



Community in Conversation Community Assessment: 2022 Findings

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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, this annual community assessment is the second of a series funded for five years. Data in this report are based on the online survey of Community in Conversation 2022 unless otherwise noted.

Key Points

- Current youth substance use rates in the Somerset Hills are unknown because youth substance use has not been measured since 2019. Nationwide, COVID-19 restrictions caused a widespread and significant delay in the initiation of substance use for substance-naive teens.
- **Parents' top concerns about their children are mental health-related**, and are at higher levels than last year, despite the easing of COVID-19 restrictions. Parents of middle school-aged youth expressed elevated concerns about their children dying by suicide.
- Youth are vaping nicotine more frequently now that quarantine measures have ended. Fewer adults consider vaping a 'great risk.' **Parents are concerned about their teens vaping nicotine, but they begin to worry well after the age that the average youth has started experimenting with vaping.**
- Fewer parents are talking to their kids about substance use early and often. During the crucial ages of 11 to 13 years old, **only 37% of parents talked to their kids about the dangers of substance use** 'often' or 'a lot' in 2022, down from 64% last year.
- While the increased perceived risk of marijuana use is evidence that education efforts are effective, adults still consider marijuana the least harmful substance to use. **Despite evidence of the risks of high potency marijuana, especially for youth, marijuana use is becoming more accepted by adults in the Somerset Hills, including youth marijuana use.**
- **Only 35% of adults who keep marijuana at home lock it up.**
- Legislation restricts law enforcement oversight and available consequence for minors with marijuana and alcohol, creating a gap in consequences that law enforcement previously filled.
- Binge drinking is common in the Somerset Hills, especially among young adults. Adults of all ages report higher levels of perceived peer binge drinking this year compared to last year's assessment.
- Opioid misuse persists and fentanyl is driving overdoses. Despite a decrease in opioids prescribed in Somerset County, **the number of overdoses increased** in

the past year from already record highs, and the people overdosing are trending older.

- Latino families in the Somerset Hills face economic and educational barriers. Spanish-speaking youth in the Somerset Hills are at elevated risk of not finishing high school. CiC has an opportunity to **decrease the stigma of substance use disorders in the Latino communities** in the Somerset Hills.

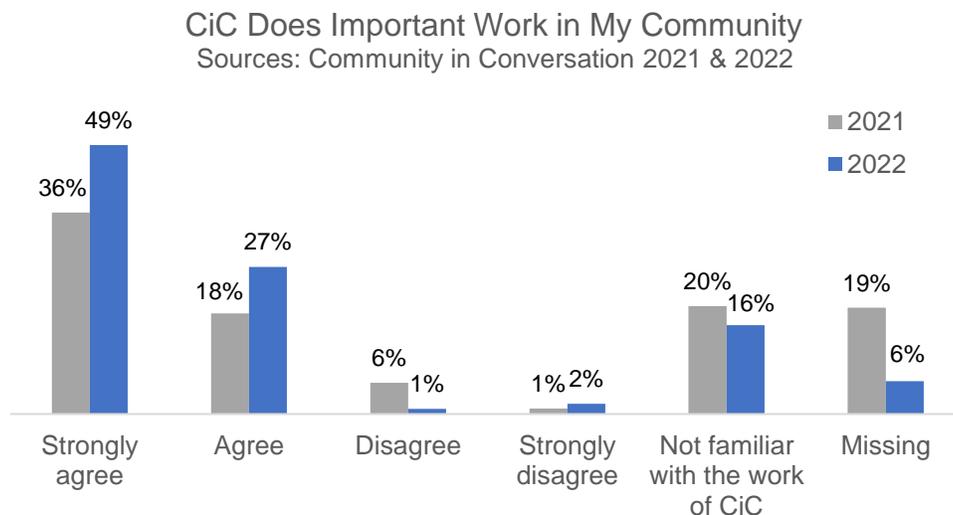
Assessment Methods

The Community in Conversation survey was online in February of 2022. A total of 380 people took the survey, and 212 responses were eligible for analysis. The sample overrepresented Bernardsville because Community in Crisis (CiC) is headquartered in Bernardsville and enjoys high levels of community support. Women and parents of children under 21 years were also overrepresented; about three-quarters of respondents were women and 58% were parents of children between the ages of 5 and 21.

