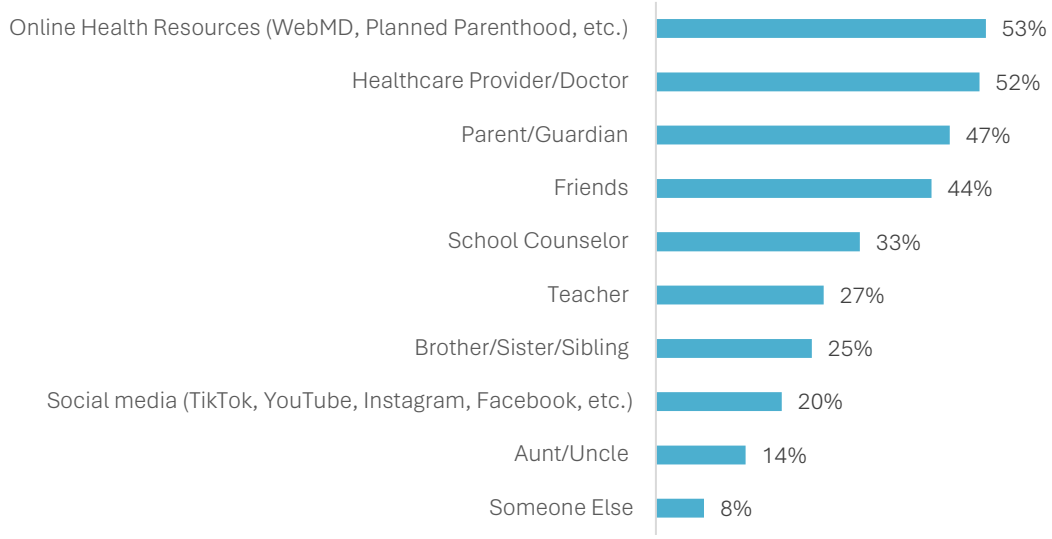
Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Figure 3. Survey: *If you have tried to get care from a clinic in the past, what challenges have you faced while trying to get confidential services?*



N=102 participants offering 158 responses. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

Figure 4. Survey: *Where would you look for support if a friend were struggling with substance use?*



N=104 participants offering 440 responses. Multiple response question. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey. 'Other' responses included: coach, social worker, Al-Anon, therapist, trusted adult, trusted adult from church community, and it depends on who in their circle is willing to help in a judgmental-free way.

Taken together, these findings suggest that many young people can identify trusted adults and sources of support, but gaps remain in awareness of available services and how to access confidential care. Because schools are often a key source of information, support, and intervention, the following section examines how local school wellness and substance use policies address prevention and student support.

SCHOOL WELLNESS POLICIES OVERVIEW

School wellness policies vary across districts and school sites in how clearly they address substance use prevention and student supports.

For the purposes of reviewing school policies, Santa Cruz County Office of Education (COE), Scotts Valley Middle School, and Pajaro Valley High School were selected to ensure representation across the county, with a goal of looking at both middle school and high school sites, traditional and non-traditional school sites, and considering both the district and site levels. The COE is responsible for the operation and oversight of both traditional school sites and alternative education programs in the county. While most schools have individual educational policies that differ from site to site, policy flows hierarchically, from the state of California, to the Santa Cruz County COE, to school districts, and finally school sites. For all three of these local examples, the wellness policies are district level policies, and were available publicly online (linked below). The table below also includes the date the policy was last updated, or when that information was unavailable, the policy adoption date.

Figure 5. School Wellness Policies Overview

School	Have a Wellness Policy?	Policy Dates & Links
County Office of Education[3] *District Level Policy*	✓	• COE's Wellness Policy • Adopted July 21, 2018
Scotts Valley Middle School[4] *Site Level Policy*	✓	• SVUSD's Wellness Policy • Last updated September 13, 2025
Pajaro Valley High School[5] *District Level Policy*	✓	• PVUSD's Wellness Policy • Last updated July 25, 2018

Student Wellness Policies were reviewed based on the inclusion of three variables; mental health support, physical health support, and substance use prevention. Across the key informant interviews, respondents consistently mentioned mental health conditions as risk factors for underage substance use. Similarly, many respondents identified physical group activities such as team sports as protective factors from underage substance use. While physical health supports in wellness policies referred to the availability of group physical activities like team and intramural sports, these policies tended to focus more on nutritional education in the context of reducing obesity and other health-related diseases. Pajaro Valley High School's Student Wellness Policy was the only one of three that mentioned substance use prevention programming. This does not necessarily prove a lack of substance use programming in the other two school environments; however, it remains unspecified in their wellness policies.

Figure 6. Comparing School Wellness Policy Components

School	Mental Health Support	Physical Health Support	Substance Use Prevention
County Office of Education	✓	✓	
Scotts Valley Middle School	✓	✓	
Pajaro Valley High School	✓	✓	✓

Related to school wellness policies, several key informant interviewees mentioned the addition of school-based wellness centers in some local middle and high schools. They were hopeful about the

[3] Santa Cruz County Board of Education. (2021, July 18). BP 5131.6: Alcohol and other drugs [Board policy]. Santa Cruz County Office of Education. https://santacruzcoe.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/BP-5131.6.pdf.

