



## **Community in Conversation Community Assessment: 2021 Findings**

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Last Updated: June 15, 2021

*“We will always have the next thing that we’re trying to combat in schools. When the next thing comes, that’s when I really appreciate Community in Crisis because they’re then there to say, ‘How can we support this school?’ . . . Most of our resources are put toward academics. We have just a little sliver for mental health and substance use. When we can get that augmented by an outside organization that is supportive, it’s incredibly helpful. I’m very appreciative of the efforts of Community in Crisis as a partner organization. . .”*

–School Administrator in the Somerset Hills

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## Introduction

The Community in Conversation community assessment of the Somerset Hills is a comprehensive mixed-methods assessment of substance use attitudes, usage, and prevailing cultural and social norms. Funded by a SAMHSA Strategic Prevention Framework – Partnerships for Success grant, a community survey will be conducted annually over the next five years. This report describes the findings of the first community assessment, which will serve as the baseline data to track changes over time.

## Key Findings

- Currently, **mental health concerns are the top priority of parents and educators.** While the link between mental health and substance use is long proven, parent and student education available in the schools is primarily mental health and resiliency focused.
- Parents are concerned about youth vaping, alcohol use, marijuana use, heroin, and prescription opioid misuse in their community, but when it comes to their own children, very few are concerned about substance use. Parents typically express concern after the average age of initiation to substances. This has implications for parent education efforts because if parents do not perceive that their child is at risk of substance use, they are less likely to seek opportunities for parent education on substance use topics.
- **A statistically significant gap exists in the perceived risk of vaping among young adults and adults over 34 years.** 64% of adults in Somerset Hills currently say vaping is ‘great risk.’ Only 33% of young adults rate vaping as ‘great risk,’ and 41% believe it is ‘moderate risk.’
- **Marijuana had the lowest reported perceived risk of any substances in Community in Conversation.** 16% of Somerset Hills adults over the age of 34 said that smoking marijuana once or twice a week was a ‘great risk,’ compared to 8% of young adults between 18 and 35 years. Young adults are significantly more likely to approve of marijuana use by high school and college students than adults over the age of 34.
- **Half (51%) of young people ages 18 to 34 years who responded to the Community in Conversation online survey used marijuana in the past year and 21% reported using marijuana daily or weekly.** 23% of the young adults aged 18 to 34 reported that ‘most’ or ‘all’ of their friends use marijuana.
- Vaping marijuana is a trend that should be monitored in future assessments.
- Heroin use and prescription opioid misuse are higher than expected in the small sample of Somerset Hills young adults. While the small sample size of young

adults (n=39) limits the generalizability of this finding, it is important to note that opioid misuse continues to be problematic in the Somerset Hills.

- A gap in perceived risk exists among young adults about using opioid painkillers to get high. More education is needed to fill these gaps.
- Disapproval for teen alcohol use is very high in the Somerset Hills. There is discordance between the low levels of approval of teenage alcohol use and the perceived high number of parents who allow their teens to attend or host parties where alcohol is being served.
- Women in the Somerset Hills reported feeling isolated from the wider community of moms. This is an opportunity to build community among moms through programming.
- Young adults and parents expressed a lack of concern about legal consequences regarding substance use.
- While acceptance that substance use disorder is a disease is high, Somerset Hills residents are less confident that treatment works. While stigma does not prevent parents from seeking help for their children when addiction issues arise, they report social isolation and fear of judgment from peers when a substance use disorder is identified. The willingness to seek treatment for their children does not always extend to themselves or their spouses.

## Methodology

### Community in Conversation Online Community Survey

The project team developed a Somerset Hills community survey to determine the current social norms, attitudes, and levels of youth substance use in the Somerset Hills, as well as the levels of protective factors and current needs for substance use prevention. The survey was conducted online in January and February of 2021. People were eligible to complete the survey if they lived in the Somerset Hills. The analysis further defined eligibility as 18 years old or older.

The Community in Conversation team disseminated invitations to take the online survey through the social media and communication networks of Community in Crisis and their partners, such as faith communities, schools, and other nonprofits and local Facebook groups. These efforts yielded a convenience sample of 302 complete and eligible responses. The sample was not perfectly reflective of the Somerset Hills community; the sample underrepresents residents of Bedminster and overrepresents Bernardsville. Compared to 2019 American Community Survey estimates, this sample overrepresents people between the ages of 35 and 64 years and underrepresents older people. Thirty-nine (13%) respondents fell into the young people category, which falls slightly below the American Community Survey estimate. (United States Census Bureau, 2020) This population is important to Community in Crisis because their prevention efforts target young people and the questionnaire contained skip logic that delivered a sequence of questions about the frequency of substance use only to young people. Parents of children ages 5 to 21 years received another special sequence of questions. Two-thirds of respondents (n=191, 63%) qualified as parents eligible to respond to a series of questions about parental concerns.

The sample collected via the community survey markedly overrepresents women. 65% of respondents were women, compared to about half of the population. By race, the sample underrepresents White, Black or African American, and Asian people, despite efforts to reach Asian Indian respondents. Some of the racial underrepresentation was addressed during the qualitative data collection. The sample underreports people at lower household income levels. All demographic questions were located at the end of the questionnaire and 80-82% of respondents completed those questions. (Selected demographic breakdown and comparison to American Community Survey estimates are included in the appendix.)

### Online Questionnaire for Teachers

Due to time constraints on teachers and school staff and the preferences of school administrators, teachers were not interviewed for the community assessment. Instead, a

teacher-specific short questionnaire was distributed to Physical Education and Health teachers in one middle school and two local public high schools.

Sixteen responses were generated from the Google Form questionnaire.

- Nine teachers from two community high schools (grades 9-12)
- Six teachers from a community middle school (grades 6-8)
- One clergy member who works with youth

### Listening Session and Key Informant Interviews

To include in-depth community perspectives, the project team hosted virtual listening sessions with Somerset Hills parents and interviews with community leaders. The team recruited participants using Community in Crisis staff's personal and professional contacts, outreach to specific groups of interest, and referrals from participants. The inclusion criteria included adults living in or serving the Somerset Hills community with special expertise in substance use, parenting, or law or had expertise in Somerset Hill's South Asian or Hispanic communities. The team hosted 4 virtual listening sessions and 22 virtual interviews from January to March 2021, at which point thematic saturation had been reached. Meetings were one hour in length and semi-structured. Each meeting had a predetermined list of about 5 guiding questions based on the objective of the meeting. Special efforts were made to recruit participants from the Asian and Indian communities. Descriptions of participants and themes for each interview are listed in the appendix.

### Research Questions

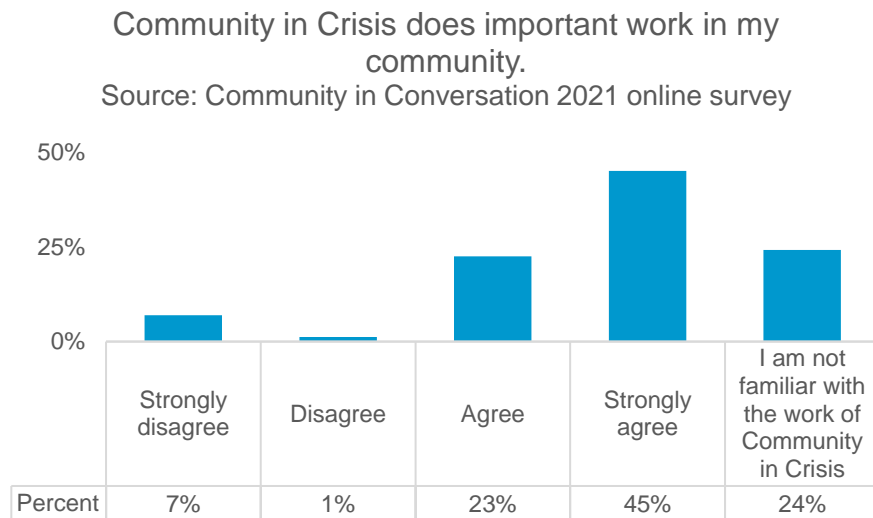
- What is the culture of substance use among residents of Somerset Hills?
  - What are the prevailing cultural norms in Somerset Hills around substance use?
  - What are residents' attitudes towards youth substance use?
- What are the current levels of substance usage among young adults?
  - Develop a baseline measure of the root causes/core measures
    - frequency of past-year use
    - perception of risk/harm
- What community and family-level protective factors exist in Somerset Hills?
- What programs and services do youth and their parents need in Somerset Hills to prevent or delay the initiation of substance use?

This evaluation will focus mainly on four substances:

1. Vaping of nicotine
2. Alcohol
3. Marijuana
4. Opioids – prescriptions and heroin

## Limitations

- All data collection was conducted in English. For the next iteration of this assessment, data should be collected in Spanish and possibly Mam.
- Selection bias is possible in the Community in Conversation sample. Respondents were likely to complete a survey from a substance use prevention nonprofit if they had existing feelings about substance use or substance nonuse. Also, respondents to the project were more likely to be active members of their communities. Efforts to measure the level of familiarity or support of Community in Crisis were made in the online survey. Almost a third of respondents (32%) indicated that they are either not supporters of Community in Crisis (indicating that they do not think Community in Crisis does important work in their community) or they are unfamiliar with Community in Crisis.



- The sample size of young adults was 39 people. This sample size is too small to generalize to the broader population of young adults in the Somerset Hills.
- Due to the limitations associated with pandemic social distancing measures, local schools were unable to collect substance usage, attitudes, and risk perception data from middle school and high school students as planned during the 2020-2021 school year. This survey, which takes place every other year, is called the Pride survey. Data from the 2018-2019 school year are used to describe youth substance use prevalence; these will be updated upon the release of new Pride data.



## The Somerset Hills Description

The Somerset Hills, New Jersey, is the northernmost section of Somerset County and includes the municipalities of Bedminster, Bernardsville, Bernards Township (Basking Ridge), Far Hills, and Peapack & Gladstone. The Somerset Hills is steeped in tradition and history. George Washington slept in many of the homes in the Somerset Hills during the Revolutionary War era. In the late 19th century, the Somerset Hills was a community of country homes for affluent city-dwellers looking for a getaway. A local official of Bernardsville described her town as split between “*a mountain community and the village community. A lot of the homes on the mountain were big names from New York who spent their weekends out here. And the village were people who worked on the estates. Over the years what we’ve seen is it getting a lot more equal. Less of that the mountain versus the village.*”

The growth of the pharmaceutical and technology industries in the region and train and road development shifted the Somerset Hills into a suburban community. In Bernards Township the population grew exponentially from 1940 until 2010. (Population Trends in the Somerset Hills, n.d.) This growth was due in large part to the 1,800-acre housing development called The Hills Development of Bedminster and Bernards Township that added 4,728 single-family homes to the Somerset Hills. The Hills offered a range of housing options, including more affordable housing options than typically available in the Somerset Hills.

As of 2019, the Somerset Hills was 73% White, 14% Asian, and 9% Hispanic. The age distribution reflects a community of families with school-aged children who leave the Somerset Hills after high school. Most adults in the Somerset Hills are highly educated. 72% of adults over the age of 25 have a bachelor’s degree or higher, while only 3% of residents do not have a high school diploma. (United States Census Bureau, 2020) The schools in the Somerset Hills are a big draw for families. Ridge High School is ranked 25<sup>th</sup> in the state and Bernards High is 51<sup>st</sup> out of 406 schools ranked in New Jersey, according to US News & World Report. (U.S. News and World Report, 2020)

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*“I’ve been really fortunate living in Basking Ridge. It’s a really nice area, a safe community. Overall, academically it really helped... In college, every freshman had to take an academic writing course. After my time at Ridge, I was sitting there thinking, ‘This is a waste of time. I’ve been doing this that past 3 years.’ It helped in a lot of aspects through college. Ridge shaped me to perform.”*

– Somerset Hills young adult

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The Somerset Hills is a beautiful part of the state and includes part of the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, equestrian facilities that host prestigious events, such as “The Hunt,” and is home to several country clubs, including Trump National Golf Club in Bedminster. As of 2019, Somerset County had the highest per capita personal income of any county in New Jersey and a lower unadjusted unemployment rate than the rest of the state at 6.6%. (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2019) However, this is not to say that poverty does not exist in the area. 4% of residents live in poverty, but the United Way’s ALICE project has determined that almost a quarter (24%) of Somerset County residents struggled to meet their bare minimum expenses in 2018. (United Way of Northern New Jersey, 2018)

### Immigrant Communities in the Somerset Hills

The Somerset Hills is home to a Paraguayan community that came to the Somerset Hills 25 to 30 years ago looking for a better life. Locals describe Italian pockets of Bernardsville shifting into Paraguayan areas, as more Paraguayan families immigrated and started working in the mansions on the mountain. Over the decades, those families started businesses and raised children who went to college or worked in the family business.

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*“The majority of kids aren’t dreaming of being landscapers when they grow up - running in their parents’ shoes. My dad used to take us to work so that we would see the hardship of it so that we grew up either we were going to want to do it for the rest of our lives and we should start our own business, or we weren’t going to want to do it at all. That’s what it came down to - I don’t want to do landscaping ever again! I’m going to work my butt off hopefully so I can pay someone else to do it.”*

*– Young adult whose parents immigrated from Paraguay*

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Typically, Paraguayans came to the U.S. with a high school education. Paraguayans typically speak Spanish as their first language, and many speak English. Guarani is a national language of Paraguay and speaking it to other Paraguayans is a source of pride for them. The Paraguayan community is well integrated into the larger Somerset Hills community.

In Peapack and the center of Bernardsville around the Catholic chapel, there are communities of recent immigrants from Guatemala who came to the U.S. for different reasons. Rather than choosing to come to the United States for opportunity, like the Paraguayans, the Guatemalan immigrants were fleeing impoverished and dangerous situations at home. For many years, Mexican drug cartels persuaded indigenous Mam

farmers in the western highlands of Guatemala to replace their crops with poppies to make heroin. The poppies brought in more income to the farmer than the crops, but when, funded by the U.S. government, the Guatemalan government eradicated the poppy fields in 2018, the farmers were left with nothing. These indigenous communities live in extreme poverty – 79% live on less than \$5.50 a day and 40% live on less than \$1.90 per day. (Gonzalez, 2019) While these recently immigrated families in the Somerset Hills look impoverished to our American eyes, they are often living in better conditions than they were in their native Guatemala.

Some of these immigrants speak only Mam, a language that is derived from the Mayan language, and do not speak any Spanish. This creates a linguistic challenge in accessing services and navigating American systems. Some men have a few years of education where they learned some Spanish, but more women are likely to have no schooling at all.

When new immigrants from Guatemala come to Somerset Hills schools, they are put into ESL classes. But the schooling they received in their home country is at a level far below what is expected in the high-achieving Somerset Hills schools. Their parents, uneducated themselves, are focused on providing food, shelter, and a source of stable income for their families. The pandemic put economic pressure on these families who were sometimes working in the informal economy. *“With the pandemic, in particular, we are aware of kids who just stop going to school. One because they are new to the educational system. Probably they lack the basic technology skills to deal with distant learning. Third, probably they don’t have the financial support that they need to stay at home and all. Their parents lose their job, or whoever they are staying with lose their jobs, so they have to support the house and they have to go and work.” - Somerset Hills School Staff*

According to faith leaders who serve Latino families in the Somerset Hills, alcohol use is high among men. Often their work is seasonal, so during the off months of November to March, they will drink more. While the women will sometimes complain about their husbands’ drinking, it is accepted as a part of life and the machismo in their culture.

Around the same time the Paraguayans came to the Somerset Hills, highly educated workers immigrated from India. These families value education and expect their children to excel at school. *“As Indians, academics are very important to us. More than sports and sometimes more important than creativity. You have to finish your bachelor’s and you have to be doing well. We do sometimes concentrate way too much on academics.” - Indian Immigrant Mom in Somerset Hills.* Indian parents admitted that these high expectations can lead to stress for their kids. In addition to the academic pressure, Indian parents want their children to understand the Indian culture, including holidays and language.