The survey overrepresents White residents by 8% but achieved close approximation (within 2%) of population estimates for other races. This year CiC translated the survey into Spanish, which we anticipate will increase the participation of Spanish-speaking residents in future assessments. We will move toward more representation in future years by focusing on efforts to recruit more community members outside of Bernardsville, more men, and more Spanish speakers with partnerships with community groups who work in and serve the populations of interest.

Compared to last year, more survey respondents reported that CiC does important work in their community and fewer respondents were unfamiliar with the organization. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1



COVID-19 and Youth Substance Use

In 2021, the national Monitoring the Future survey reported the biggest drop in adolescent substance use ever recorded. Social distancing restrictions put in place to curb the spread of COVID-19 limited social interaction, prevented groups of teens from congregating, and increased adult supervision of teens. **Nationally, the decrease in**

youth substance use is due to the delay of initiation of substance use in a large cohort of teens, rather than the discontinuation of substance use among those already using substances.

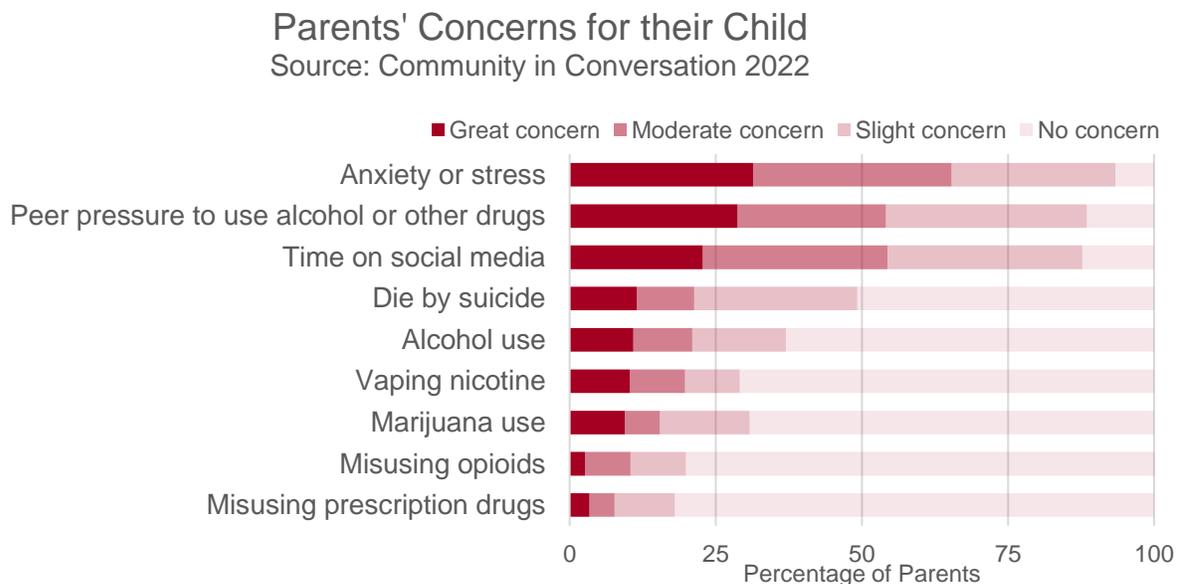
Unfortunately, the 2021 Pride Survey to collect youth substance use data did not garner high rates of parental consent and schools conducted the survey during a week of high numbers of students absent due to the Omicron surge of COVID-19. The confluence of these factors resulted in a sample size too low to draw generalizable conclusions from the student data. *As a result, we do not fully understand how the pandemic restrictions have affected youth substance use rates locally.* This may be an opportunity for a cohort of kids to delay initiation and sustain reduced substance use. Alternatively, will the isolation and negative mental health consequences of the pandemic increase substance use among youth?

Mental Health

Parents are increasingly concerned about their children’s mental health

Social distancing restrictions created significant and lasting challenges for the mental health of parents, adolescents, and children, and local schools focus their resources on social-emotional support and mental wellness for students and parents. As shown in Figure 2, of the concerns parents expressed for their oldest child under the age of 21, the top 5 concerns were related to mental health. Parents remain very worried about their adolescents’ mental health, even after schools and extracurricular activities have returned to normal.