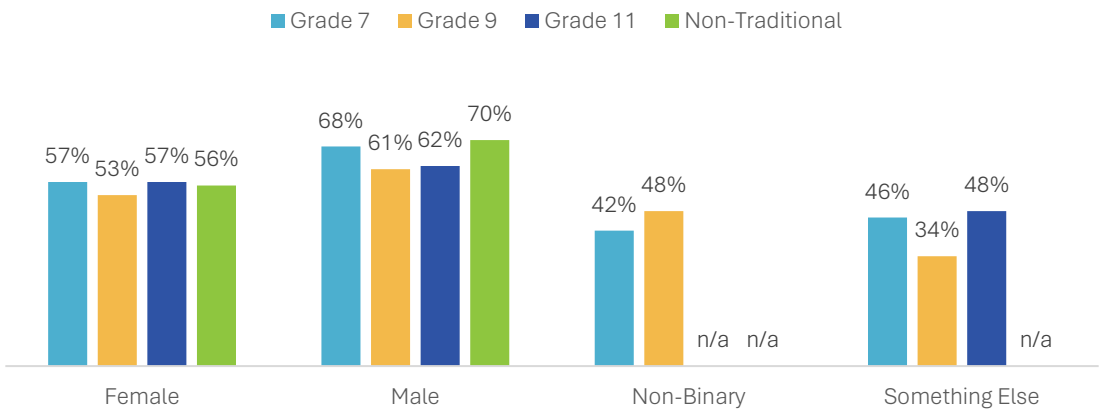
[4] Scotts Valley Unified School District. (2025, September 13). Policy 5030: Student Wellness [Board policy]. https://pvusdschoolfood.net/schools/pvusd_2109091814082813/WellnessPolicy.pdf.

[5] Pajaro Valley Unified School District. (2018, July 25). PVUSD wellness policy: BP 5030 [School district wellness policy]. https://pvusdschoolfood.net/schools/pvusd_2109091814082813/WellnessPolicy.pdf.

opportunities these spaces present as more accessible and supportive environments where youth can ask questions and seek help related to mental health and substance use. At the same time, interviewees also identified challenges related to how substance use concerns are addressed within school-based wellness models. Some participants described confusion or tension around confidentiality policies, information sharing requirements, and differences between school expectations and community-based treatment philosophies. Others expressed concern that as schools expand internal wellness services, youth may be referred less often to specialized community providers for substance use treatment and support.

Secondary data related to school connectedness and caring adult relationships provides additional insight into the broader support environments young people experience in Santa Cruz County schools. These findings from the California Health Kids Survey help contextualize the importance youth and providers placed on trusted relationships, belonging, and supportive adults throughout the primary data collection process.

Figure 7. School Engagement and Supports: Percent of Students who Report Feeling a Sense of Belonging, Safety, Support, and Connection within their School Community (e.g., School Connectedness*), by Grade and Gender^ (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25)



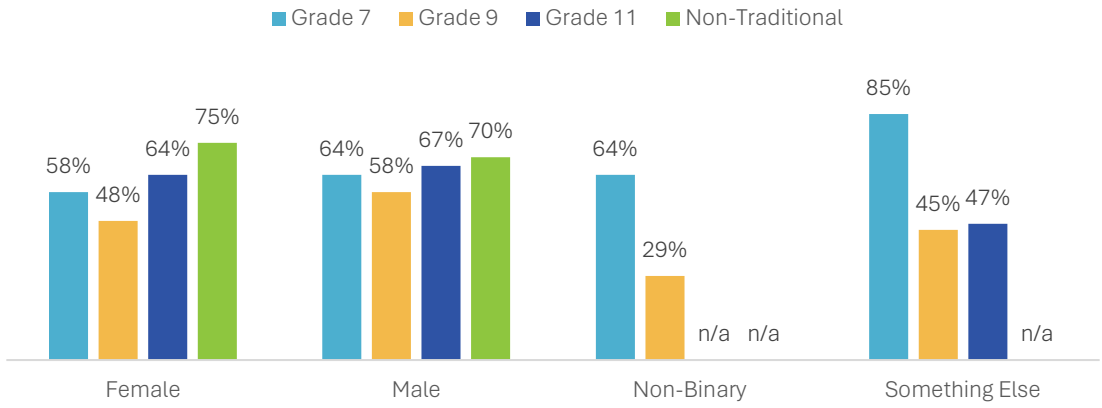
Source: Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.

Note: 'n/a' indicates data is not available due to low sample size.

* The California Healthy Kids Survey measures school connectedness using a validated scale that assesses students' sense of belonging, safety, support, and connection within their school community.

^ The California Healthy Kids Survey reports data by gender, with response options including *female*, *male*, *non-binary*, and *something else*. While *female* and *male* are commonly used to describe sex, this report retains the terminology and categories used in the original dataset for consistency with the source data.

Figure 8. School Engagement and Supports: Percent of Students who Report Having Caring Adult Relationships, by Grade and Gender^ (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25)



Source Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.
Note: 'n/a' indicates data is not available due to low sample size.
^ The California Healthy Kids Survey reports data by gender, with response options including *female*, *male*, *non-binary*, and *something else*. While *female* and *male* are commonly used to describe sex, this report retains the terminology and categories used in the original dataset for consistency with the source data.

School Substance Use Policies

This section explores how schools in Santa Cruz County are responding to youth substance use through prevention efforts, student supports, disciplinary practices, and formal substance use policies. Findings highlight that youth, caregivers, and providers often perceive school responses as inconsistent across campuses, with schools balancing both restorative and punitive approaches. This section also examines a sample of school policies across the county and how practices may shape student experiences, perceptions of support, stigma, and access to help related to substance use.

PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL SUBSTANCE USE RESPONSES

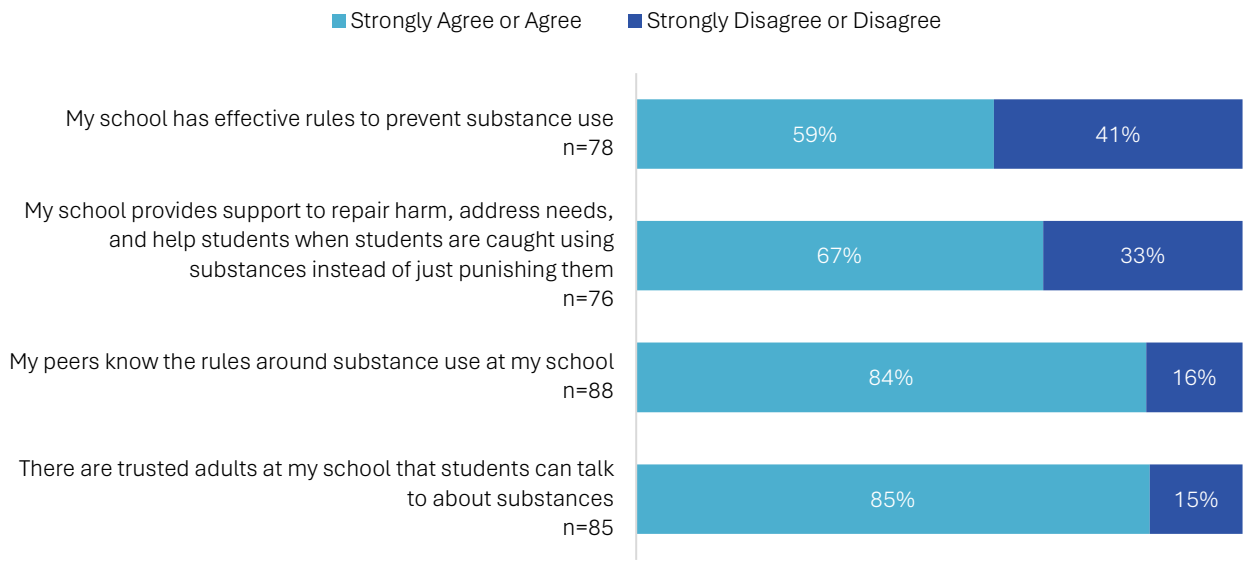
Youth and caregivers see school substance use responses as mixed and uneven, but progress in moving towards restorative approaches was reported.

Key informants described inconsistent approaches across school sites in Santa Cruz County, with policies and practices varying widely by district, campus, and even staff members. They noted that some schools are moving toward more supportive models, while others continue to rely on more traditional disciplinary responses like citing and suspending.

> The shift from the restorative to punitive approach has been more of a pendulum, it comes in waves. Punitive is easier, it's efficient, black and white. If you got caught vaping, you are suspended for three days. The restorative model requires work, beyond just what the youth is doing, but also looking at the norms and examples being set by the family system as a whole.
>
> *- Key Informant Interviewee*

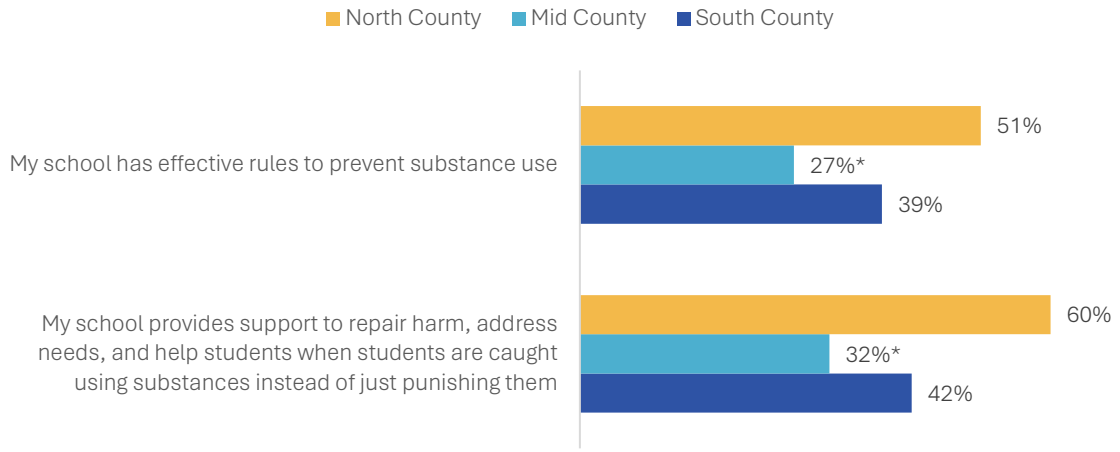
In interviews, key informants identified a number of positive efforts being implemented in schools including use of the *Stanford Reach Lab* curriculum for cannabis prevention and the *Seven Challenges* early intervention and treatment program, as well as the addition of wellness centers in schools. They also described some of the challenges schools face including limited resources and sunsetting program funding, overworked school administrators and staff, and conflicting school policies, which can lead to defaulting to more punitive responses to substance use or possession on campus. Despite these challenges most interviewees believed that schools are moving towards more supportive approaches.

Figure 9. Survey: School Substance Use Policies (*How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?*)



Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey.