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*“I think there is extra stress because there is this expectation that you need to go to the best school and achieve the absolute best you are capable of and maybe a little beyond. Because there’s pressure to excel in academics and extracurriculars nowadays – have this idea of perfection of culturally you’re very well balanced. Where there is Indian-ness at home, and outside you get along with your peers and the outside world is very comfortable for you. . . Indian parents put pressure on the kids that they shouldn’t be dating in their high school years, you should do all that in college. Right now we need to focus on what we need to focus on. So, there is all of that stress. I think we do have a little pressure because of the cultural issues.”*

*- Indian Immigrant Mom in Somerset Hills.*

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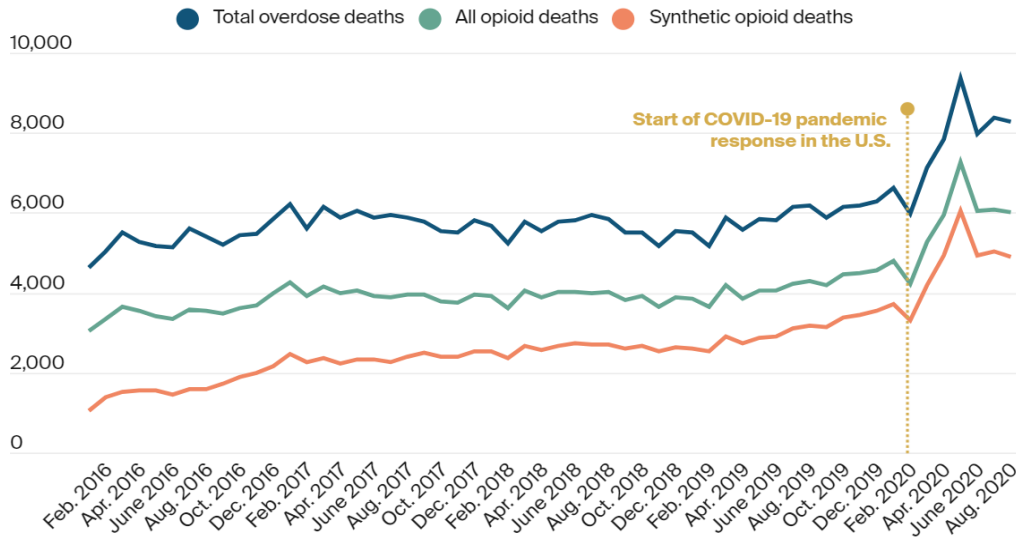
Indian parents reported that their large support networks offset much of the stress that can come with high expectations. *“Most Indians I know, for mental incidents, Indians have a lot of people around. We have a big community, extended family, friends. I know some people could use a lot of help if they’re by themselves and have things going on at home.”* - Indian Immigrant Mom in Somerset Hills. While some of the Indian parents involved in Community in Conversation reported willingness to seek mental health help when their children needed it, another Indian parent described some resistance: *“In India, we leaned on family support. Therapy was for completely gone cases, like when you’re mentally not balanced or can’t function, then you seek help outside of the home. Otherwise, the family can take care of all your needs. Having grown up with that, I think there is still resistance to therapy for a lot of kids. It’s changing but it’s slow change in the whole mindset.”*

### **COVID-19 Pandemic**

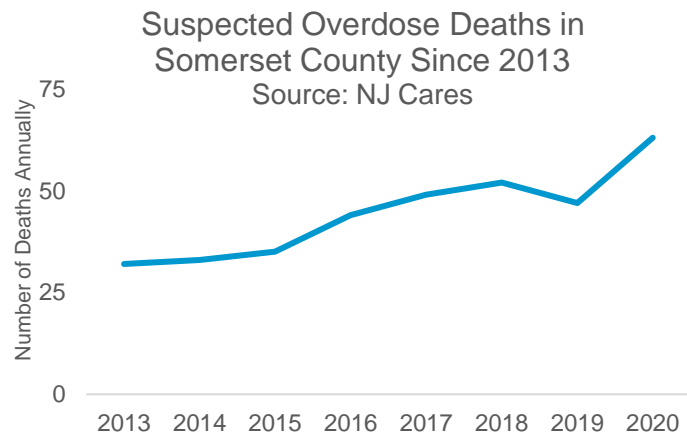
The COVID-19 pandemic has affected every part of the globe, including the Somerset Hills. As of May 10, 2021, over half a million Americans have died of COVID-19 and over 32 million have been infected. New Jersey has the most deaths per capita than any other state in the country. Somerset County has experienced a COVID rate of 9,012 cases per 100,000 residents and 253 deaths per 100,000 residents. (The Washington Post, 2020) This death rate is higher than the national average of 177.56. (Johns Hopkins University, 2021)

The global pandemic resulted in a spike in overdose deaths nationally. Between September 2019 and August 2020, researchers estimate 88,295 deaths, a record high that is almost 19,000 more deaths (27%) than the prior 12-month period. (Baumgartner & Radley, 2021)

**Monthly drug overdose deaths**



According to New Jersey Cares, suspected overdose deaths in Somerset County increased by 34% in 2020, compared to 2019. Naloxone administrations also increased by 19%, although naloxone is likely undercounted. The deployment of naloxone to laypeople has avoided many overdose fatalities and thus increased non-fatal overdose counts. A large and unspecified number of bystander naloxone rescues are not recorded in official data if emergency services are not called. The number of opioid prescriptions dispensed county-wide continues to trend downward. (New Jersey Coordinator of Addiction Response and Enforcement Strategies (NJ CARES))



Among youth, substance use levels have remained unmeasured in the Somerset Hills in the past year. The Pride and the Student Stressors surveys are the most comprehensive measures of student mental health and substance use in the Somerset Hills. Due to schools have not been meeting in person, neither of these surveys has been conducted since the 2018-2019 school year.

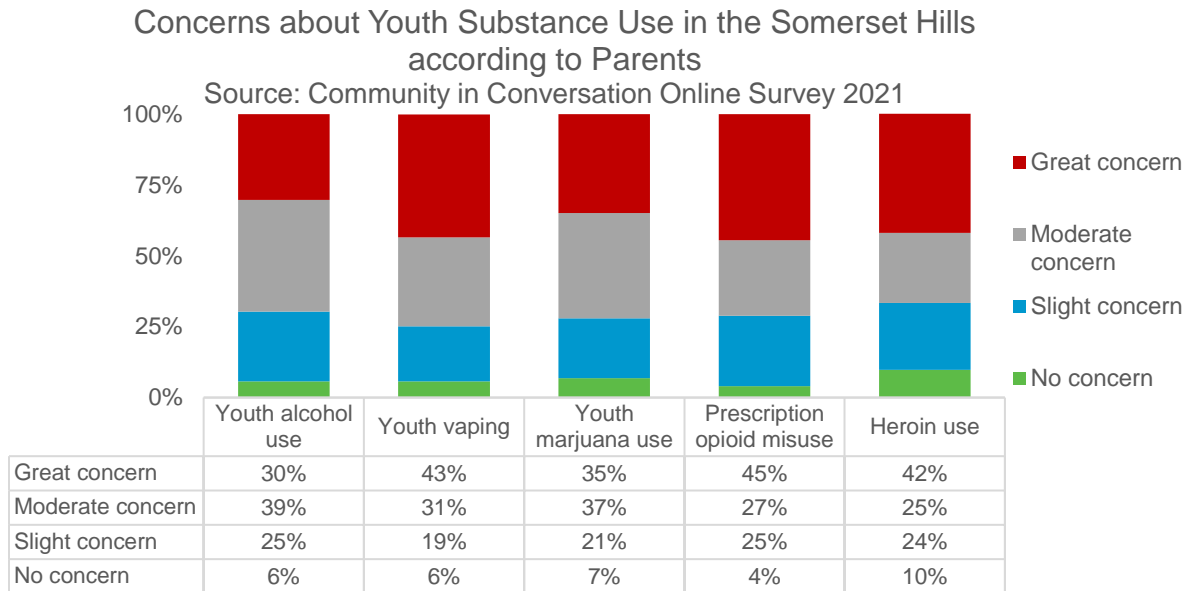
Teachers and school administrators in the Somerset Hills described feeling disconnected from the experiences of youth in the past year. One school administrator described the school counselors' attempts to reach students during remote school. *"It's not as easy to get a hold of people. You can't just walk into their office, you have to set an appointment, then log on. It's harder. So that connection is a little less. Our counselors do a lot of outreach, especially if students are struggling academically. If the student and parents don't pick up the phone calls, you have no accountability."*

Before the global pandemic closed school buildings and moved students to remote learning, local school district totals of suicide, violence, and child abuse reports as of March 2020 were down by almost 50% compared to the prior year. At a high school in the Somerset Hills, there were 18 suicide interventions, compared to 33 and 31 the two years prior. At a middle school, there were 12 suicide interventions by March, compared to 23 and 25 the two years prior. (Smith, et al., 2021)

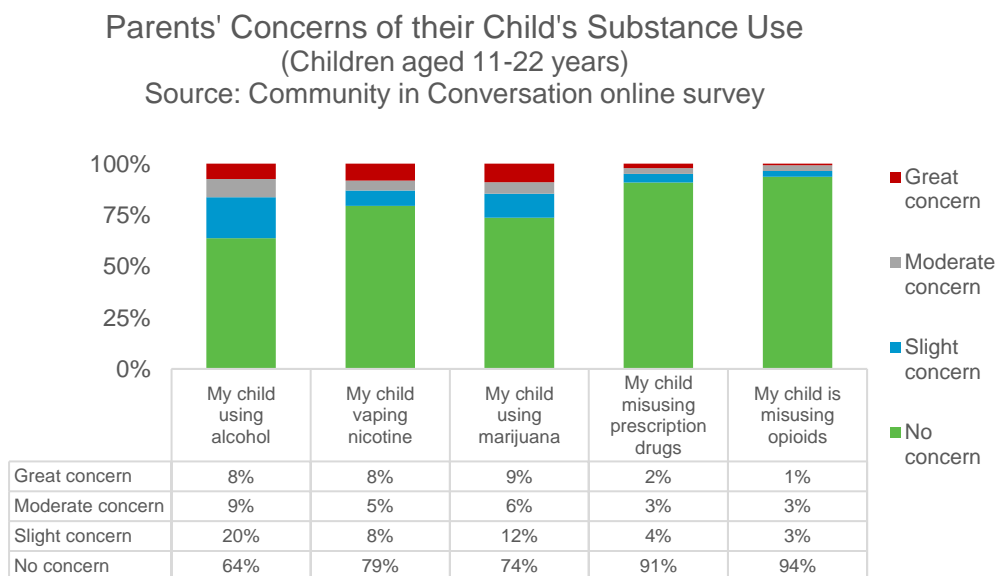
# Concerns of Residents of the Somerset Hills

## Youth Substance Use

The Community in Conversation online survey measured the level of community members' concerns about youth substance use in the Somerset Hills. The substances of great concern were prescription opioid misuse, youth vaping, and heroin, and other illicit opioid use.



When asked about their own child, parents reported much lower levels of concerns about substance use. The majority of parents with a child between the ages of 11- and 22-year-olds reported no concerns about their child using substances.

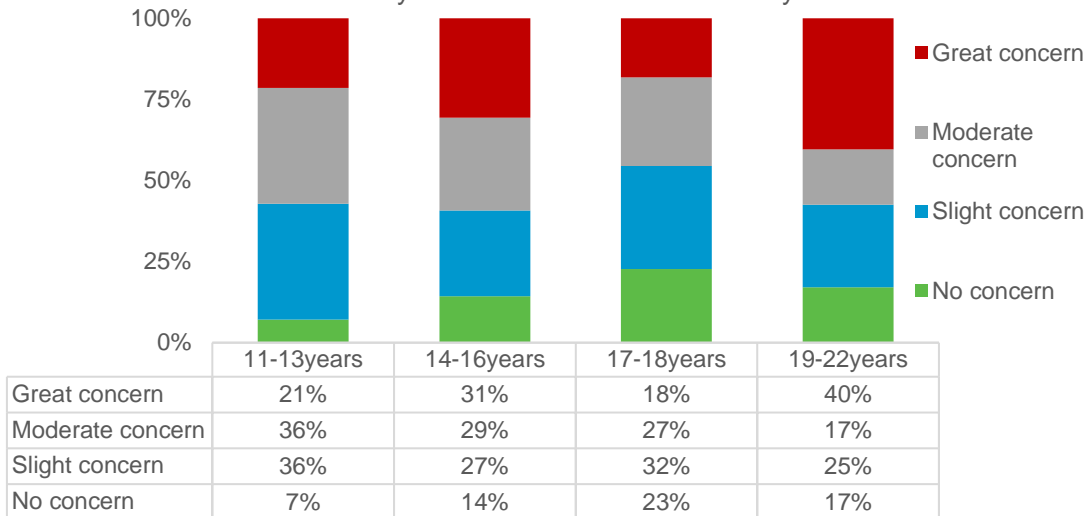


## Mental Health

Most parents who responded to the Community in Conversation online survey were concerned about their child's stress and anxiety. Parents of 19- to 22-year-olds expressed great concern most often, followed by parents of 14- to 16-year-olds.

Parents' Concerns about their Child's Anxiety and Stress by the Age of the Child

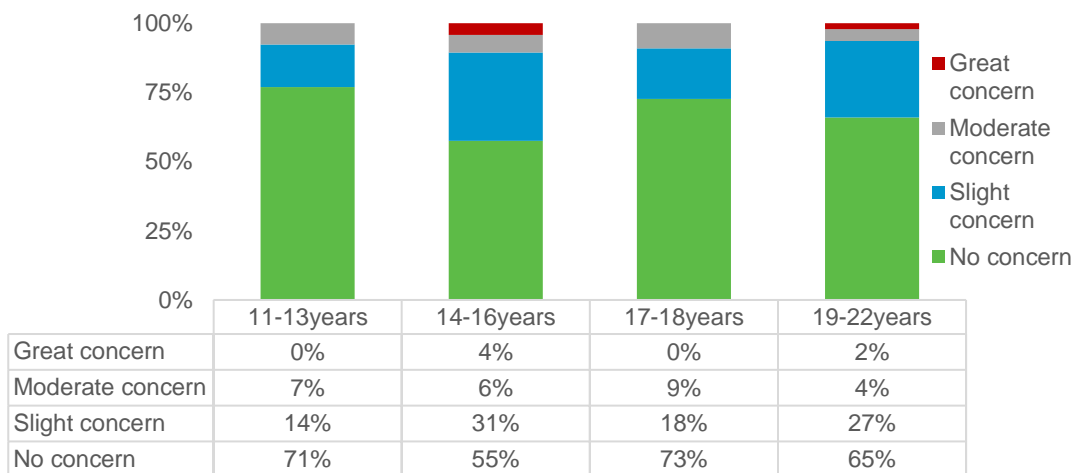
Source: Community in Conversation Online Survey 2021



Parents were less concerned about their child dying by suicide, but there were a few parents of 14- to 16-year-olds and 19- to 22-year-olds who were greatly concerned. In 2019, 6% of sophomores and 4% of seniors had thought about dying by suicide 'often' or 'a lot.' (Pride Surveys, 2019)

Parents' Concerns about their Child Dying by Suicide

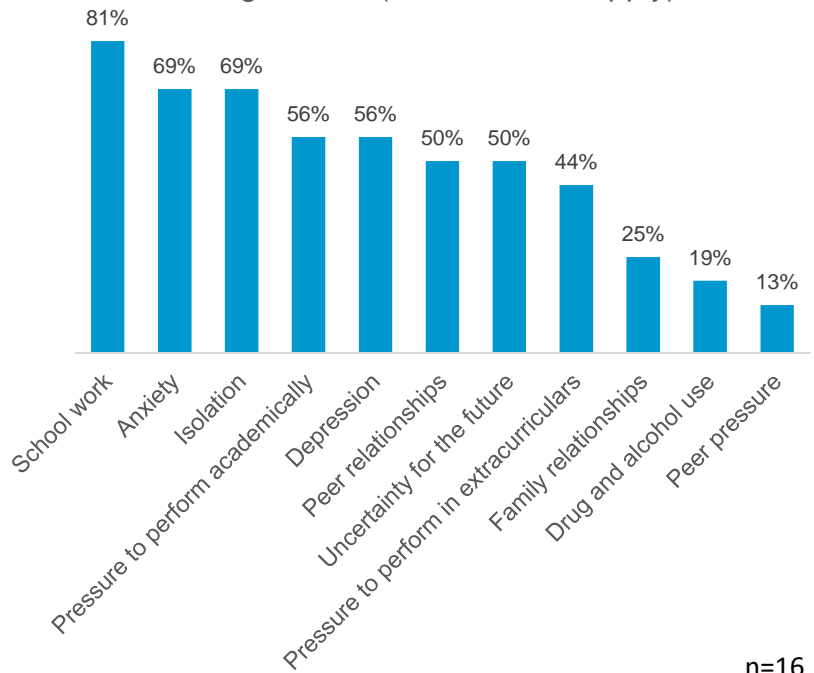
Source: Community in Conversation Online Survey 2021





Mental health concerns are at the forefront of teachers' minds. More than half of the teachers reported students struggling with school work (81%), anxiety (69%), isolation (69%), pressure to perform academically (56%), and depression (56%). Half of the teachers reported their students struggling with peer relationships (50%), uncertainty for the future (50%), and pressure to perform in sports and arts extracurriculars (44%).