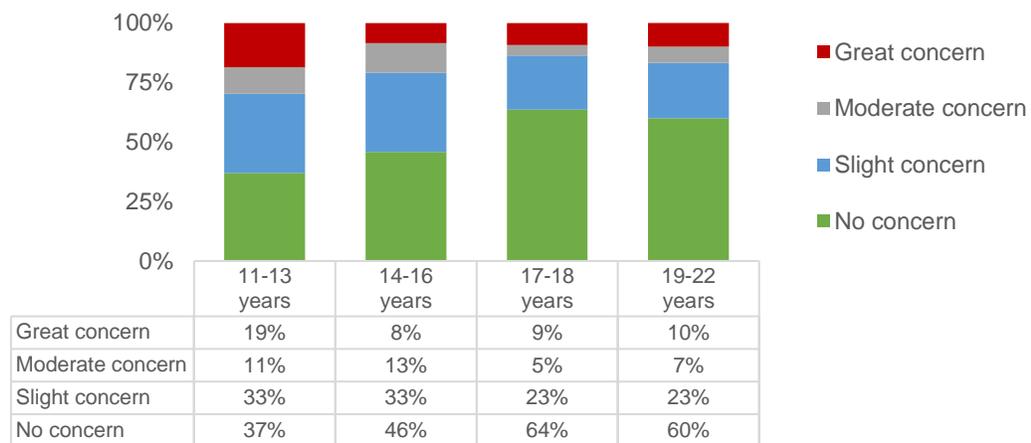
Figure 2: Parents’ top concerns for their child



64% of parents surveyed reported ‘moderate concern’ or ‘great concern’ about their child’s anxiety or stress. As shown in figure 3, parents of preteens raised alarming concerns: almost a third (30%) reported ‘moderate’ or ‘great concern’ that their child would die by suicide. While very concerned about their teen’s mental health, the established link between substance use and mental health problems cannot be understated. Parents who worry that their teens are using marijuana seem to understand that their child is at increased risk of death by suicide. According to the Community in Conversation survey in 2022, a strong correlation exists between parents’ concern about their child using marijuana and their concerns about their child dying by suicide. Youth in the Somerset Hills also report this link, students who use marijuana are 1.8 times more likely to think about dying by suicide ‘often’ or ‘a lot’ than those who do not use marijuana (Pride 2019)

Figure 3

Parents' Concerns about their Child Dying by Suicide
Source: Community in Conversations Online Survey 2022



Mental health and substance use

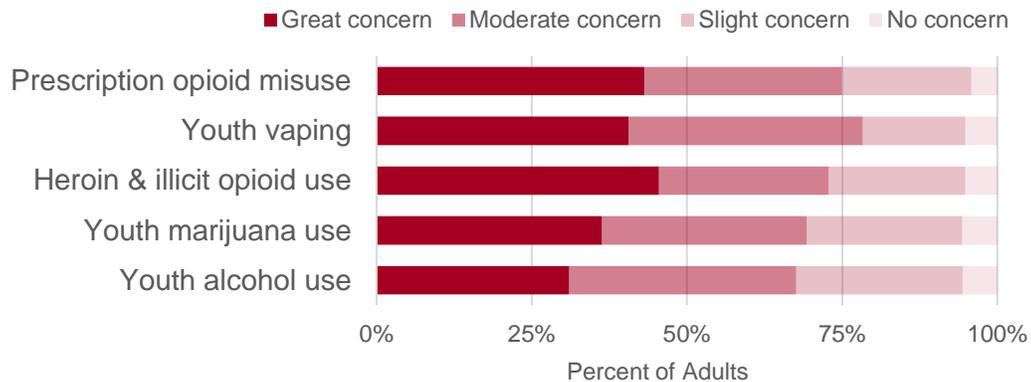
The shift in focus from substance use to mental health has decreased the regularity of parents reinforcing the nonuse of substances with their children. Parents are not talking to their kids about the dangers of substance use as often or as early as they did in 2021. During the crucial ages of 11 to 13 years old, only 37% of parents talked to their kids about the dangers of substance use ‘often’ or ‘a lot’ in 2022, down from 64% last year.