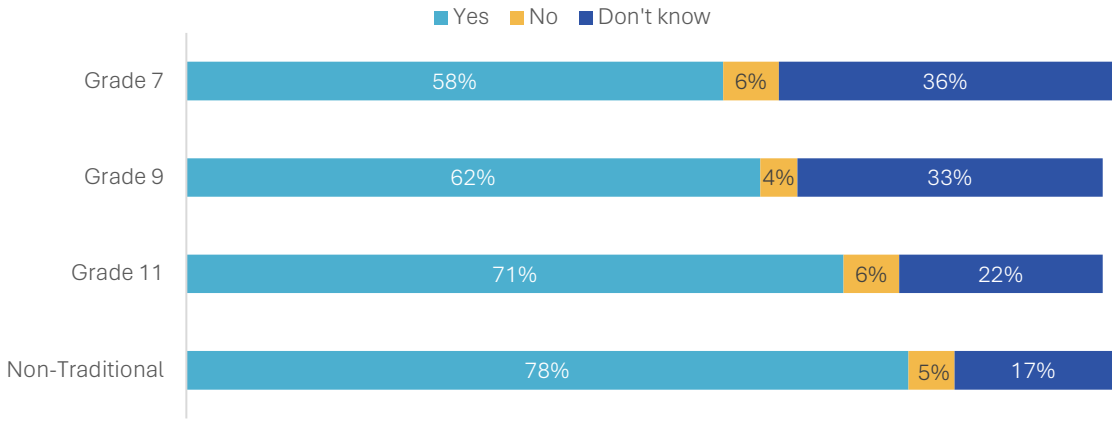
Figure 10. Survey: School Substance Use Policies (*How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?)* (Responding Agree/Strongly Agree), by County Region



North County n=45, Mid County n=22, South County n=10. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey. Note: 1) North County includes Santa Cruz, San Lorenzo Valley, and Scotts Valley. Mid County includes Aptos, Capitola, Live Oak, and Soquel. South County includes Watsonville; 2) * indicates where caution should be used when interpreting data with a small n.

Secondary data provides additional context on how substance use policies and enforcement are experienced across local schools as can be seen in the figure below.

Figure 11. School Bans Tobacco Use and Vaping (*Does your school ban tobacco use and vaping on school property and at school sponsored events?)* (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25)



Source: Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.

When asked if schools do enough to prevent substance use on campus, the youth that participated in the focus group generally felt that schools could do more to prevent substance use on campus,

noting that substances often bypass existing detection efforts. Some participants described school messaging as overly focused on abstinence and punishment, which they felt contributed to stigma toward students who use substances. Youth also shared that substance use education was more common in middle school than high school. While participants were generally aware that consequences for substance use at school existed, many were unclear about what those consequences actually were.

The same question was asked in the caregiver focus group and many caregivers said schools cannot address the issue alone and emphasized that prevention needs to start at home. While caregivers were aware of some school-based education, policies, and prevention activities, many described a disconnect between schools and families. Some noted that parents may not know what programs or resources are already available, and that school events on these topics are often not well attended.

> “It’s not that schools don’t do enough to prevent substance use, it’s that they can’t… parents need to help… the education begins in the home.”
>
> *- Caregiver Focus Group Participant*

Caregivers also shared concerns that substance use continues to be common on school campuses despite prevention efforts, especially vaping in school restrooms. Some participants felt schools should take stronger steps to enforce rules and reduce access to substances on campus, including measures such as backpack checks.

SCHOOL POLICIES ON SUBSTANCE USE

Restorative approaches are present in some school policies, but punitive practices remain common.

Substance use policies from the COE, SVMS, and PVHS, policies were reviewed for the use of punitive and restorative language and the inclusion of five key responses: counseling referrals, multi-tiered disciplinary approaches, suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. Throughout the key informant interviews, participants frequently discussed the importance of restorative versus punitive responses to substance use in schools. Punitive approaches were generally associated with suspension, expulsion, or referral to law enforcement, while restorative approaches more often emphasized referrals to counseling, behavioral health supports, and graduated disciplinary responses. While suspension or expulsion may still exist within multi-tiered policies, these consequences are less likely to occur for a first offense or solely for substance use, and more likely in situations involving distribution or repeated violations. The table below provides an overview of the substance-related responses reflected in these district and school policies.

Figure 12. Comparing School Substance Use Policy Components on a Restorative to Punitive Spectrum of Approaches

	Restorative Approaches ⟷				Punitive Approaches
School	**Counseling Referral**	**Multi-tiered Disciplinary Policy**	**Suspension**	**Expulsion**	**Referral to Law Enforcement**
COE[6]	✓	✓	✓	✓	
SVMS[7]	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
PVHS[8]	✓		✓	✓	✓

Beyond these three examples, efforts were made to obtain wellness and substance use policies from additional school districts and sites across Santa Cruz County. Although several of the policies reviewed were from elementary schools and therefore fell outside the primary age range of this assessment, many included language related to substance use prevention and student wellness. This finding is notable given that several key informant interviewees emphasized the importance of beginning prevention efforts in late elementary school (5th–6th grade), noting that youth may be more receptive to prevention messaging at younger ages and are increasingly being exposed to substances at younger ages, including during middle school.

Ways Young People Get Substances

This section explores how young people access alcohol, cannabis, vapes, prescription medications, and other substances, as well as perceptions about how easy substances are to obtain in Santa Cruz County. Findings highlight the significant role peers, social settings, family environments, social media, and online platforms play in youth access to substances, while also underscoring growing

[6] Santa Cruz County Board of Education. (2021, July 15). BP 5131.6: Alcohol and other drugs [Board policy]. Santa Cruz County Office of Education. https://santacruzcoe.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/BP-5131.6.pdf.