What do you see your students struggling with right now? (Select all that apply)

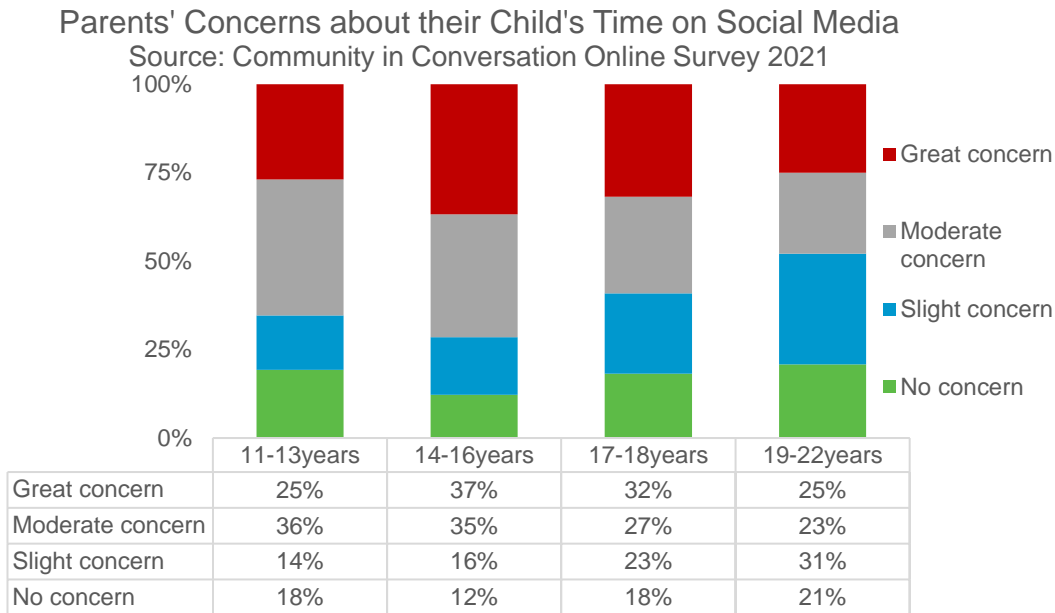


Local school counselors reported that since March 2020, middle schoolers have reported increased loneliness, increased social media use, and drawing closer to close friends and their family. Middle schoolers adapted to the technology required for remote schooling quickly but also reported feeling Zoom fatigue, feeling disengaged from school, and struggling with time management and organization. High schoolers experienced similar feelings of disconnection from their teachers and peers, and levels of engagement in classes dropped. School counselors reported that high schoolers were open to accessing virtual mental health support and learning self-care activities. While some students struggled to cope with the stress of remote learning, others felt successful and built resiliency in remote school. High school students have become more aware of mental health warning signs in themselves and their peers and they have been willing to bring friends to the school counselor for help when they were concerned. (Smith, et al., 2021)

There is a clear link between substance use and mental health in the Somerset Hills. According to the 2019 Pride survey, students who use alcohol or marijuana were more likely to report thoughts of suicide and threatening or harmful behaviors. While the number of students using cocaine was low, those who did were 3x more likely to have thoughts of suicide. (Pride Surveys, 2019) As students struggle with mental health, adults must watch for signs of substance use.

## Technology

60% of parents are moderately or greatly concerned about the amount of time their children spend on social media. Parents of 14- to 16-year-olds expressed the most concern about their child's social media exposure.



The influence of technology was a common theme in listening sessions with parents. Parents frequently compared how they were raised without technology to how their children are being raised, and struggle with parenting with the influence of technology, especially social media.

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*“I’ve made some wonderful, lifelong friends here. I can’t say the same for my kids though. They tell me all the time that a lot of the kids are phony here. With Instagram - nobody’s real. That makes me sad – we didn’t grow up that way with all the technology. They’re learning to navigate that and still be true to themselves.”*

- Mom in the Somerset Hills

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The addition of school being dependent on a screen has brought the issue of screen time to the forefront of parents' minds. *“I see people struggling to manage, particularly younger children. To have them in front of the computer doing anything from kindergarten to 5th grade and needing a ton of support for that. For a lot of kids, you*

*just can't be told to sit in front of a computer for an entire day and do your schooling that way. That's just not how humans are.” – Faith leader in the Somerset Hills*

## Substance Use

### Vaping

#### Prevalence

Vaping was reported by parents and school and local administrators as a tremendous problem before the pandemic. Schools and parents reported students vaping in school bathrooms during school hours before the pandemic. Due to social distancing measures, school bathrooms have been restricted to one student at a time, so the schools are not seeing vaping in the school buildings at the same levels they were last year. 75% of the teachers in the Somerset Hills surveyed reported hearing students talking about vaping.

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*“My son is on the <high school> basketball team - they had just had tryouts - the upperclassmen were showing up at practice winded. They would joke to my son and say ‘I just vaped. I can barely get through practice.’ They’re doing it. They can push through it. I don’t know. I thought athletics would be a deterrent.”*

*– Parent in the Somerset Hills*

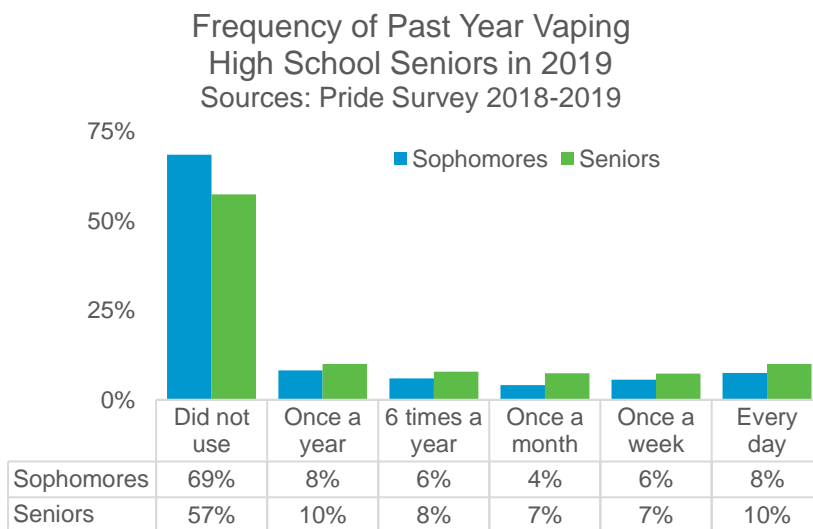
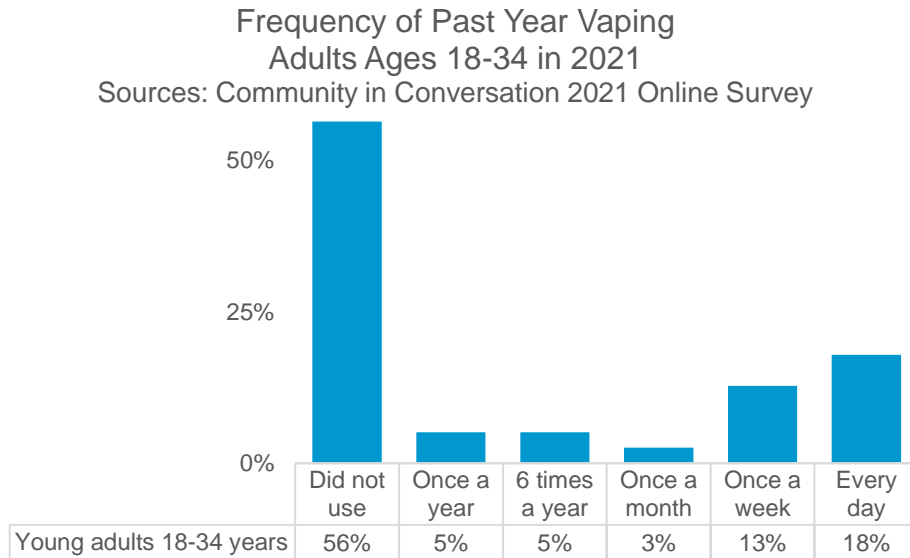
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Nationwide, the alarmingly rapid rise in teen vaping seen in 2018 and 2019 leveled off in 2020, although the rates remain high. (Johnston, et al., 2020) In 2016, 16% of sophomores and 27% of seniors in the Somerset Hills reported vaping tobacco in the past 30-days. (Harlow, Drug and Alcohol Use Among Bernards Township School District Students 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th Grades 2016-2017, 2016) In 2018, this had increased to 26% of sophomores 29% of seniors. When asked about past year use, 32% of high school sophomores and 43% high school seniors reported vaping in 2019. (Pride Surveys, 2019)

A local law enforcement officer noticed that they are “*starting to see vaping earlier – 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> graders, occasionally 6<sup>th</sup> graders.*” Young adults in the Somerset Hills who were interviewed described vaping as outdated or a fading trend, using terms including “*sketchy*” and “*weird*.” Nationally, the prevalence of past-year vaping decreases with age, peaking at 32-35% among those aged 18 to 22 years. (Schulenberg, et al., 2020)

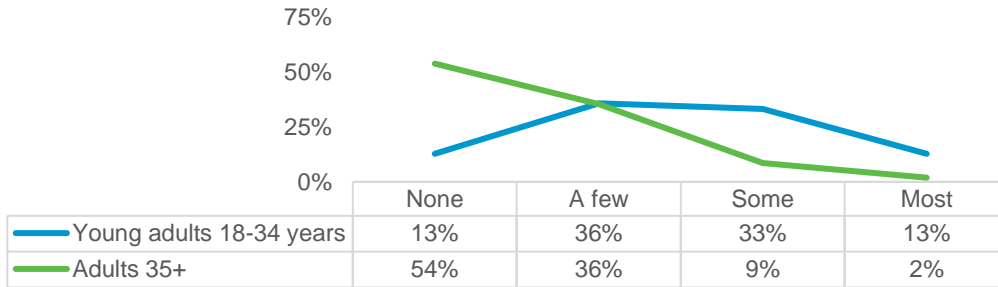
In Somerset Hills, the prevalence of young people vaping was higher than national estimates of young people vaping. [Community in Conversation 2021 online survey showed that 44% of young people 18 to 34 years old had vaped in the past year.](#) While caution must be exercised when comparing data collected in different groups during

different time periods, young adults are more likely to vape weekly or daily than high school students in 2019.



Younger adults who responded to the Community in Conversation online survey were more likely to have peers who they perceived vaping than those 35 years and older. 46% of young adults reported that ‘some’ or ‘most’ of their peers vaped compared to only 11% of adults over 34 years.

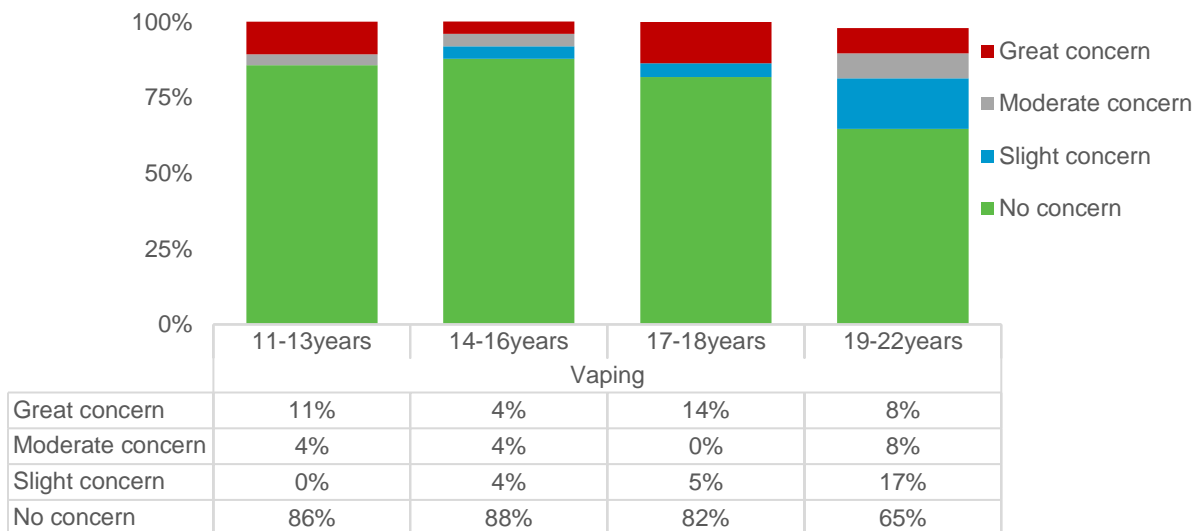
**Perceived Peer Vaping by Age Group**  
 Source: Community in Conversation Online Survey 2021



74% of the parents who responded to the Community in Conversation online survey reported feeling moderate or great concern about youth vaping in the Somerset Hills. However, when asked about their concerns about their children, the majority of those parents surveyed were not concerned about their child vaping.