Adults in the Somerset Hills are concerned about youth substance use in their community, but they are not necessarily seeing it in their own children. Adults

expressed great concern about substance use in general, but parents do not mirror these concerns for their own children. As shown in figure 4, adult respondents ranked their concerns about youth substance use with opioid misuse as the highest concern, however figure 2 showed opioid misuse as the lowest concern of parents for their own child.

Fig.

Concerns about Community-Level Substance Use
Source: Community in Conversation Online Survey 2022

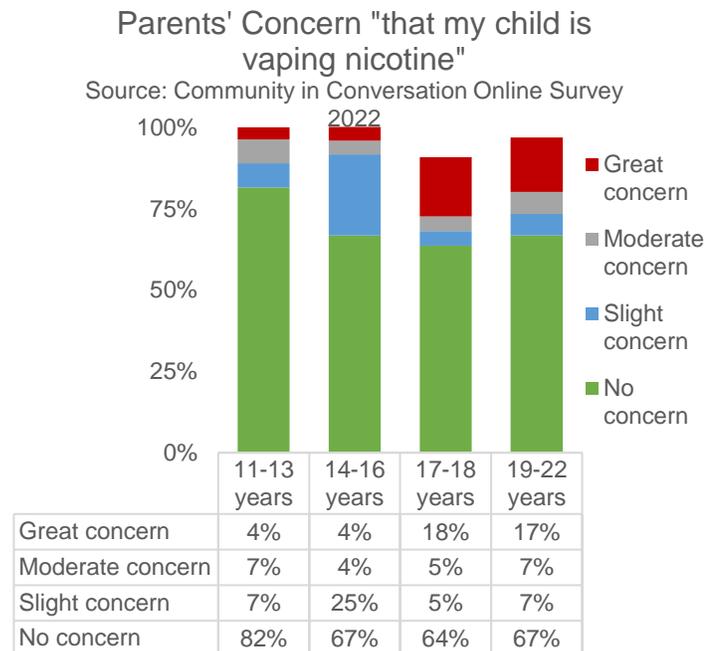


Vaping

Vaping is on the rise in schools after COVID-19 protocols end

Key informant interviews with school administrators and school resource officers reported that in-school e-cigarette use dramatically decreased while pandemic social isolation protocols were in place, such as limiting access to school bathrooms to one student at a time. However, students report that since the bathrooms reopened in December 2021, **vaping is once again occurring at local schools, especially in bathrooms.**

Figure 5



Signs of waning adult concern

There is a disconnect between when teens start vaping and when parents develop concern for their teens vaping. **In the Somerset Hills, the average age of initiation for vaping is 15 years old for high school students.** (Pride 2019) However, only 8% of parents with kids between the ages of 14 and 16 report ‘moderate’ or ‘great’ concern that their child is vaping nicotine. (See figure 5)

Perceptions of peer use, or social norms, can be a predictor of substance use. While useful to measure, perceptions of peer use often overinflate actual rates of substance use, so these cannot be interpreted as the prevalence of use. **The social normality of vaping nicotine among young adults (over 18 years) shows signs of decreasing compared to last year’s assessment.** The number of young adults who reported that ‘none’ of their peers vape nicotine increased from 13% last year to 24% this year. Conversely, the percentage of young adults who reported that ‘all’ or ‘most’ of their peers vaped decreased from 18% last year to 6% this year. Compared to last year’s assessment, young adults’ perception of the harms associated with vaping nicotine have not changed significantly. However, there was **a significant decline in the perceived harm of vaping nicotine among adults over 35 years.** According to the Community in Conversation online survey in 2021, 64% of adults over 35 years considered vaping nicotine ‘great risk;’ that percentage fell to 49% in 2022.