[7] Scotts Valley Middle School. (2024-2025). Student Handbook [Rules of Student Conduct]. Google Drive. Last updated February 25, 2025. https://hs.slvusd.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=1278819&type=d&pREC_ID=1400745. Scotts Valley Unified School District. (2021, September 13). Behavior Response Plan. Google Drive. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XMZ6Qlgrb6nuWhn6lNm8ZPUHTldgKvwr/view.

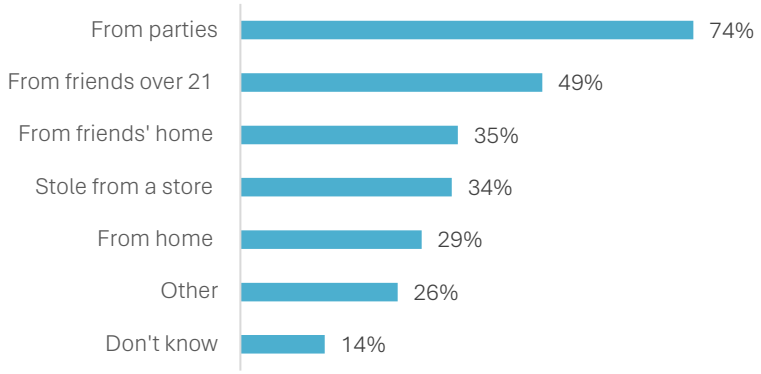
[8] Pajaro Valley Unified School District (2008, 2010, 2014, & 2019). Board Policy Manual: BP/AR 5030 (Student wellness), BP/AR 5131.6 (Alcohol and other drugs), and BP/AR 5131.62 (Tobacco) [Board policy manual]. Simbli/eBoard Solutions. https://simbli.eboardsolutions.com/Policy/PolicyListing.aspx?S=36030630&ptid=amIgTZiB9plushNjl6WXhfiOQ==&secid=9slshUHzTHxaaYMVf6zKpJz3Q==.

concerns among caregivers and providers about normalization, online sales, and the ease with which youth can obtain substances both in the community and at home.

SOURCES OF SUBSTANCES

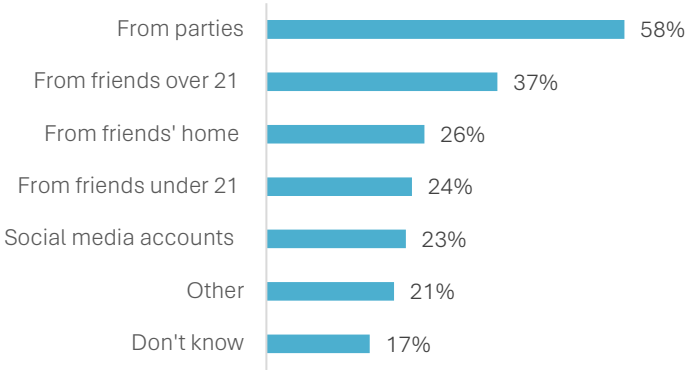
Substances are accessible through peers, social settings, and online platforms.

Figure 13. Survey: *What are the main ways you hear about young people getting alcohol?* (Top 5 Responses and Other/Don't know)



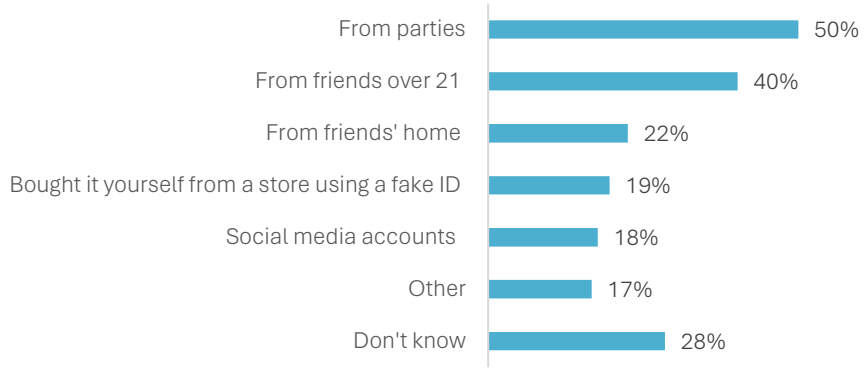
N=102 participants offering 415 responses. Multiple response question. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey. 'Other' write in responses included buying it themselves.

Figure 14. Survey: *What are the main ways you hear about young people getting vapes?* (Top 5 Responses and Other/Don't know)



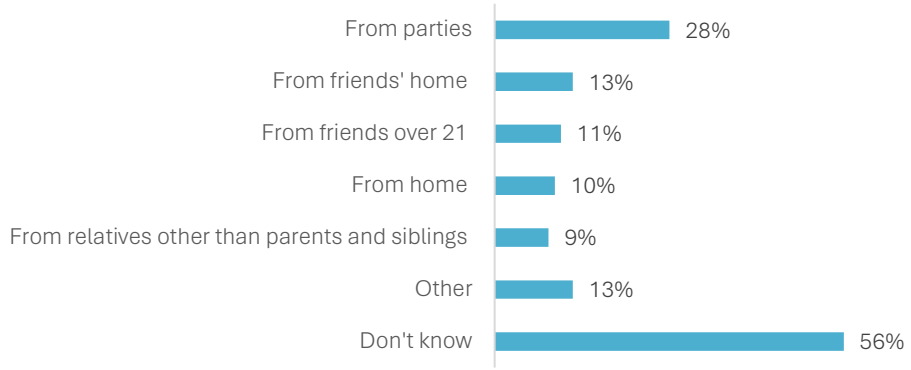
N=102 participants offering 324 responses. Multiple response question. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey. 'Other' write in responses included: most people have a plug (i.e., drug dealer) and purchase it themselves from stores.