**Somerset Hills Parents' Concerns about their Child Vaping by Child's Age**

Source: Community in Conversation Online Survey 2021

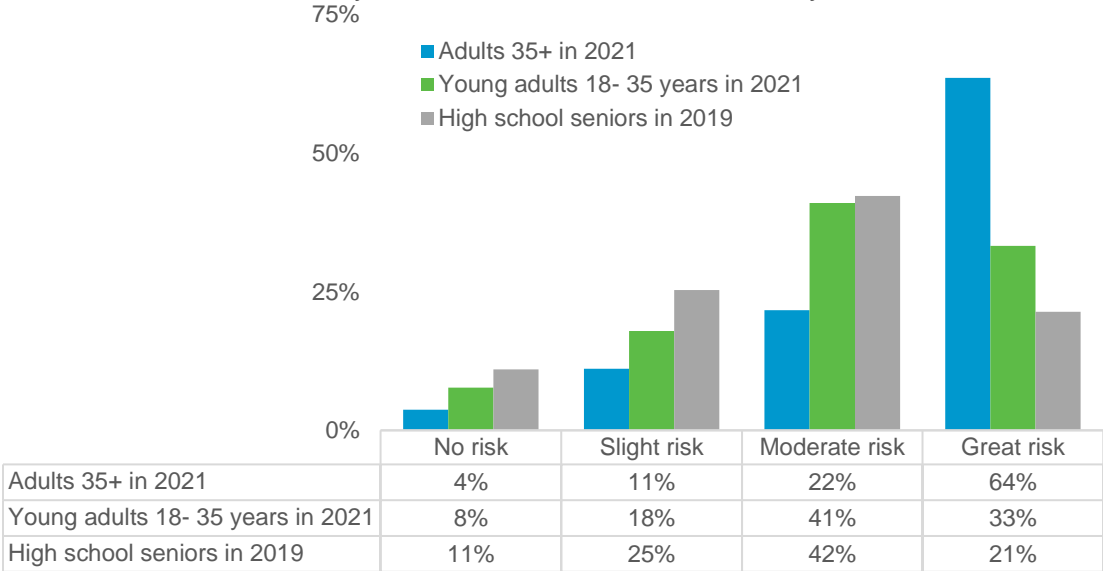


## Risk

A statistically significant gap exists in the perceived risk of vaping among young adults and adults. 64% of adults in the Somerset Hills currently say vaping is 'great risk.' Only 33% of young adults rate vaping as 'great risk,' and 41% believe it is 'moderate risk.' Two years ago, even fewer high school seniors perceived vaping as 'great risk,' and perceived vaping much lower risk than cigarettes. (Pride Surveys, 2019)

How much do you think people risk harming themselves using an e-cigarette, or vape pen (excluding marijuana)

Sources: Community in Conversation 2021 Online Survey & Pride 2019



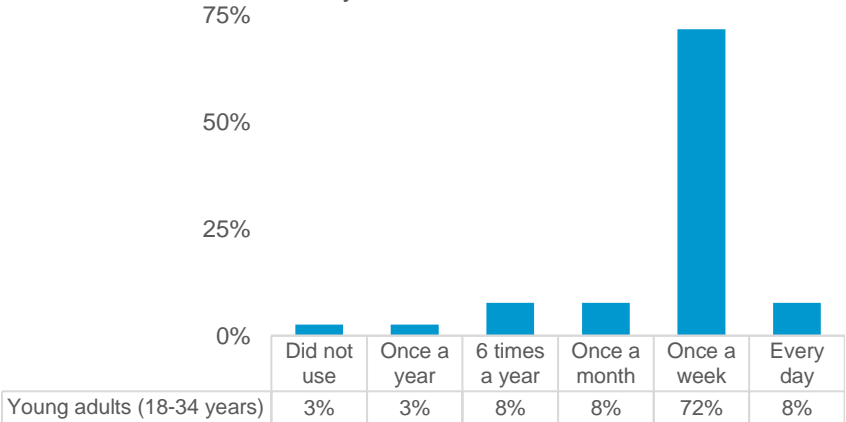
**Alcohol**

**Prevalence**

Alcohol was widely reported as a feature of social life in the Somerset Hills. 80% of the Somerset Hills adults surveyed reported keeping alcohol in their home and 68% reported that ‘all’ or ‘most’ of their friends drank alcohol. Of the 39 18- to 34-year-olds who responded to the Community in Conversation online survey, only one (3%) did not use alcohol in the past year, and 80% drink alcohol weekly or daily.

Frequency of Past Year Alcohol Use among Young Adults in 2021

Source: Community in Conversation 2021



85% of young adults in the Somerset Hills reported binge drinking in the past year. This is slightly higher than the national prevalence of past-year binge drinking among young adults aged 19 to 28, which was 81% in 2019. (Schulenberg, et al., 2020) A quarter (26%) of the Somerset Hills young people binge drink 5 or more alcoholic beverages within a few hours weekly and a third (31%) binge drink monthly.

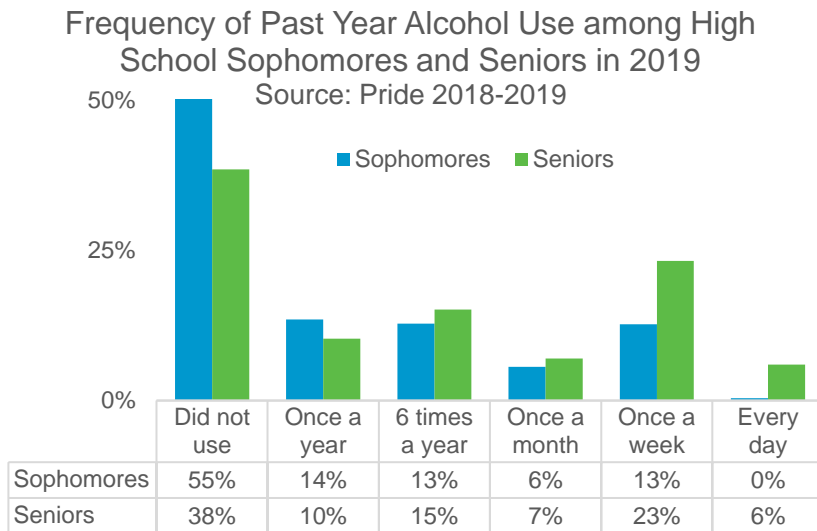
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*My younger one, yes, he started drinking alcohol. We'd already heard about it from our friends - that this was the norm at the high school, so be prepared for it. So, it was almost like an expectation.*

- Mom in the Somerset Hills

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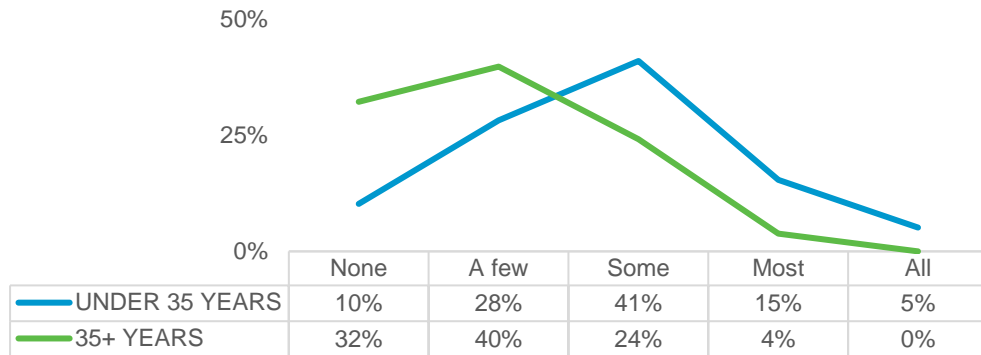
The culture of alcohol use is present in high school-aged youth as well. 63% of the teachers in the Somerset Hills surveyed reported hearing students talking about drinking alcohol. In 2019, alcohol annual use in the Somerset Hills was higher than the national average by 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and 62% of high school seniors have used alcohol in the past year, a percentage that has held steady since 2016. (Pride Surveys, 2019; Harlow, Drug and Alcohol Use Among Bernards Township School District Students 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th Grades 2016-2017, 2016)



According to the Community in Conversation online survey, young adults were more likely to report that ‘most’ or ‘all’ of their peers binge drink than adults 35 years or older, 20% and 4% respectively.



Perceived Peer Binge Drinking by Age Group  
Source: Community in Conversation Online Survey 2021



Nationally, there has been a trend in the past decade of less binge drinking and alcohol use amongst middle and high schoolers. This trend downward continues but is leveling off, (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2020) and annual and daily alcohol use significantly increased for 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders in 2020. (Johnston, et al., 2020) The Somerset Hills seems to be following these national trends; less than half of high school seniors (44%) reported past 30-day alcohol use and less than a third (28%) of sophomores. (Pride Surveys, 2019) Monitoring the Future collected national data during the spring of 2020, when quarantine measures were in place. They found that past 30-day alcohol use and binge drinking increased in 2020 for 8<sup>th</sup> graders, 10<sup>th</sup> graders, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders. (Johnston, et al., 2020) . In 2019, 33% of college students and 22% of same-age adults not in college reported binge drinking. (Schulenberg, et al., 2020)

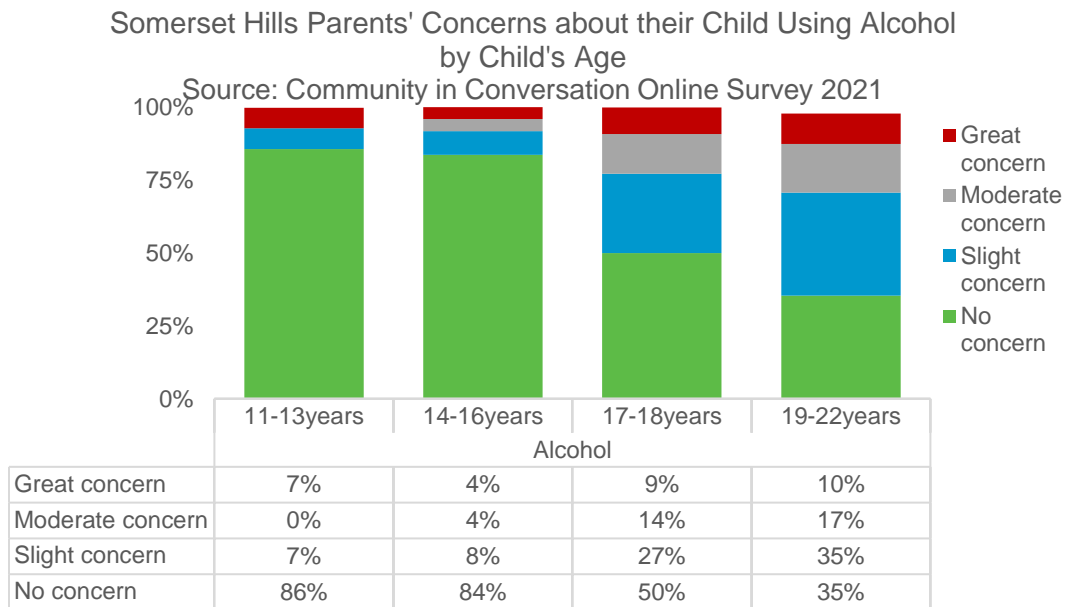
**Access**

Young adults interviewed reported when they were in high school, they would drink alcohol at friends’ houses when their parents were out of town or at a specific friend’s house whose parents allowed or turned a blind eye to underage drinking. This confirms the 2019 Pride survey results that state the most commonplace for 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders to drink alcohol is a friend’s house. (Pride Surveys, 2019)

In 2019, 8<sup>th</sup> graders in the Somerset Hills reported that alcohol is easier for them to access than either e-cigarettes or marijuana. 38% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders said that alcohol was ‘fairly easy’ or ‘very easy’ for them to access. This is compared to 33% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders reporting e-cigarettes and 16% reporting marijuana is ‘fairly easy’ or ‘very easy’ to get. Access increases with age; 62% of high school sophomores and 70% of high school seniors reported alcohol being ‘fairly easy’ or ‘very easy’ for them to get. (Pride Surveys, 2019) Access to alcohol has gotten more difficult for teens. In 2016, 92% of high school seniors reported alcohol being fairly or very easy to obtain. (Harlow K. , 2016)

## Disapproval

Of all the substances discussed in the listening session and key informant interviews, alcohol was mentioned more than any other substance. In the Community in Conversation online survey, 50% of parents with children older than 17 years expressed some level of concern that their child is using alcohol. The average age of initiation of use of alcohol in the Somerset Hills is between 14 and 15 years old, (Pride Surveys, 2019), however, 85% of children under 17 years old, reported feeling 'no concern' about their children drinking alcohol.

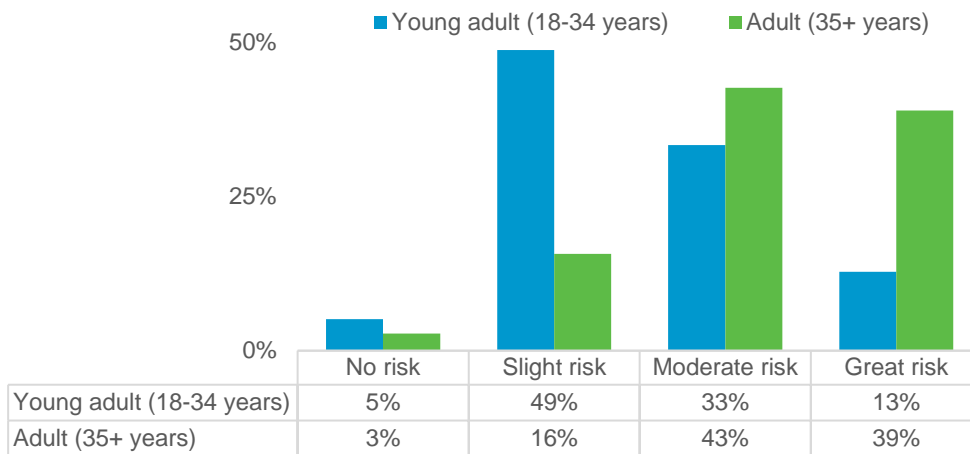


While most high school students do not think their parents condone drinking, their perception of their parents' disapproval decreases by their senior year. 64% of seniors reported their parents thought nearly everyday drinking was 'very wrong,' compared to 72% of sophomores. (Pride Surveys, 2019)

## Risk

The perceived risk of binge drinking differs by age in the Somerset Hills. Young adults under the age of 35 perceive binge drinking as less of a 'great' or 'moderate risk' than adults over 34. **Almost half of young adults consider binge drinking a 'slight risk.'**

Perceived Harm Having Five or More Drink of an Alcoholic Beverage Once or Twice a Week by Age  
 Source: Community in Conversation Online Survey 2021



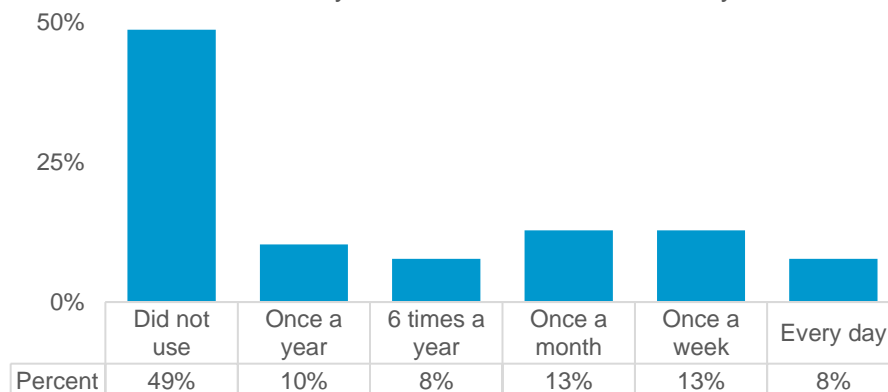
About a third of high school seniors rated binge drinking as a ‘great risk’ and slightly more than a third said it was ‘moderate risk’ in 2019. (Pride Surveys, 2019) This is a decrease in perceived risk compared to 2016, when 40% and 46% of high school seniors reported binge drinking as ‘moderately’ or ‘greatly’ risky, respectively. (Harlow, Drug and Alcohol Use Among Bernards Township School District Students 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th Grades 2016-2017, 2016)

## Marijuana

### Prevalence

Half (51%) of young people ages 18 to 34 years who responded to the Community in Conversation online survey used marijuana in the past year and 21% reported using marijuana daily or weekly. This is higher than the most recent national data. Nationally,

Frequency of Past Year Use of Marijuana among Somerset Hills Young Adults Ages 18-34  
 Source: Community in Conversation Online Survey 2021



past-year marijuana use among young adults ages 19 to 28 reached 40% in 2019, the highest rate recorded. (Schulenberg, et al., 2020)

Young adult marijuana use is higher than the levels of use among high school students in the Somerset Hills reported in 2019. Two years ago, 21% of sophomores and 35% of seniors reported past-year marijuana use, which was up from 5%<sup>1</sup> and 29% respectively in 2016. (Pride Surveys, 2019; Harlow, Drug and Alcohol Use Among Bernards Township School District Students 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th Grades 2016-2017, 2016) Sophomores in the Somerset Hills had lower levels of marijuana use than the national average in 2019, but seniors were the same as national estimates. 63% of the teachers in the Somerset Hills surveyed reported hearing students talking about using marijuana. Although national trends in youth marijuana use show some leveling off in prevalence, more high school students are vaping marijuana. Nationally, vaping marijuana doubled or tripled among high schoolers from 2017 to 2019. In 2020, more seniors reported ever vaping marijuana (28% up from 24% in 2019) and vaping marijuana in the past year (22% up from 21% in 2019). (Johnston, et al., 2020)

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*“The big thing is the weed pens, the vape pens for marijuana. Those are big among a lot of my friends that still do it because it's more discreet and they can get away with it more.”*

*- A young adult in the Somerset Hills*

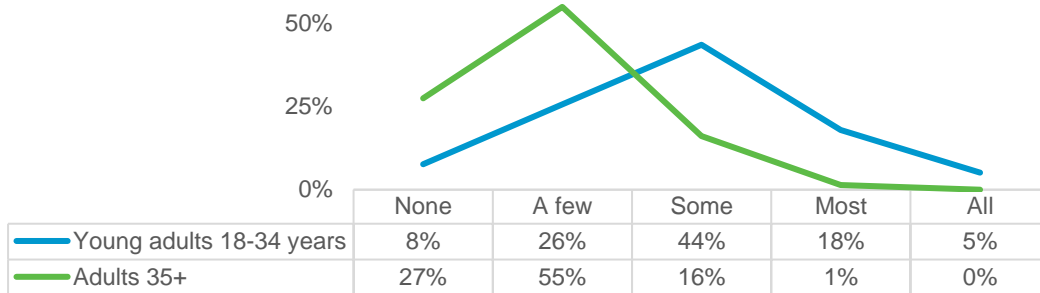
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National data shows that marijuana use prevalence peaks in the early 20s age group. (Schulenberg, et al., 2020) A quarter of all adults who responded to the Community in Conversation online survey reported that they do not know anyone who uses marijuana, and 51% reported knowing a few people who used marijuana. Those responses differ by age at the extremes. 23% of the young adults aged 18 to 34 reported that ‘most’ or ‘all’ of their friends use marijuana, compared to only 1% of adults 35 or older. Only 8% of young adults did not have peers who use marijuana, whereas 27% of adults did not.