Marijuana

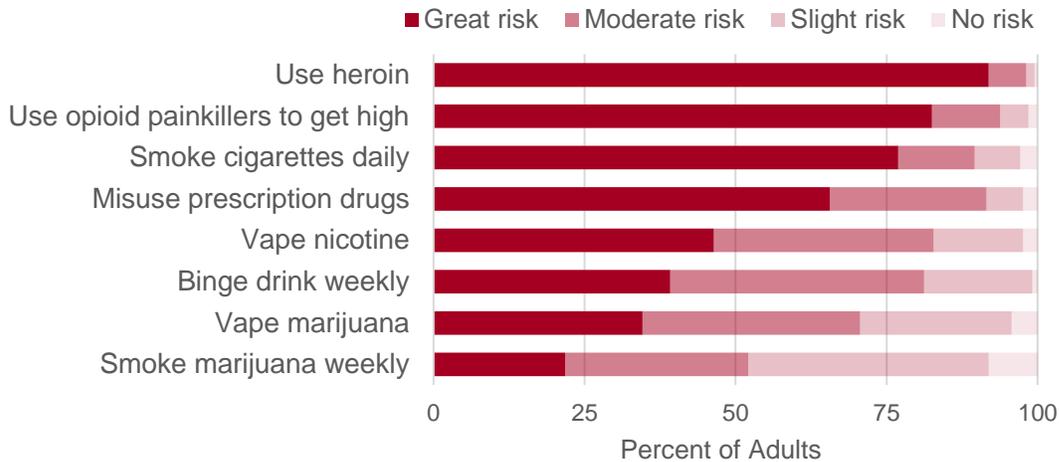
Perceived risk is low, but shows signs of increasing

Despite the dangers of today’s high potency cannabis products, **marijuana, by far, has the lowest perceived risk of any substance we measure.** (See figure 6.) Compared to last year, the perceived harm of regular marijuana use has increased. About half of the respondents report regular marijuana use as ‘moderately’ or ‘greatly’ harmful, compared to 90% for smoking tobacco and 80% for binge drinking. Young adults are significantly less likely to perceive ‘moderate’ or ‘great’ risk in marijuana use.

Vaping very high-potency cannabis products lead to more severe health consequences than the use of other forms of cannabis, **some adults in the Somerset Hills understand that vaping marijuana poses more health risks than smoking marijuana.** 52% of adults consider smoking marijuana ‘moderate’ or ‘great’ risk, while 71% consider vaping marijuana ‘moderate’ or ‘great’ risk.

Figure 6

Perceived Harm of Substance Use Source: Community in Conversation 2022



With the legalization of MJ, this is not what we expected to see. We need more data to declare this a trend, but this assessment shows preliminary evidence that the **marijuana education efforts by Community in Crisis and other community organizations are increasing the perceived harm of regular marijuana use.**

Familiarity with marijuana is associated with a lower perception of risk. Adults in the Somerset Hills are significantly more likely to consider regular marijuana use harmful if they do not know many people or anyone who uses marijuana. This has the potential to further decrease the perception of harm as the legalization of recreational marijuana changes use patterns.

The perceived risk of marijuana use is low, even among nonusers. 100% of young adults who use marijuana monthly or more frequently perceive regular marijuana use as low or slight risk, but 53% of those who do not use marijuana perceive it as low or slight risk. This may have implications for prevention in the future to educate nonusers on the risks of marijuana use.

Marijuana use shows signs of increasing social acceptability

When we asked respondents how many of their friends use substances **21% of young adults said 'most' or 'all' adults they know use marijuana**, compared to only 4% of adults over 35. That was about the same as last year. Interestingly, the number of young adults who said no one they know uses marijuana almost doubled this year. It went from 8% last year to 15% this year. This is not enough data to declare a trend, but it will be interesting to see if a pattern emerges over time of more young adults seeing peers abstaining from marijuana use.

It is common for parents to choose to turn a 'blind eye' to marijuana use; some parents will allow their teens to attend parties where they suspect alcohol and marijuana will be present. (Community in Conversation, 2021) From 2021 to 2022, adults in the Somerset Hills showed signs of **weakening disapproval of youth substance use**. Fewer adults in the Somerset Hills strongly disagreed with the statement "I believe that occasional marijuana use by high school-aged youth is okay" in 2022 compared to 2021. In 2021, 73% of adults strongly disagreed that marijuana use in high school students was okay, but in 2022, only 61% strongly disagreed. For college students, 55% and 51% of adults strongly disapproved of marijuana use in 2021 and 2022, respectively. This is a potential trend we will continue to track.

Marijuana is more available to young people

An increasing number of young people live in homes where adults keep marijuana. **This year, more adults reported keeping cannabis products at home, but fewer reported locking them up**. Twelve percent of respondents surveyed reported keeping cannabis products in their homes, an increase from 9% last year. Of those who keep cannabis products at home, 35% lock them up, which is a decrease from 44% last year. In 2019, 62% of 12th-grade students reported marijuana was 'fairly easy' or 'very easy' for them to obtain. (Pride, 2019) Police report that teens use social media to connect with peers from whom they can buy marijuana.