Figure 15. Survey: *What are the main ways you hear about young people getting cannabis?* (Top 5 Responses and Other/Don't know)



N=103 participants offering 297 responses. Multiple response question. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey. 'Other' write in responses included: purchase from stores or dealers, and school.

Figure 16. Survey: *What are the main ways you hear about young people getting opioids, pills, and prescription drugs?* (Top 5 Responses and Other/Don't know)



N=103 participants offering 188 responses. Multiple response question. Source: 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth & Young Adult Substance Use Survey. 'Other' write in responses included: on the streets and plugs (i.e., drug dealers).

Caregivers described many ways youth access alcohol, drugs, and vapes, including through peers, older acquaintances, family members, social media, and online platforms. Many expressed concern about how easy it has become for youth to connect with sellers through apps and social media, including delivery-style "dead drop"[9] methods that make transactions harder for adults to monitor and potentially put youth in danger. Participants also discussed retail access, including concerns about stores selling to minors, theft, adults buying on behalf of young people (e.g., asking people off

[9] The "dead drop" style of buying drugs is a contactless transaction method that eliminates face-to-face meetings between the buyer and the seller by hiding illicit goods in public spaces for the buyer to retrieve later.

the street to buy for them), and the need for stronger enforcement and compliance checks. Caregivers noted that cannabis legalization and a local culture of public usage has contributed to greater normalization and accessibility. They also voiced concern about not knowing what is in vape pens commonly used by young people. Overall, caregivers emphasized how easy substances have become for youth to obtain through both in-person and online channels.

Caregivers also discussed how alcohol and prescription medications can be easy for youth to access within the home if they are not properly monitored or secured. Participants emphasized the importance of locking up medications, monitoring alcohol, and increasing awareness about how easily substances may be accessible in home and social settings.

Questions about where or how youth obtain substances were intentionally excluded from the youth focus groups. This approach was taken to minimize the risk of participants learning about potential access channels from one another and to keep discussions focused on attitudes, experiences, and support needs.

WHERE ARE THE SUBSTANCES COMING FROM?

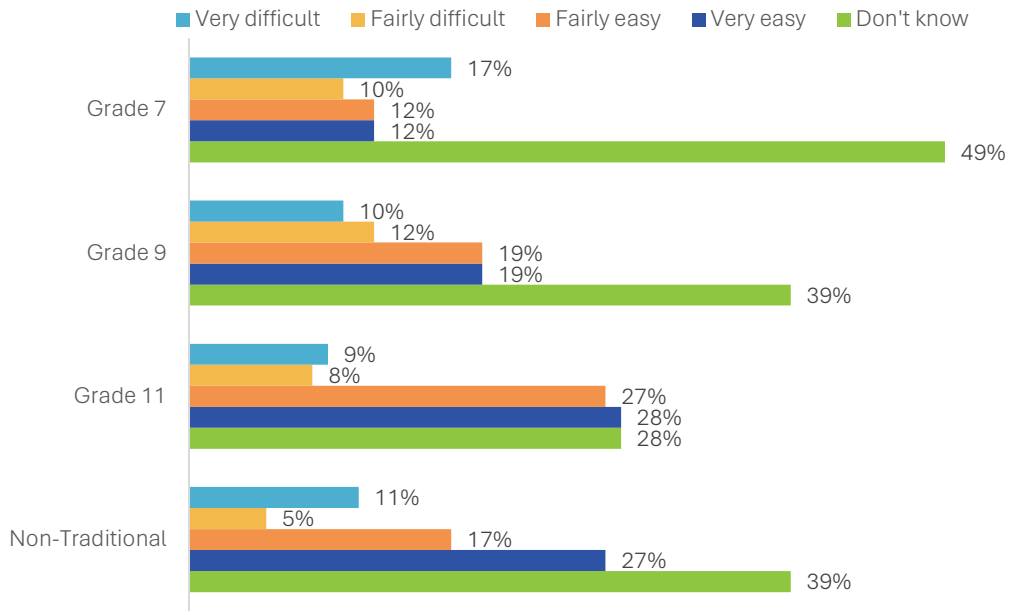
This remains an important gap in the current data. While youth, caregivers, and providers described substances being accessed through peers, older youth or adults, family members, social settings, social media, and online platforms, the study did not specifically identify how often cannabis or vape products originated from licensed dispensaries versus informal or unregulated sources. Given concerns raised about unknown vape contents, online sales, and concerning delivery methods, understanding where products are coming from locally may be an important area for future research and prevention efforts.

PERCEIVED DIFFICULTY OBTAINING SUBSTANCES

Many youth perceive alcohol and cannabis as easy to obtain, and perceived access increases as youth get older.