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<sup>1</sup> 5% annual use of marijuana as reported by Harlow in 2016 is very low. The national annual use for the same age group was 24% the same year.

Perceived Marijuana Use by Age Group  
 Source: Community in Conversation Online Survey 2021



## Access

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*“Drugs were easy flowing in my friend group. It was the stoner friend group. Most of them were dealing drugs – probably 3 or 4 of them. We would drive into Brooklyn and pick up weed. We would drive my car – which was really dumb - pick up a few pounds of weed and drive across state lines. That’s fine, I don’t care. Drugs were easy. I mean, we could get anything.”*

– *A young adult in the Somerset Hills talking about her high school experience*

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As of 2019, 62% of high school seniors and 47% of sophomores reported marijuana was ‘fairly easy’ or ‘very easy’ for them to obtain. This is lower than in 2016 when 73% of seniors reported marijuana was ‘fairly easy’ or ‘very easy’ for them to get. (Harlow, Drug and Alcohol Use Among Bernards Township School District Students 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th Grades 2016-2017, 2016) Law enforcement officials and parents report young people using Snapchat and other social media to access drugs.

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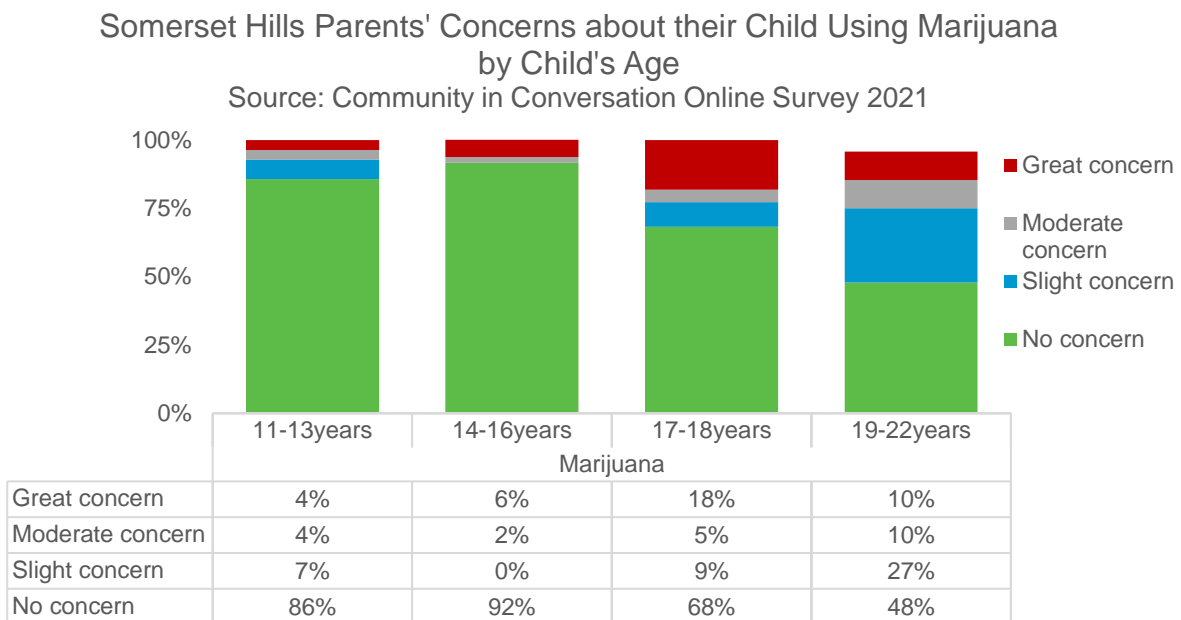
*“Cell phones make it easy to network and find drugs. Parents don’t know how accessible drugs are to kids. Social media exposes kids to a lot more.”*

–*Law Enforcement Officer serving the Somerset Hills*

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## Disapproval

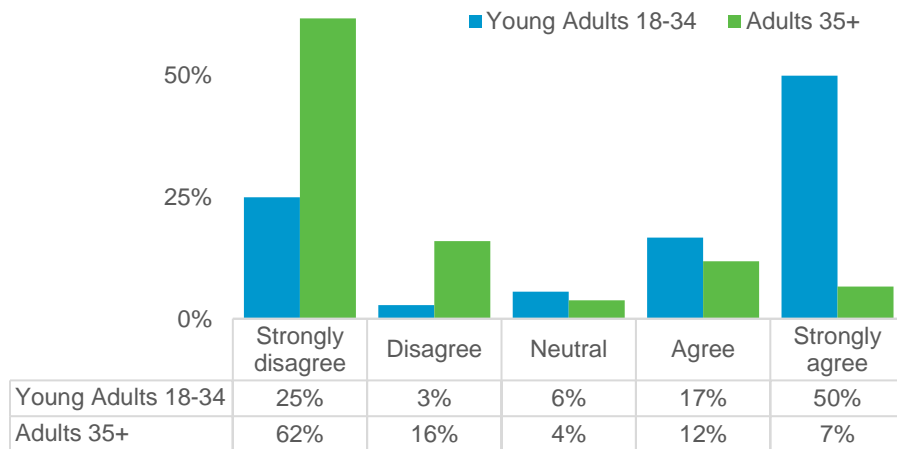
Based on the Community in Conversation 2021 online survey, **most parents do not have concerns about their child using marijuana**. Over half of parents of 19- to 22-year-olds were concerned about marijuana use, but 92% of parents of 14- to 16-year-olds expressed 'no concern' about their child's marijuana use. Notably, in 2019, the average age of onset of use for high schoolers was between 14 and 16 years old. (Pride Surveys, 2019) Like other substances, parents were more likely to be concerned about youth in their community using marijuana than their child. Behind alcohol, marijuana was the most commonly discussed substance in listening sessions and focus groups.



There is a disparity between the approval of marijuana use by youth based on the ages of the respondent. **Young adults are significantly more likely to approve of marijuana use by high school and college students than adults over the age of 34**. Half of young adults strongly agree that marijuana use among college students is okay, compared to 7% of adults over 34. Both age groups were less likely to approve of high school youth using marijuana, but a statistically significant difference exists between the approval of high school youth using marijuana by age as well.

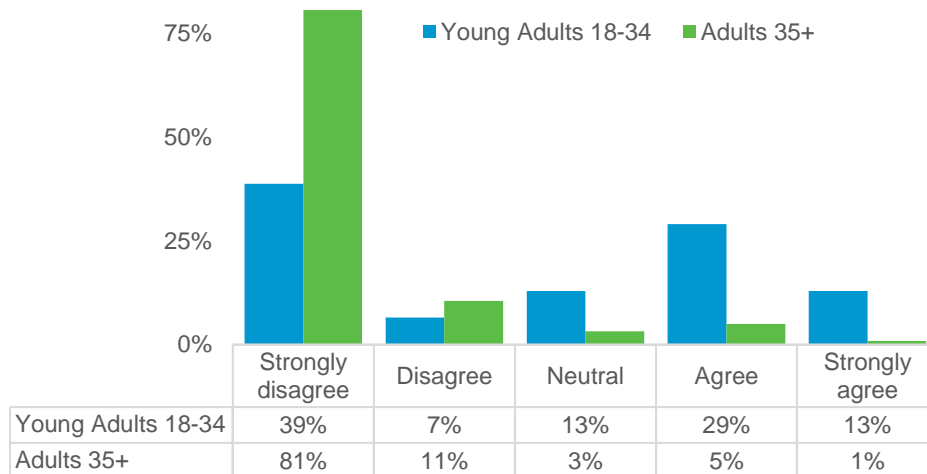
I believe that marijuana use by college aged youth under 21 is okay

Source: Community in Conversation Online Survey 2021



I believe that marijuana use by high school youth is okay

Source: Community in Conversation Online Survey 2021



Students' perception of their parents' disapproval of marijuana is decreasing. 55% of seniors in 2019 thought their parents thought it was 'very wrong' to smoke marijuana, compared to 63% of sophomores. (Pride Surveys, 2019) This is lower than 2016 when 66% of seniors and 79% of sophomores said their parents thought it was 'very wrong.' (Harlow, Drug and Alcohol Use Among Bernards Township School District Students 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th Grades 2016-2017, 2016) As of 2019, rates of perceived parent and peer disapproval are lower for marijuana than for daily alcohol use. (Pride Surveys, 2019) This reflects the shifting acceptance of marijuana by the culture at large, which is represented by the legalization status in many states, include New Jersey as of 2020.

## Risk

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*“Marijuana is just looked as like the lesser of all the drugs. And it’s like if they’re just doing weed, ‘It’s just a little weed. You’re not addicted to weed. Weed doesn’t kill anybody.’ You see all these other stats - heroin and opioid use - there are death numbers behind it.”*

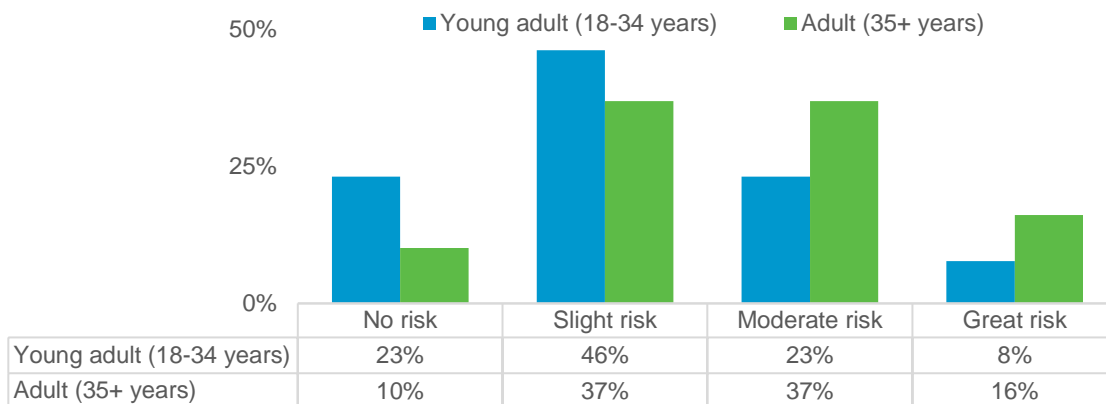
– *Law enforcement officer serving the Somerset Hills discussing attitudes of marijuana use in the community*

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Marijuana had the lowest reported perceived risk of any substances in Community in Conversation. 47% of adults in the Somerset Hills over the age of 34 and 69% of young adults between 18 and 35 years said that smoking marijuana once or twice a week posed ‘no risk’ or a ‘slight risk.’ 12% of local high school seniors perceived marijuana as ‘no risk’ in 2019. (Pride Surveys, 2019)

Perceived Harm of Smoking Marijuana Once or Twice a Week by Age

Source: Community in Conversation Online Survey 2021



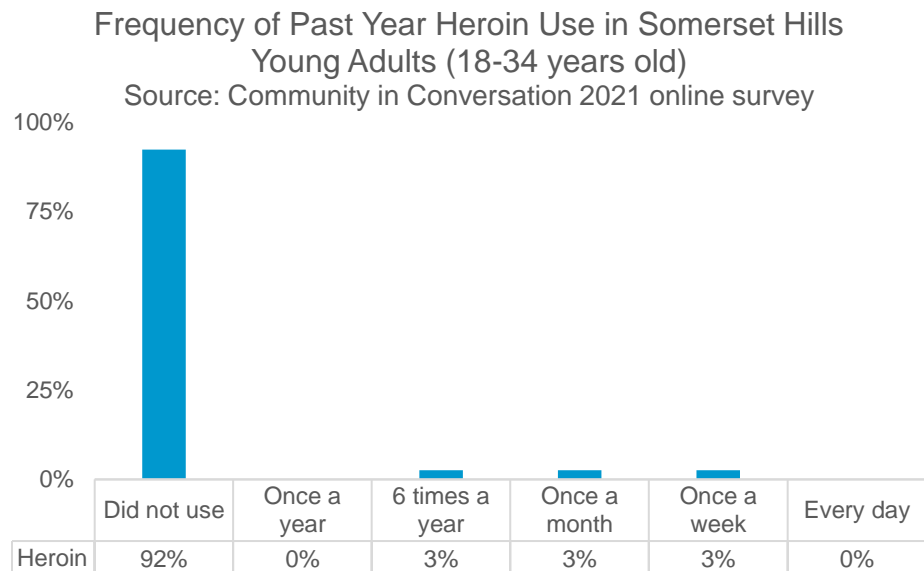
While perceived risk is low, only 13% of residents of the Somerset Hills reported keeping marijuana in their homes, and of the young adults (18-34 years old) surveyed in 2021, 54% did not use marijuana in the past year. Nationally, the perceived risk of marijuana use has reached all-time low levels among young adults 19 to 29 years. (Schulenberg, et al., 2020)



## Heroin

### Prevalence

According to the Community in Conversation online survey, 8% of young adults in the Somerset Hills reported using heroin in the past year. Caution should be used when analyzing these data because of the small number of young adults answering the Community in Conversation online survey (n=39). 1 person (3%) used heroin 6 times in the past year, 1 person (3%) used heroin once a month in the past year, and 1 person (3%) used heroin weekly in the past year. Additional data should be collected on heroin use to obtain a more representative sample.



Data quality checks indicate no clear evidence of falsifying data, but there is potentially false data in the race, employment, and child age variables. Demographic data for the three young adults who used heroin in the past year are outlined below.

- Hispanic American Indian female in her late 20s with an associate degree. She is retired with an income below \$88,000. She has a child between 5-10 years old and did not leave an email address.
- Hispanic Native Hawaiian male in his early 30s with a graduate or professional degree. He is retired with an income below \$88,000. He has a child under 5 years old and submitted an email address.
- White male in his late 20s without a high school diploma. He is employed part-time with an income below \$88,000. He has a child between 23 and 26 years old and submitted an email address.