The new legislation legalizing marijuana created unintended consequences for local law enforcement for both underage marijuana and alcohol use. New regulations inhibit police from intervening when they observe youth using alcohol or marijuana for fear of receiving a charge of a potentially career-ending civil rights violation resulting from an illegal interrogation or search of a minor. Local law enforcement officers are making interactions with youth as brief as possible to minimize the risk of an officer receiving a civil rights violation. If officers observe underage alcohol or marijuana use, they report that they ask the youth to discard the alcohol or marijuana but cannot ask if they have more alcohol or marijuana. In practice, this looks like police asking minors to pour out the beers that they're holding and take their cooler (probably full of beer) and go home.

Police officers have the option of writing a curbside warning to underage youth using marijuana or alcohol. In practice, this is rarely done due to the arduous process for officers and the lack of consequences for youth. Police officers ask the youth's name for the warning but cannot verify that the name given is indeed the youth's name. Officers explain that the process for each warning results in 45 minutes of paperwork when they get back to the station. Finally, police reported a frustrating lack of consequences for getting a ticket, explaining that the young person can tear up the warning with no consequences. Theoretically, once an underage youth gets three warnings from one town's police department (police departments cannot share names of youth who have

received warnings across departments), police refer them to a CiC substance use referral program, which provides screening, brief intervention, and referral to treatment (SBIRT) as appropriate. Once the youth receive the referral to the program, there is no requirement that they attend. For these reasons, police are not issuing warnings to youth who are caught using substances and **there are few to no legal consequences for underage marijuana and alcohol use.**

Alcohol Use

A part of life in the Somerset Hills

Drinking alcohol is widely reported as part of the culture in the Somerset Hills as shown by Community in Conversation online survey results, but there are indications that the amount of binge drinking (drinking 5 or more drinks of alcohol within a few hours) among young adults is decreasing. **The majority (79%) of young adults (18-35 years) surveyed reported binge drinking in the past year, but this is a decrease from 2021, when 85% of young adults reported binge drinking in the past year.** Perceptions of how many of their young adult peers binge drink declined as well. According to the Community in Conversation online survey, 12% of young adults reported that ‘all’ or ‘most’ of their peers binge drink; this is down from 21% last year.

The social norms of alcohol use are apparent in survey responses about youth alcohol use. Only 30% of adults ‘strongly’ disapprove of alcohol use by college-aged youth, and 58% ‘strongly’ disapprove of alcohol use by high school youth.

While binge drinking is more common among young adults than adults over 35 years, **adults of all ages reported more of their peers binge drinking in the past year, compared to the 2021 assessment.**

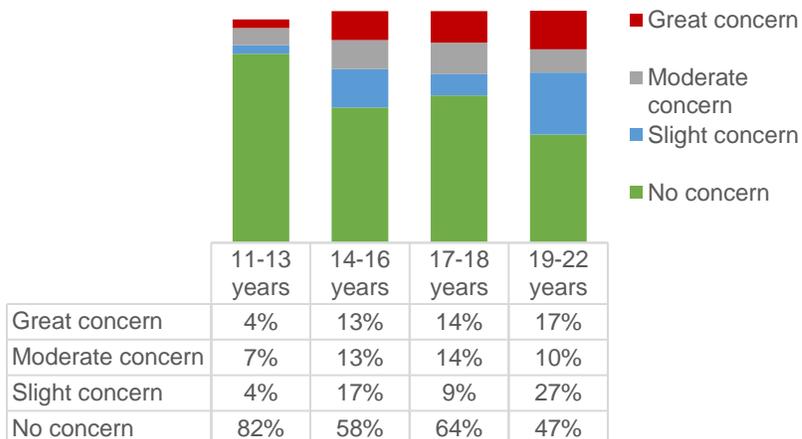
A bright spot in the young adult binge drinking is that only 12% of young adults reported that most or all of their peers binge drink, which is down from 21% in the 2021 assessment.