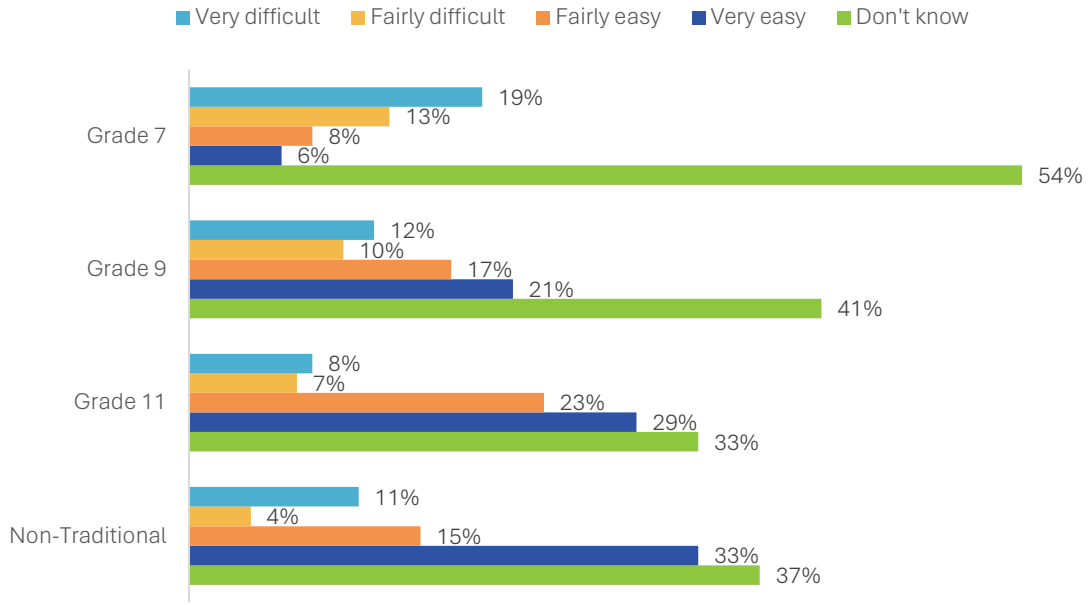
Secondary data from the California Healthy Kids Survey provides additional context about youth perceptions of substance access in Santa Cruz County. Findings suggest that many youth view alcohol and marijuana as relatively easy to obtain, with perceived access increasing as students get older. Across grade levels, alcohol and marijuana were generally viewed as easier to access than prescription drugs used to get “high,” and students in non-traditional school settings reported the greatest perceived ease of access. These findings help contextualize the concerns shared by youth, caregivers, and providers about the accessibility of substances within the community.

Figure 17. Perceived Difficulty of Obtaining Alcohol (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25)



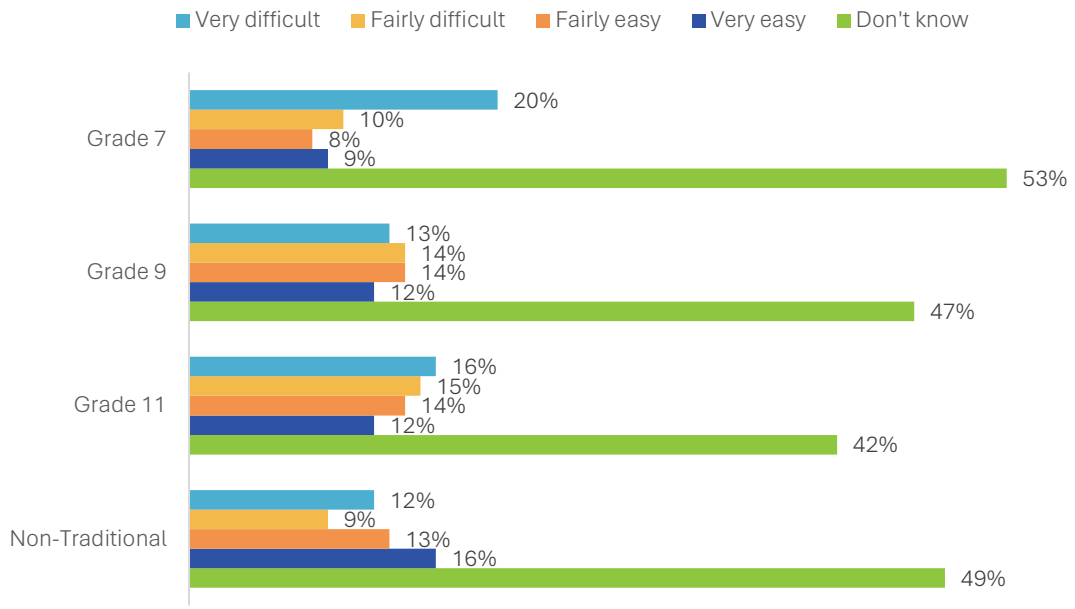
Source: Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.

Figure 18. Perceived Difficulty of Obtaining Marijuana (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25)



Source: Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.

Figure 19. Perceived Difficulty of Obtaining Prescription Drugs to Get "High", (Santa Cruz County, 2023-25)



Source: Santa Cruz County. California Healthy Kids Survey, 2023-2025: Main Report. San Francisco: WestEd for the California Department of Education. Retrieved on May 29, 2026 from https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Cruz_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf.

Key Findings

Overall, findings from this report highlight the complex social, cultural, and environmental factors shaping youth substance use in Santa Cruz County, including normalization of some substances, easy access, misinformation, stigma, and uneven access to support. At the same time, the data point to important opportunities for prevention through trusted relationships, youth-centered supports, open communication, restorative approaches, and stronger coordination across schools, families, providers, and community organizations. A full outline of the key findings are provided in the Executive Summary on page 1, and priority recommendations are provided below.

Recommendations

The findings from this report point to several opportunities for strengthening youth vaping and substance use prevention, education, and support efforts across Santa Cruz County. The recommendations below are grounded in the perspectives shared by youth, caregivers, providers, and community partners, and are intended to support more connected, youth-centered, and prevention-focused approaches moving forward.

PRIORITY AREAS FOR ACTION

1. Invest in trusted relationships, belonging, and youth-centered prevention.

Across surveys, focus groups, and interviews, youth consistently emphasized the importance of trusted adults, supportive peer relationships, and safe spaces where they feel accepted and not judged. Findings suggest prevention efforts are likely to be more effective when they focus on connection, belonging, mentorship, extracurricular engagement, and open conversations rather than fear-based or purely punitive messaging. Expanding youth-centered spaces, mentoring opportunities, wellness supports, and peer-led prevention efforts emerged as a key direction for the community.