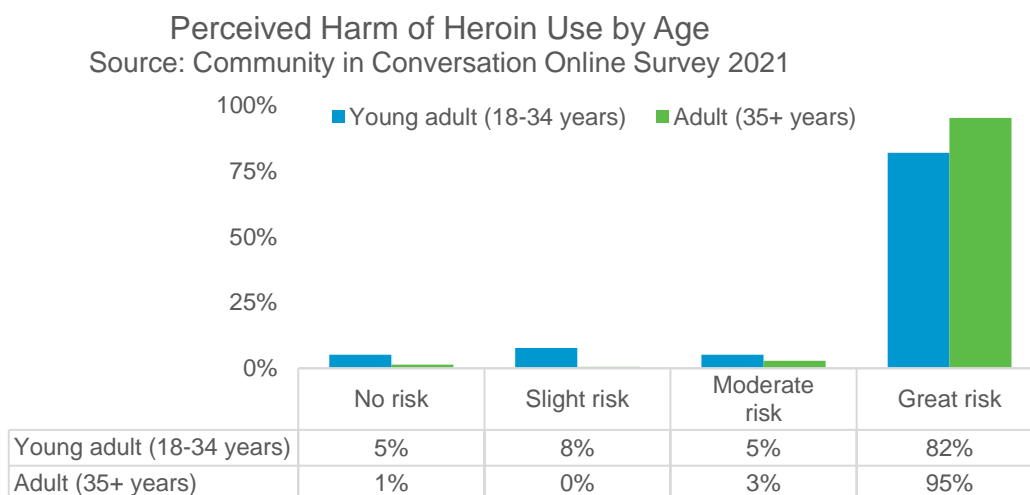
All 3 of the young adults who used heroin also used every other substance asked about in the survey, except benzos, which one young adult did not answer. Their reported frequencies of use varied by substance.

For young adults ages 19 to 35 years, past-year heroin use varied by age from 0.1% (among 21-, 22-, 25-, and 26-year-olds) to 0.5% (among 29- to 30-year-olds) in 2019. (Schulenberg, et al., 2020) Data inconsistencies preclude the interpretation of the 2019 Pride questions regarding the 30-day use of heroin.

Nationally, past-month heroin use remained flat in 2020 for middle and high schoolers. 0.3% of seniors and 0.1% of sophomores reported past 30-day heroin use in Monitoring the Future. (Johnston, et al., 2020) In 2016, 2% of high school seniors and 4% of sophomores in the Somerset Hills reported ever using heroin. (Harlow, Drug and Alcohol Use Among Bernards Township School District Students 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th Grades 2016-2017, 2016)

### Risk

95% of adults over 35 years believe using heroin is ‘great risk,’ but that falls to 82% for young adults under 35. This illustrates that while overall knowledge of the risks of heroin is high, differences persist in the perception of risk by age.



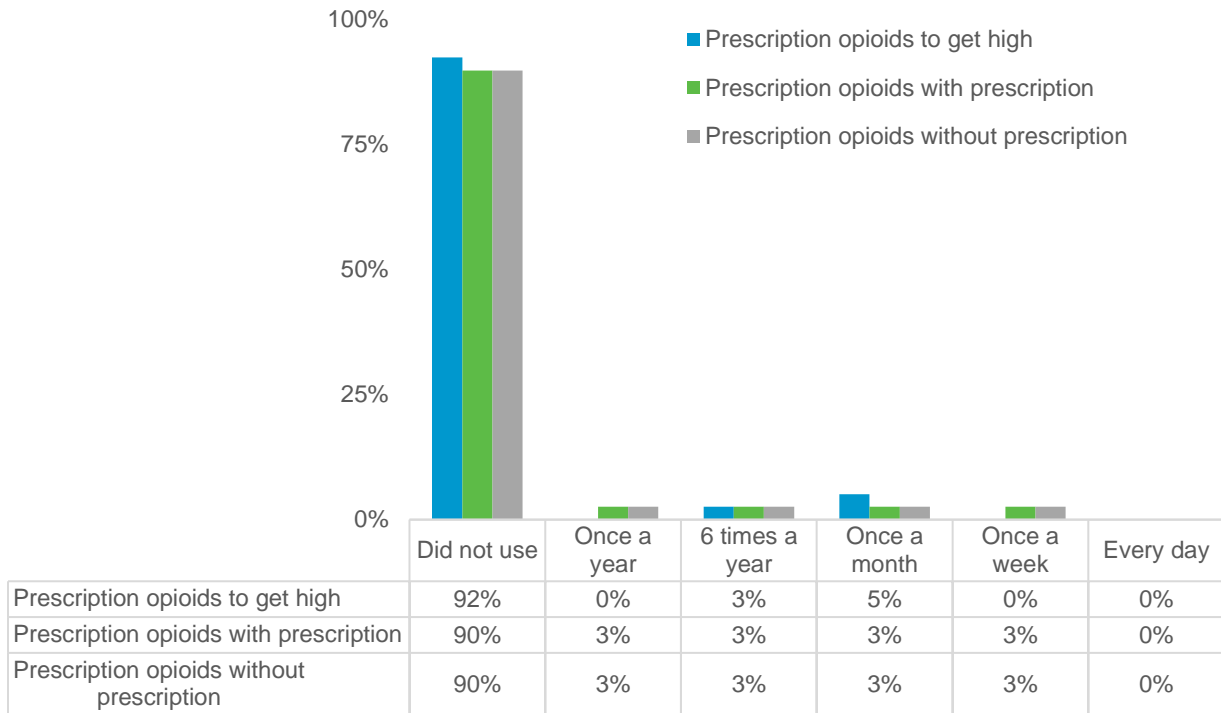
## Prescription Opioids

### Prevalence

5 out of the 39 (13%) young people who responded to the Community in Conversation online survey used prescription opioids that were prescribed to them in the past year. 4 out of 39 (10%) used prescription opioids not prescribed to them in the past year, and 3 out of 39 (8%) used prescription opioids to get high in the past year.

### Frequency of Past Year Opioid Use among Young Adults (18-34 years old) in the Somerset Hills

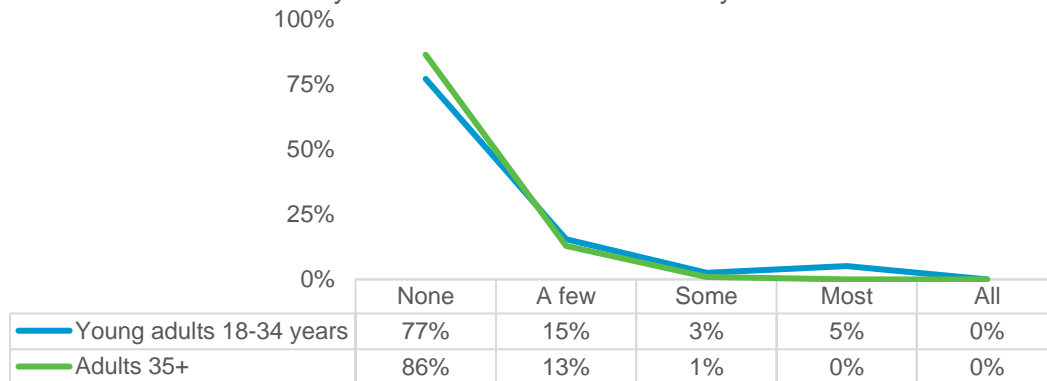
Source: Community in Conversation 2021 online survey



In 2019, 6% of high school seniors reported using a prescription opioid painkiller for any reason (including by prescription). Misuse of prescription opioids has continued to decrease annually since its peak of 9% in 2009.

### Perceived Peer Opioid Prescription Misuse by Age Group

Source: Community in Conversation Online Survey 2021

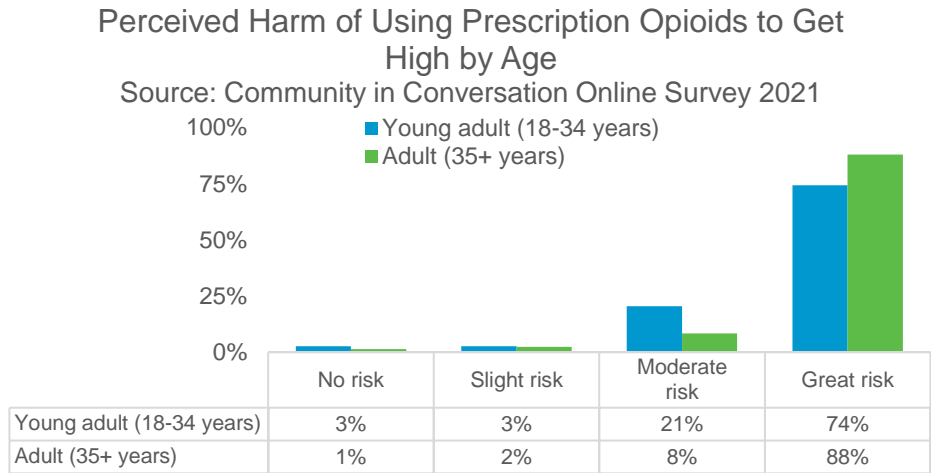


The older and younger age groups were closest in the perception of peer prescription opioids misuse. While the trend looked similar, no one in the older group reported 'most' or 'all' of their peers misusing prescription opioids compared to 5% of young people.

## Risk

88% of adults over 34 years old and 74% of young adults ages 18 to 34 said there was 'great risk' in using prescription opioids to get high. In 2019, 84% of high school seniors in the Somerset Hills reported using prescription opioids to get high was a great risk.

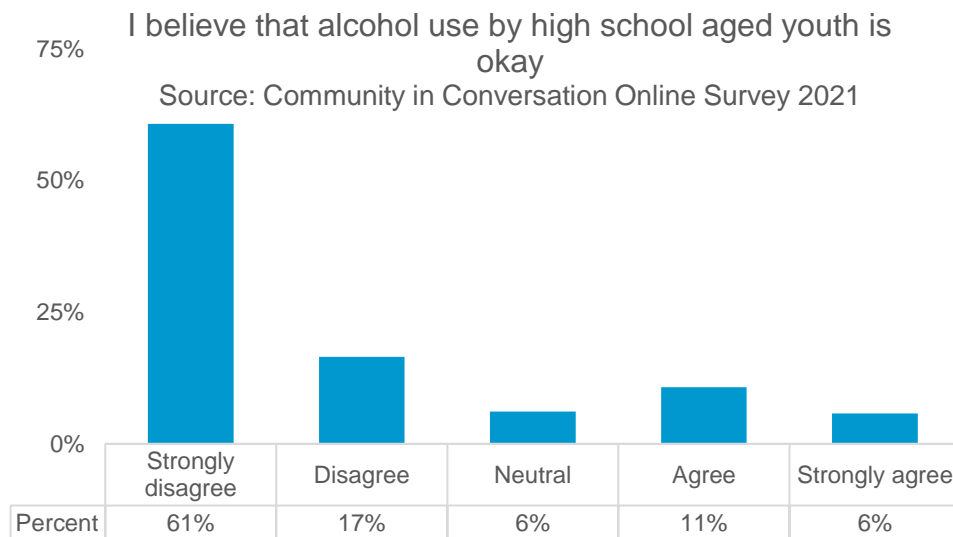
This is an opportunity to further educate young adults that using opioid painkillers to get high is greatly risky behavior.



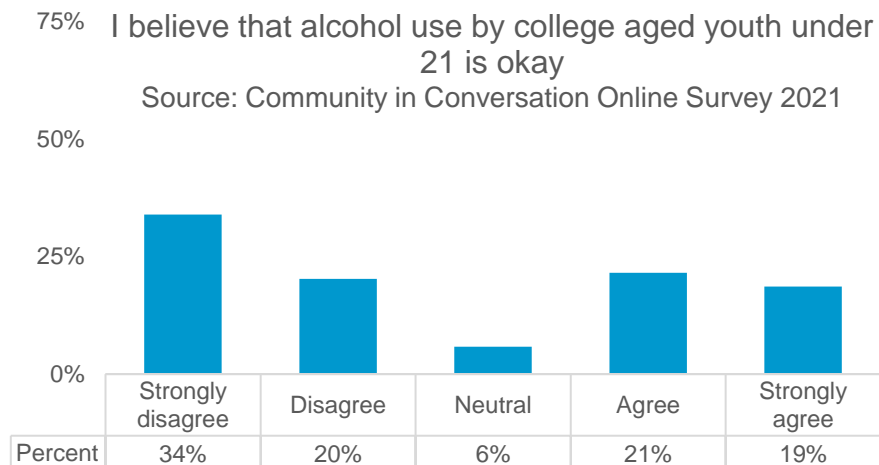
## The Somerset Hills Culture

### Social Norms

The Community in Conversation online survey presented respondents with a series of statements and they moved a slider bar to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with a given statement. **Disapproval for teen alcohol use is very high in the Somerset Hills.** 61% of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement ‘I believe that alcohol use by high school-aged youth is okay.’



Approval for alcohol use by college-aged minors was higher; 34% of those who responded to the question strongly disagreed with college-aged minors using alcohol.



The high level of disapproval of teen drinking is highly at odds with the perception of the levels of acceptance of youth alcohol use in the community. One substance use professional working in the Somerset Hills explained the culture like this: *“I think it’s permissive, I think it’s good clean fun - all kids drink, everybody drinks, everybody*

*parties. Now do I think it's any more permissive than some other neighborhoods? Maybe a little more. I think there's a bit of insularity between - in a lower-income community, there's a fear of police and all this other involvement, whereas here - who's going to call the cops on you unless it's getting really out of control. So, I think there's a bit of a kind of look the other way - as long as they're drinking under my roof, or in my backyard, or at this social function, then it's fine. Rite of passage type of thing."*

Respondents were less likely to approve of marijuana use, especially among high school students. 75% of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement for high school students, whereas 56% strongly disagreed in the context of college students. The state of New Jersey approved recreational marijuana use in the fall of 2020, so it will be important to track marijuana use approval trends over the next 5 years.

### **Social Hosting**

Interviews with young adults confirmed the finding from Pride that high schoolers most often use alcohol and marijuana at friends' houses. (Pride Surveys, 2019) Through Community in Conversation, the concept of social hosting was brought up as a source of frustration from parents who felt like other parents in their community did not share their values.

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*"I have a friend whose kids are out of <a high school in the Somerset Hills > and go to really good schools. But on the weekends, she would buy the seniors beer to drink in her basement. She would buy the beer! And she knows they were smoking pot. But they would all sleep over. I don't agree with that, but that's what she was telling me. She said, well they're not going anywhere, they're sleeping until midday, one o'clock. I'm like, oh, okay, well that's not happening at my house, sorry! But parents do it. Her sons are high achievers, athletes. They were the cool kids."*

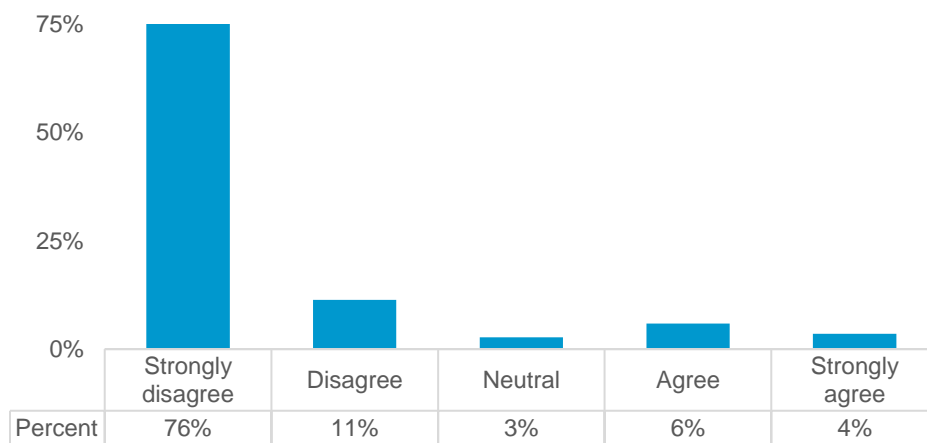
*– Mom in the Somerset Hills*

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Community in Conversation respondents overwhelmingly disapproved of parents providing alcohol to minors. The online survey sample may be biased toward supporters of Community in Crisis who held strong feelings about youth substance use. This possibility was addressed in targeted key informant interviews when we spoke to parents who allowed their teenagers to drink alcohol in the basement. But as one substance use professional working in the Somerset Hills explained, if only one family allows teens to drink in their basement, alcohol becomes accessible to a whole circle of teens.