Like vaping, parents report concerns about youth alcohol use after the age of initiation. In 14 to 16-year-olds, when kids try alcohol for the first time,

Figure 7

Parents' Concern: That my child is using alcohol

Source: Community in Conversation 2022



only 26% of parents expressed 'great' or 'moderate' concern for their own child, as shown in figure 7. While parents discussed social hosting as a persistent problem in the 2021 Community in Conversation assessment, adults have softened their stance on social hosting in the past year. Strong disapproval of social hosting fell from 76% of adults in 2021 to 70% in 2022 according to the Community in Conversation online survey.

In the Somerset Hills, many point to the annual horseracing event as a symbol of decadence and drunkenness. While the Far Hills Police Department reports lower than normal substance-related incidents at The Hunt in 2021, attendees reported widespread intoxication, especially among young people. The culture of substance use does not come without cost; two-thirds of survey respondents reported that they or a family member have been affected by substance use disorder.

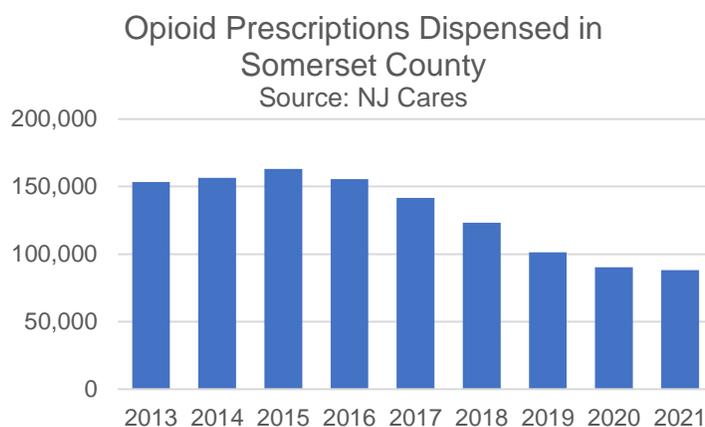
Opioids & Overdoses

Overdoses rise, despite the decline in prescriptions for opioids

The ubiquity of fentanyl in counterfeit pills and heroin today makes opioids more dangerous than ever. Last year, about 96% of the suspected heroin submissions to forensic labs statewide contained fentanyl or fentanyl analogs according to the Office of Drug Monitoring & Analysis of the New Jersey State Police. Law enforcement confiscated counterfeit pills cut with fentanyl in Somerset County last year, including in Bernards Township.

While the number of opioids prescribed in the Somerset County has steadily decreased in the past decade as part of the effort to decrease the availability of opioids in our community, the Community in Conversation assessment found a significant increase in the number of young adults receiving a prescription for opioids in the past year. Additionally, the percentage of adults who know someone who uses opioids not prescribed to them increased from 16% to 26% in the past year.

Figure 8

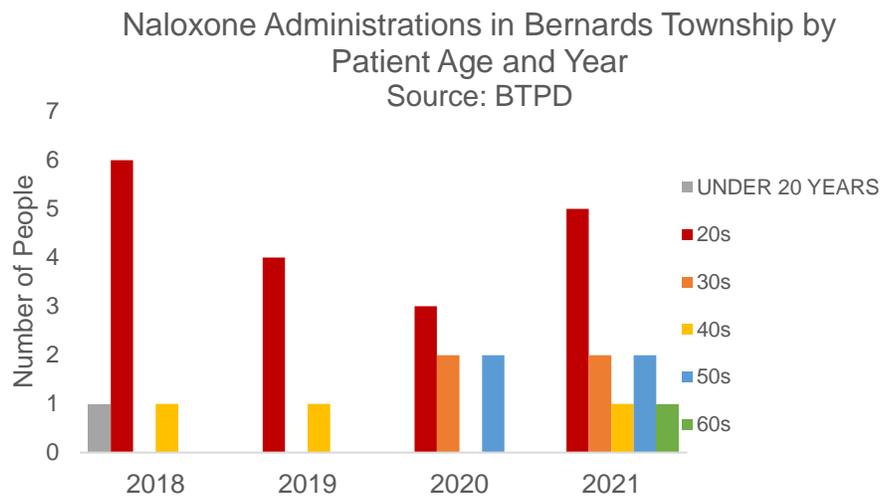


Perceived peer use and self-reported young adult use increased in the past year for both prescription opioids and heroin according to the Community in Conversation online survey. The percentage of people who said they knew someone who used heroin

increased from 7% to 12% this year compared to last year. In terms of the perceived harm of misusing opioids, 100% of Asian adults reported misuse as a ‘great risk,’ compared to 84% of White adults, and 71% of Latino adults.