2. Improve access to consistent, youth-friendly education and support services.

Youth, caregivers, and providers described confusion about available resources, inconsistent school responses, and barriers to accessing help, including transportation, cost, confidentiality concerns, and lack of awareness. Findings point to the need for more coordinated, accessible, and culturally responsive prevention and behavioral health services across schools and communities. Participants also emphasized the importance of making supports more inclusive and affirming, particularly for LGBTQ+ youth and young people experiencing mental health challenges.

3. Address normalization and easy access to substances through community-wide prevention efforts.

The report findings suggest that vaping, cannabis, and alcohol use are widely perceived as normalized and easily accessible among youth. Participants described substances being available through peers, homes, social settings, social media, and online platforms. Caregivers and providers also raised concerns about misinformation, unknown vape contents, and youth perceptions that some substances are low risk. Findings suggest a need for prevention strategies that address social norms, improve education around potency and harm, strengthen caregiver awareness and safe storage practices, and reduce youth access through coordinated school, family, retail, and community approaches.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

The following opportunities for action provide examples of how schools, providers, community organizations, and policymakers could begin translating these findings into practice. In addition to responding to the priority areas identified above, these strategies also reflect specific ideas and recommendations shared by youth, caregivers, providers, and community partners throughout the assessment process.

EARLY & HOLISTIC PREVENTION

- Integrate substance use prevention and support into broader youth wellness and mental health efforts, leveraging the lower stigma often associated with mental health services to increase engagement and access to support
- Provide opportunities for caregivers to learn valuable communication skills to support open conversations with youth about substance use, mental health, stress, relationships, and other challenging topics.
- Start substance use prevention earlier and continue through to graduation
  - Consider starting substance use in elementary school (5th or 6th grade) when youth are more open to messages and less likely to have exposure to substances
  - Many youth reported mainly receiving substance use prevention education in middle school noting an absence of it in high school – consider making it a more consistent component throughout high school
- Strengthen coordination and consistency across school campuses related to prevention education, wellness supports, referral pathways, and restorative responses to substance use incidents

TRUSTED INFORMATION & SUPPORT

- Employ peer-to-peer strategies for prevention efforts, leveraging the credibility that exists within youth friend groups and social circles
- Create more ways for informed, trusted adults to be available to youth
  - Ensure they are available “as needed” or “on demand” as much as possible to act as a readily available resource for reliable information as an alternative to going online
- Ensure youth have non-judgmental spaces to ask questions and get reliable information
  - Create opportunities for casual, but confidential conversations with trusted adults where youth will not be judged for asking questions or get in trouble for asking for help

- Capitalize on young people's desire to seek out information online, by developing accessible, youth-friendly digital content and online resources that provide accurate information about vaping and substances, risks, harm reduction, and local support services
- Create more readily available and easy to understand information for caregivers to use in discussing substance use with youth
  - Informational resources need to be less academic or clinical and more conversational
  - Resources need to live somewhere where caregivers can access the information easily and when they need it most

Create a campaign to better equip providers to address youth substance use with the youth and families they serve, including an up-to-date and comprehensive resource list for them to use for referral and information sharing

WELCOMING & INCLUSIVE SPACES FOR YOUTH

- Create free, low-barrier spaces where youth can safely gather, socialize, and build connection without pressure, judgment, or structured participation requirements
- Teach youth how to better discern reliable versus unreliable information, especially in the context of information being accessed online, so they are better equipped to obtain the information themselves as needed
- Consider the ways in which youth may not feel seen or welcomed – review policies, materials, forms, and youth engagement practices to ensure spaces feel inclusive and affirming for LGBTQ+ youth and youth of all identities
- Create "wellness spaces" for youth that are casual and comfortable and where they can receive private/confidential, on-demand support

Conclusion

The 2026 Santa Cruz County Youth Substance Use Spotlight provides a deeper understanding of how young people in Santa Cruz County experience, perceive, and navigate substance use within their schools, families, peer groups, and communities. Findings from surveys, focus groups, interviews, secondary data, and school policy review point to a complex landscape shaped by normalization of vaping and substance use, easy access to substances, mixed perceptions of risk and harm, and uneven access to prevention and support resources. At the same time, the findings also highlight important protective factors that can help support youth well-being, including trusted relationships, welcoming social spaces, supportive school environments, and access to caring adults and accurate information.

A consistent theme throughout the report was the importance of connection. Youth, caregivers, and providers emphasized that prevention efforts are most effective when young people feel safe, supported, included, and able to have open conversations without fear of judgment or punishment. Participants also highlighted the need for prevention and intervention approaches that are youth-centered, culturally responsive, and grounded in the realities young people are experiencing today, including social media influences, online access to substances, mental health challenges, and evolving perceptions around cannabis and vaping.

The findings suggest that addressing youth vaping and substance use locally will require a coordinated, community-wide response that extends beyond schools alone. Schools, families, healthcare providers, behavioral health systems, community organizations, and policymakers all have a role to play in strengthening prevention education, reducing stigma, expanding access to support, and creating environments where young people feel connected and supported.

Ultimately, this Spotlight is intended to serve as a tool for reflection, planning, and action. By centering youth voices alongside caregiver, provider, and community perspectives, the report offers an opportunity to better align prevention and support efforts with the lived experiences and needs of young people across Santa Cruz County.