I believe that it is okay for a parent to host a party and provide alcohol to those under 21 as long as the youth are not driving.

Source: Community in Conversation Online Survey 2021



The reasons for these parents allowing their teens to use substances were based on their desire to know what their teen was doing than be in the dark. One mom explained it like this, *“I wanted to know what was going on and, you know, wanted to meet their friends and let them hang out here. The good, bad, and ugly showed up. So, you know, I feel like I really know what is going on. Maybe there are parents that just really are clueless and have no idea because they are so strict with their kids.”*

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*“We would allow the kids to have friends over and we would allow . . . we wouldn't provide alcohol, but we would ‘allow’ kids to drink here. But I would find that they were smoking too, and it wasn't good . . . these are good kids. If you look on the outside, meaning, like, they're functioning well in school, they're athletes. But they're all drinking on the weekend and a lot of them are smoking too.”*

– Mom in the Somerset Hills

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Many people in the Somerset Hills who expressed frustration about other parents allowing youth alcohol consumption assumed those other parents were trying to be the “cool parent.” But in interviews, these parents were trying to protect their children when they knew they could no longer control their behavior. Social hosting would not be a problem in the Somerset Hills if parents did not allow their children to attend parties where alcohol is present. *While parents disapprove of social hosting and do not allow it in their own home, they will allow their teens to attend parties where they know or suspect alcohol is being served.*

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*“Whenever he told me he wasn’t going to take the car and asked me to drop him, I knew what was going to take place. And we would pick him up too, obviously. Initially, we weren’t very open with each other because I was a lot stricter. But I realized I was getting no information from him at all. So, he was obviously doing whatever he wanted to, but he was hiding it. So, the only way is to accept it so at least I know what is going on so I can have a conversation with him. Better me make him understand than he gets wrong information from the peers.”*

*– Mom in the Somerset Hills*

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Young adults who were interviewed admitted that when they were in high school, they would push the boundaries of what parents allowed. One young adult described her friends using cocaine and other drugs at a friend’s house. She described her friend’s mom like this, *“She was definitely considered the cool mom. She didn’t know about everything, but she was fine with having people over, drinking and smoking weed. She probably wouldn’t be cool with anything else <that we did at her house>. . .”*

One elected official who understands the process of addiction expressed sadness that adults allow teens to be initiated into substance use when the risk of addiction is so high for their developing brains.

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*“You don’t know which kid will be ‘yeah that was fun’ and which kid will be like ‘Wow, I can’t stop because this is so great.’ And the younger they start, the more likely they are to have a problem with it. But there’s a lot of controlled drinking. You kids can come to my house and you can stay over and it’s okay. Which isn’t always okay.”*

*–Elected Official in the Somerset Hills*

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A law enforcement official in the Somerset Hills explained that he sees the worst possible outcomes of these parties, and parents do not fully grasp the risks they are taking when they host them. *“A gentleman . . . argued with me that he has total control of a situation where there's, you know, 10 to 15 teenagers in his basement drinking. . . I said, ‘Really, you think you have control over 10 to 15 teenagers that are drinking?’ He's like, ‘Yes, absolutely I monitor the situation.’ I said, ‘What if I shared with you that two weeks prior to this conversation, there's a young teenage girl that came to our office and alleged that she was raped by two boys in a very similar situation in a basement.’”*

## High Achievement

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation report named excessive pressure to excel as a risk factor for substance use. *“An environment characterized by extreme pressure to succeed or to outdo everyone else—often, but not exclusively, occurring in affluent communities—can have negative effects such as high levels of stress or alcohol and drug use.”* In a 2018 survey of youth in the Somerset Hills, a quarter of students felt *“too much pressure”* to do well from parents. (Harlow, The Student Stressors and Assets Survey: An Assessment of the Developmental Assets of Students in the Bernards Township School District, 2018) Excessive pressure to achieve has been listed as one of the top environmental risks that compromise adolescent well-being. (Geisz & Nakashian, 2018) Youth in high achieving schools, like those in the Somerset Hills, are now considered an at-risk group along with other groups typically thought of as vulnerable, such as children living in poverty. Schools that qualify as high achieving offer rich extracurricular activities, AP courses, high standardized test scores, and the majority of students are accepted into selective universities and colleges. (Luthar, Suh, Ebbert, & Kumar, 2020)

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*“Parents are so fixated on, ‘I’ve got a journey for my kid. My kid is going to go this way, and no one is going to deviate from that.’”*

*– Mom in the Somerset Hills*

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Studies show that anxiety in adolescents predicts subsequent substance use disorder. (Costello, Mustillo, & Erkanli, 2003) Therefore, it is unsurprising that youth who feel pressure to achieve look for a release from that pressure. One law enforcement officer who works closely with high school students explained what he sees. *“Especially with marijuana or vaping - a lot of the kids that you find with it, ‘I’m stressed from my parents, I’m stressed from this, I’m stressed from sports, I’m trying to get into this college’ - it’s a*

release for them. I do think that most of those cases are because of - it's an avenue - to get out of their real-world and just to escape.”

### Sense of Belonging

Many women who participated in Community in Conversation was feeling like there was an expectation in the Somerset Hills to look a certain way and maintain an affluent lifestyle. One mom in the Somerset Hills explained it like this, *“I live in town, it's affluent. Doing what everyone else is doing. Everyone has a house at the shore (I don't have a house at the shore), everyone has a boat. It's the lifestyle. Big houses, lavish lifestyles. Everyone's driving a BMW or Mercedes. Even the kids - the parking lot at the high school! Everyone's got a Jeep or a BMW.”*

Very few women interviewed felt like they truly belonged in their community beyond their tight circle of close friends. Several moms whose children had struggled described feeling different than everyone else when they couldn't join in on conversations about the successes of their children.

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*“Everyone's car has the bumper stickers of where all their kids are going to school. Everybody seems to have it together. Their kids are successful and bright and smart. . . I just felt not - maybe ashamed, a little bit scared - to be like ‘We're not okay. My kids are not doing okay.’ . . . I just felt like I couldn't relate to anybody because everybody else seemed fine.”*

– Mom in the Somerset Hills

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The common sentiment was a sense of isolation, especially when they felt like other parents did not share their parenting values and choices. Mothers described a struggle to build a community of like-minded parents.

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*“I thought when I became a parent, I would have a village. We would all gather our wagons around someone who needed help, and we would all share ideas and fight for each other's kids. Like, we'd be the moms to everybody. And that's just not the way it is. . . I think people are really engaged in their own lives, their own kids, their own jobs. It doesn't even feel like it's on the radar for them to become friends . . .”*

– Mom in the Somerset Hills

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This sense of trying to fit into an image of a Somerset Hills resident extended to the teens too. One young adult who was interviewed for Community in Conversation described her experience growing up in the Somerset Hills without wealth. *“I lived with a single mom in a condo. We were well off and fortunate, it was nothing compared to my peers. When I was asking for XYZ, and my mom said, ‘I can’t afford that.’ That was hard for me at the age of 15, 16. That plays to every kid economically or socially. I’d say that applies to the parents in the area too, to be honest. There is a lot of. . . I don’t know if keeping up with the Joneses is the right reference, it’s a smaller community, a close community. People are in one another’s business and know what’s going on. Keeping up with the pressure to look a certain way or perform a certain way or having the right things goes across all ages in town.”*

Some youth leaders in the Somerset Hills described using substances as a way for teens to fit in.

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*“When I grew up, it was it just didn’t happen. The kids that were doing it were, you know, the outcasts at school, right? You didn’t want to be a part of them, so you didn’t do that stuff. But now it’s the complete opposite kids that want to fit in, you know, are doing these things because they want to be a part of the ‘in-crowd.’”*

*- Athletic coach in the Somerset Hills*

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Somerset Hills residents of color described increasing racial segregation among social groups of students in the high school. A faith leader serving the Somerset Hills Latino community described feelings of frustration among those whose families did not have the resources to give them the experiences and opportunities they saw their classmates had. He described a gap in the way Latino immigrant teenagers view their futures compared to American teens. *“Teenagers dropping out of high school - working - the reason they are doing that is they don’t believe it is possible for them to go to college because they haven’t seen it in their own communities. They don’t believe it is impossible to elevate into the middle or upper-middle class because they haven’t seen it in their communities--they haven’t seen these opportunities presented or available.”*

Latino and Indian residents expressed a desire to be included in mainstream clubs and activities and did not want to continue to be separated by race. One mom explained that her children do not get the same opportunities at school because people assume they will be good at math and sciences, simply because they are Indian. Several Indian parents expressed concern about the racism, stereotyping, and bullying their children have experienced in the Somerset Hills. One parent thought changes she saw were

linked to the national political divisions: *“In the past 4 years when the climate was different, a lot of kids faced racism. They were called ‘Brownies go back to your countries.’ In the last 4 years, people were more enabled than before. Bullying. Some kids share with their parents, some don’t because they feel like the parents won’t get it. But they do experience it. We hear about it after they go to college. When they come back, they say ‘Oh this happened to me, but I never said anything.’ It happens to a lot of brown kids, where they’re isolated. They end up finding their own group, but it takes time. They are not the popular or the cool kids, so they are not in those groups.”*

The part of the Somerset Hills called The Hills was mentioned by several residents as being a diverse part of the Somerset Hills that welcomed immigrants. The Hills has a dedicated elementary school, Mount Prospect, where 63% of students are Asian, 24% White, 7% Hispanic, and 6% other races.

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*“Once I moved in and realized how diverse the area is, It’s amazing for my kids. Where we lived before . . . , I would speak to her in Portuguese, she would say don’t talk to me like that in front of people. She was embarrassed. My heart was sinking every time she said it. And she wanted ‘normal food’ for lunch – like a sandwich. I make her homemade food and she wants a sandwich! We moved here <the Hills> and after a while, we would hear all these people speaking different languages, and she started talking to me in Portuguese in front of other people. For me, that was amazing! Unfortunately, it didn’t translate to middle and high school.”*

*- Immigrant mom living in the Hills*

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## Lack of Consequences

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*“In town, I met a lot of kids with the sense of untouchability. Which is not good to have when it comes to things you can become addicted to or at least things that can inebriate you . . . ‘Nothing bad can happen to me’ is common in teenagers as a whole. I experienced that when I was younger, everybody does. But it’s a very connected town, so the idea of if I get caught what could really happen to me is realistic as well.”*

*– A young adult in the Somerset Hills*

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When teens are caught by the police with any substance, the policy has been that the police officer has the discretion of how to handle the situation. This is changing with new laws on minors in possession of substances. Previously, officers could file a station house adjustment, which requires the teen to attend substance use education classes with Middle Earth and complete community service hours. If the station house adjustment requirements are completed within the required timeframe, the incident does not go on the minor's record. *"You essentially get out of jail free card - it doesn't come with no consequences, it comes with community service and completing a program, but outside of this, you get caught again, like that's it, this offer is not on the table. It goes down to the county as a charge and that stays on your record,"* explained a law enforcement officer serving the Somerset Hills. This officer had never had a minor not complete the station house requirements by the deadline, but if they failed to do so a formal charge could be made in the juvenile court system. He also had never had a minor get a second station house adjustment, which would also result in formal juvenile charges.

Young adults explained that when the police are called to a home where minors are drinking alcohol, they typically tell the kids to go home or go inside. Parents are not contacted in most cases. Young adults recalled not wanting to be in trouble with the police, but not being overly concerned. One young person said, *"I was definitely afraid of being caught by the cops. No horrified, but that's definitely scary. I wasn't really afraid of them legally, because the perception is if you're under 18 you can't really get in trouble. I distinctly remember after we turned 18, we were more cognizant of it. Like, now we could really get in trouble from the cops and have something on your record. That became a real threat and deterrent. When we were younger, we felt invincible. But also, they would just pick you up and maybe call your parents. They weren't arresting anyone or putting things on your record that would carry through your life. It wasn't as big of a concern."*

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*"<I was> never nervous about the police. It's Basking Ridge! You can do what you want. They'll give you a slap on the wrist. . ."*

*– A young adult in the Somerset Hills*

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One Latino young adult brought up was the perceived injustice around legal consequences for Hispanics, especially immigrants, versus American youth.

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*“Here’s the main difference that I noticed: If they get caught, they’re going to get away with it because their parents can get them out of it more. If a Latino student gets caught, that’s their future gone right down the drain because their parents probably can’t speak English, you’re not going to be able to afford a lawyer, and they’re not going to be able to get you out of it. . . They know people in the town council, they know people in the police department, they know good lawyers that kind of be like ‘alright, slap on the wrist for the first time, that’s it’ and they don’t really get caught again either ‘cause they don’t do it again or because they’re more careful. Whereas with the Hispanic kids, nobody knows their parents--chances are their parents can’t defend themselves that well in English and then they can’t get a lawyer--like they don’t know many people within the town.”*

*-Young adult whose parents immigrated from Paraguay*

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According to a local law enforcement official, the new law regarding minors and substance use minimizes the discretion that the police have to escalate a charge quickly. The new law requires officers to issue three warnings to the minor, rather than allowing the officer to decide when a station house adjustment is appropriate.

The schools in the Somerset Hills take an aggressive stance on testing before and after school events and games and conduct random drug tests monthly (when school is not remote). Administrators find these policies effective at preventing substance use at school because the students know they won’t get away with it. If a student is found using a substance, the focus is on educating and supporting the student, not punishment.

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*“It’s not about getting kids in trouble. It is not about excluding kids from the things they love. It’s truly about getting them help at the earliest possible point to prevent them from going down a more dangerous road.”*

*– School Administrator in the Somerset Hills*

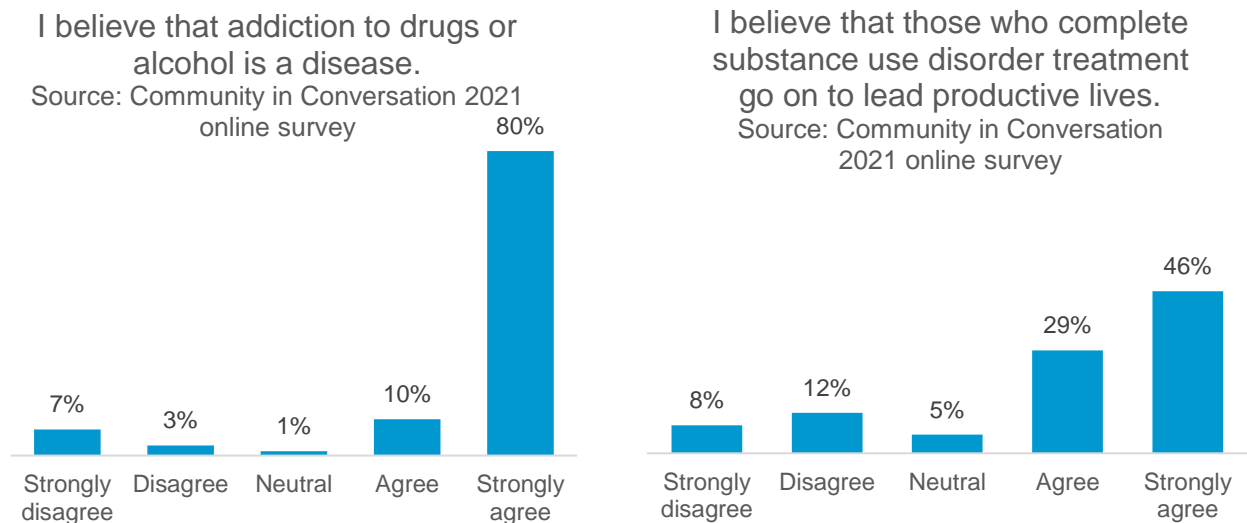
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Young people and parents in the Somerset Hills described ways parents try to monitor their teen’s substance use, including home drug tests and breathalyzer tests and reading the teen’s text messages. Once a parent discovers a teen is using substances,

young people described having to work with a therapist and long punishments. While one young person from the Somerset Hills described continuing to use substances but feeling terrified of being in trouble with her mom, and another said the punishments her parents gave her didn't change her behavior at all.

## Stigma

To understand the level of stigma in the Somerset Hills community about substance use disorder, the Community in Conversation online survey included statements to determine if residents considered substance use disorder a disease and how effective they considered substance use disorder treatment. While the majority of respondents (80%) strongly agreed that addiction is a disease, less than half (46%) strongly agreed that those who complete treatment go on to lead productive lives.



A commonly cited problem of substance use disorder stigma is that it prevents people from seeking treatment. When it is a parent who recognizes that their child needs help with their substance use, substance use professionals serving the Somerset Hills reported that parents typically don't hesitate to get their child help. The stigma is more apparent when it comes to disclosing their child's struggles with their peers.

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*“I don’t want my son stigmatized because he’s going to go to Harvard and he’s going to become a businessman someday. And I don’t want them thinking ill of him.’ But it’s really what they’re going to think of them. But I also think it’s like, well if he gets his life together - when he gets his life together - I don’t want him to be stigmatized by this. . . I think ultimately in their - within themselves, they do feel worried and ashamed that they’ve done wrong, that they’ve messed up.”*

*- Substance use counselor serving the Somerset Hills on how the parents of her clients internalize stigma*

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Young people whose parents can get them into treatment may not find stigma a barrier to treatment, but that is not true of adults who must decide on their own to seek treatment.

### **Protective Factors**

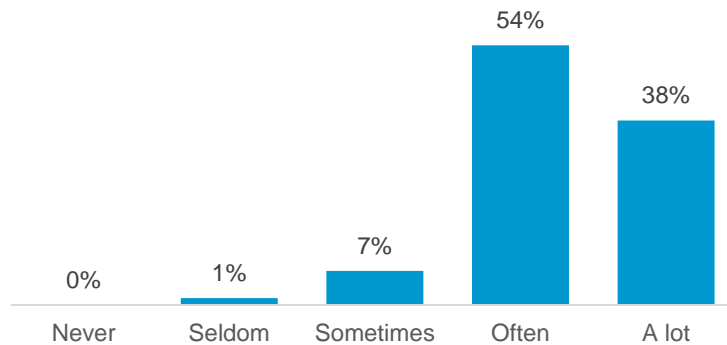
The Somerset Hills is rich in community resources and assets. The leadership of each town is engaged and invested in leading their communities. This extends to the educational leadership, as well as law enforcement, civic, and nonprofit leaders. The Somerset Hills has a strong cultural value of education, and parents support the schools and their children’s extracurricular activities. Parents are highly engaged in the lives of their children and want the best for them.

The Community in Conversation online survey measured factors that are known to protect young people from problematic substance use, including academic achievement and parental monitoring. The Community in Conversation parent respondents reported high levels of academic achievement, 81% reporting that their children get good grades ‘often’ or ‘a lot’ and low levels of disciplinary problems from their children, 92% reporting their children ‘never’ or ‘seldom’ get into trouble at school.

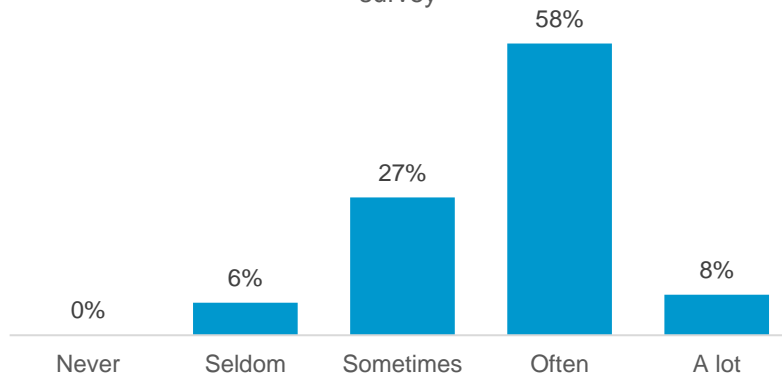


Another protective factor against substance use includes parenting behaviors, such as setting clear rules and enforcing punishments. The majority (92%) of parents reported setting clear rules for their high schoolers 'often' or 'a lot' of the time. Only about two-thirds (66%) of parents reported punishing their high schoolers for breaking rules 'often' or 'a lot' of the time.

Do you set clear rules for your child?  
Parents of teens 14-18 years old  
Source: Community in Conversation 2021 online survey

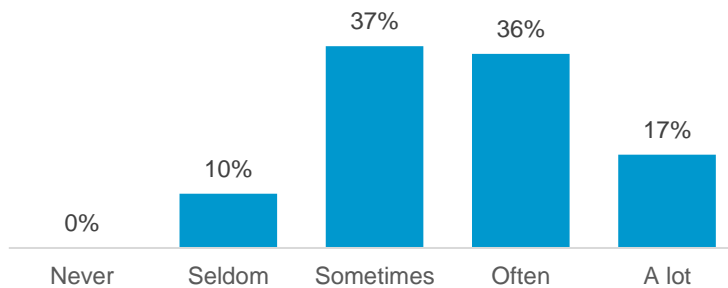


Do you punish your child when they break the rules?  
Parents of teens 14-18 years old  
Source: Community in Conversation 2021 online survey



Community in Conversation also measured how often parents are talking to their high schoolers about the problems associated with substance use. While no parents taking the online survey reported 'never' talking to their high schoolers about substance use, slightly over half (53%) talk to their high school children about substance use 'often' or 'a lot.' **This is an opportunity to increase the communication about substance use between parents and their children.**

Do you talk to your child about the problems of tobacco, alcohol, and drug use?  
Parents of teens 14-18 years old  
Source: Community in Conversation 2021 online survey



## Prevention Messages

- Stay positive. Traditional substance use prevention work tends to over-emphasize fixing problems and removing risks. *“More emphasis should be put on understanding and developing interventions to foster protective factors, strengths, and resilience, and above all, on helping adolescents thrive. . . Too often, when adolescents start engaging in risky behavior, adults and institutions focus on damage control rather than on nurturing and reinforcing adolescents’ natural drive to propel themselves, and the world, forward.”* (Geisz & Nakashian, 2018)
  - The high achieving nature of the Somerset Hills can be harnessed as a strong motivator not to use substances. *“My daughter is confident, self-directed, an athlete. She has a group of friends who make similar good choices like her. She knows where she wants to go. She wants to continue her sport, get into a good school. . . She knows where she wants to go, and she knows that jail or juvey or a health issue is going to slow her down.”* – Mom in the Somerset Hills
- Include other topics of interest. Parents may not feel concerned that their child is vulnerable to substance use, but all the parents involved in the Community in Conversation listening sessions were interested in how to better parent their kids and prepare them for adulthood. Substance use prevention can be woven into parenting topics that are specific to parents of teens but do not carry the stigma that substance use prevention can.
  - Make the call. One strategy that both parents and young adults said is effective is when parents call each other to confirm the teenagers’ plans. This prevents teens from lying and parents get to know each other and communicate about what the teens are doing.
  - Parents should keep talking to their children about substance use. *“The role of the parent is to be as honest with the kid as possible and to recognize the seriousness of what is going on to try not to fall into the trap of ‘not my kid’ because that’s one of the first things that folks - it can’t happen to my kid - and very often parents see warning signs ahead of times and don’t address it. Grades slip a little bit and all of a sudden not hanging out with the same kids - so they kind of see stuff, but they let it go. My thing would be right now just to be a little more aware during COVID of changes in behavior. Because if your gut is telling you something, chances are something is wrong. And as uncomfortable as the conversation may be, the eye roll, and the heavy sighing reaction from your kid and have them it down and let them know that something has been going on, your behavior has changed if there is anything you want to talk about, we are here, and be aware of what’s available in terms of services.”* – Official in the Somerset Hills

- Include those being served in the planning. In any public health intervention, input from those being served is a best practice.
  - When asked about needs for youth substance use prevention, one coach working in the Somerset Hills suggested we ask the adolescents themselves. She emphasized their sophistication, intelligence, and creativity. This sentiment is echoed by researchers as well, who emphasize the value of adolescent voices should be included in prevention messaging. (Geisz & Nakashian, 2018)
  - Messages and programs serving the Somerset Hills' immigrant communities must be tailored to those communities. *“Often what works with the white affluent community does not work at all with the Hispanic community due to the dynamics I guess of their situation. Like, I think it’s a lot easier to convince somebody that has a wider trajectory of a future because their parents have money - they can go to college, they can get any job they want if they work hard. It’s a tough sell to somebody that - having some drinks may be better than going to sleep on a cold floor. . .”* – Faith leader serving the Somerset Hills Spanish speaking immigrant community
- Approach a problem from several angles. Community in Conversation participants suggested addressing social hosting from several angles.
  - Liability - *“If you have, God forbid, an accident at your home where you are condoning underage drinking, . . . there's no insurance policy in the United States, it's going to cover you. Your umbrella policy - none of it. He's like, I don't care if you have a \$5 million umbrella policy. It is not covering you. So, separate from the legal issue or the morale issue more or less? There's the financial issue.”* – Official serving the Somerset Hills
  - Only the best - *“Parents are spending thousands of dollars getting their kids academic help with tutoring or SAT prep, they make them eat healthy, they put them in extracurriculars and want them to get good grades, but then they allow the kids to drink at their house so they can teach the child to responsibly use alcohol. But studies show that is not what happens. Kids who use alcohol at home drink more in college.”* – Substance use professional serving the Somerset Hills
  - Parents working together - *“Parents would have to kind of agree that <social hosting is> not going to happen, and band together and say it's not going to happen. And then have kids over and not supply <alcohol> and still be able to create some fun for them. . . Parents are going to have to let their kids hang out without it, and say, ‘It's not going to happen.’”* – Mom in the Somerset Hills
    - Parents may not host parties with substances in their homes, but when they drop their child off at a party where substances are being used, they are participating in social hosting.

- When an adult chooses to social host, they are risking introducing a teen to a substance that may alter the course of their life due to addiction.
  - *“Two people could each have a cup of coffee, or if this was alcohol, I may be able to shut off after one. The person next to me can't. And it's just because the way their brain is geared. . . You can have two or three people all given the same thing, and two will be fine, and the third one, through no fault of his or her own, it's just the way she is geared that they become addicted to it.”* – Official serving the Somerset Hills
  - *“Very often it starts out as experimentation or the person using to get the thrill out of it, to fit in, peer pressure, but once addiction kicks in, now you've got a hijacked brain. Now the addiction tells you what to do. You've lost your control.”* – Substance use professional serving the Somerset Hills
  - *“Many kids can handle that, meaning they don't become addicts or become addicted to it. But my son just couldn't.”* – Mom in the Somerset Hills

## Conclusions

The Community in Conversation community assessment of the Somerset Hills is a comprehensive assessment of substance use attitudes, usage, and social norms. During a difficult year, **350 community members participated in the Community in Conversation initiative.** (302 in the online survey, 16 responses to the educators' survey, and 32 people interviewed or participated in listening sessions). This success set a strong foundation for the start of the 5-year assessment project which was well-received by the community. Conducting a community assessment during a global epidemic brought unique challenges, such as data collection limitations, which were overcome with creative solutions.

The community survey responses describe a community of affluent, educated parents, primarily moms, who set clear rules for their children, who, in turn, perform well in school and stay out of trouble. Parents occasionally talk to their teens about the dangers of substance use. Parents and educators are focused primarily on youth mental health, rather than substance use during the past year of COVID-19 restrictions, including limitations on in-person school and social distancing limiting some extracurriculars. However, **it is crucial to educate parents on the correlation between poor mental health and substance use.**

**Prevalence of past-year use of vaping nicotine, binge drinking, and marijuana in the Somerset Hills is higher than the national prevalence for those substances among young adults in 2019.** Parents expressed strong concern for youth substance use in their community, but concern for their own child's substance use was low until their children were well past the average age of initiation for the substance of concern. This indicates an opportunity for parent education on vaping, marijuana, and alcohol use. There is also strong disapproval for parents providing alcohol to minors, despite the perception that social hosting is commonplace in the Somerset Hills.

In the fall of 2020, New Jersey citizens voted to legalize recreational marijuana. Recent studies in other states that have legalized marijuana found a significant increase in youth marijuana and alcohol use after recreational marijuana legalization. (Baily, Epstein, Roscoe, & Oesterle, 2020) Several factors could increase the prevalence of marijuana use in the future. **Marijuana is considered the safest substance among adults in the Somerset Hills, and vaping marijuana is increasingly popular nationally.** These trends should be measured annually to alert Community in Crisis of emerging prevention needs.

The Somerset County Department of Human Services runs a Stigma-free Campaign to raise awareness of the impact of mental health and substance use stigma in the community. This effort is apparent through the high levels of understanding that

substance use disorder is a disease. Opportunities for education about successful treatment options for substance use disorders exist.

The Community in Conversation 2021 assessment set a solid foundation for the future assessments of the Somerset Hills. The community responded positively to the initiative and willingly offered their perspectives of their community. A summary of this report will be shared with community leaders, Community in Crisis supporters, and some participants of Community in Conversation.

## Appendices

### Demographics of the Community in Conversation Online Survey Sample

Variable	Responses	Frequency	Percent	ACS 2019 estimate
Gender n=249	Female	197	65.2	50.8
	Male	51	16.9	49.2
	Transgender, non-conforming, or non-binary	1	0.3	
	<i>Missing</i>	53	17.5	
Age n=250	18-21 years	9	3.0	
	22-29 years	10	3.3	
	25-29 years	11	3.6	
	30-34 years	9	3.0	
	35-39 years	27	8.9	
	40-49 years	84	27.8	
	50-59 years	67	22.2	
	60-64 years	19	6.3	
	65-74 years	11	3.6	
	75 or older	3	1.0	
	<i>Missing</i>	52	17.2	
Hispanic or Latino n=247	Yes	25	8.3	8.9
	No	222	73.5	91.1
	<i>Missing</i>	55	18.2	
Race (Multiple responses allowed) n=244	White	219	72.5	80
	Black or African American	6	0.6	2
	Asian	15	5.0	14
	American Indian or Alaska Native	2	0.7	0.2
	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	2	0.7	0



Employment status (Multiple responses allowed)  n=262	Full-time	115	38.1	
	Part-time	44	14.6	
	Student	15	5.0	
	Homemaker	53	17.5	
	Disabled	2	0.7	
	Retired	21	0.7	
	Unemployed	12	4.0	
	<i>Missing</i>	<i>54</i>	<i>17.6</i>	
Education  n=249	Some high school	3	1.0	3.0
	High school diploma or GED	17	5.6	10.7
	Associate degree or technical training/certificate	27	8.9	14.3
	College degree	93	30.8	72.0
	Graduate or professional degree	109	36.1	(included in college degree category above)
	<i>Missing</i>	<i>53</i>	<i>17.5</i>	

## Description of Qualitative Data Sources

<i>Participant Type</i>	<b>Number of Key Informant Interviews</b>	<b>Number of Listening Sessions</b>	<b>Total Participants</b>	<b>Themes</b>
<i>Faith leaders</i>	2	1	4	<p>Issues facing their community</p> <p>Support needed by parents and youth</p> <p><u>Hispanic leaders</u>: Hispanics' parenting strategies &amp; specific needs</p>
<i>Parents</i>	3	3	11	<p>Parenting strategies in dealing with substances.</p> <p>Cultural and social norms around substances</p> <p><u>Indian parents</u>: Indians' parenting strategies &amp; specific needs</p>
<i>Substance use disorder experts</i>	3	0	3	<p>Trends in substance use in Somerset Hills</p> <p>Parenting strategies once a problem is identified</p> <p>Needs of families</p>
<i>Public servants</i>	6	0	6	<p>Current substance use environment and trends</p> <p>Attitudes around substance use consequences</p>
<i>Young adults who live in or grew up in Somerset Hills</i>	4	0	4	<p>Growing up in Somerset Hills</p> <p>Social norms of substance use among young people</p> <p>Attitudes around substance use consequences</p>
<i>Educators/ youth leaders</i>	4	0	4	<p>Needs of students</p> <p>Current substance use prevention measures</p> <p>Gaps in substance use prevention</p>

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