The Bernards Township Police Department reports an **increase in the number of naloxone administrations, especially in older adults**. In 2018 and 2019, most of the people receiving naloxone were in their twenties; in 2021, patients ranged in age from their 20s to 60s.

Figure 9



There is a new law that requires the police to leave behind naloxone after they administer naloxone at a scene. This will increase the amount of naloxone available to those in the community who have overdosed previously. While this should save lives in the future, we anticipate the number of naloxone administrations by EMS and police to decrease because more people are receiving naloxone from friends and family without calling for help. Reported naloxone administrations will increasingly underrepresent the true extent of overdoses prevented.

Latinos in the Somerset Hills

CiC has committed to a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan that includes focusing on underserved groups within the Somerset Hills. At 9% of the population, **Latino residents are the second-largest minority group in the Somerset Hills**, concentrated primarily in the town of Bernardsville. (U.S. Census ACS, 2020) The school population is more diverse than the overall demographic make-up, reflecting the growing diversity of the towns. 59% of students are White, 24% Asian, 12% Hispanic, and 12% are of two or more races. Of the two school districts serving the Somerset Hills, the schools in the Somerset Hills School District (SHSD) serves a higher percentage of Latino students,

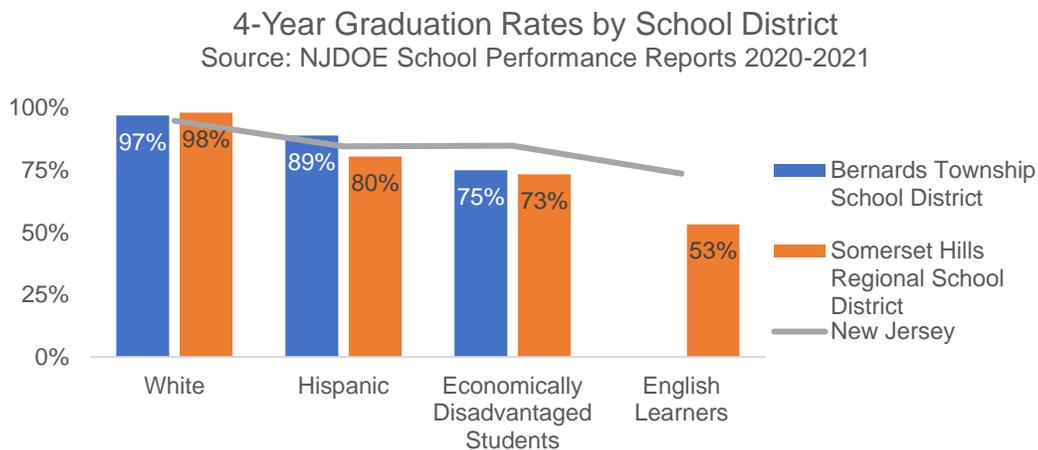
where 22% of the student body is Hispanic. (NJ School Performance Report, 2019-2020)

Latino immigrants face socioeconomic challenges

Great socioeconomic disparities exist within the Somerset Hills, amplified further by ethnicity. These **economic disparities affect Latino families more than white families.** Latino respondents of Community in Conversation were significantly more likely to report an annual income of less than \$88k. 19% of white respondents reported a household income below \$88k, compared to 59% of Latino respondents.

Immigrant populations face tremendous barriers to education and health success. When new immigrants come to Somerset Hills schools, they struggle with both language and course content. (Community in Conversation 2021) As a result, fewer immigrant students graduate high school. **As shown in figure 10, in SHSD, only 53% of English learners graduate in 4 years, compared to 80% of Hispanic students and 98% of White students.** (NJ School Performance Report 2020-2021) Latino respondents of Community in Conversation were highly significantly less likely to have advanced degrees, compared to White residents. 47% of Latino residents reported having a college degree or higher, compared to 84% of white respondents.

Figure 10



Language acts as a barrier to accessing services, including substance use prevention and recovery services. 16% of students in SHSD speak Spanish at home and 7% are English learners. (NJ School Performance Report 2020-2021) Spanish speakers are least likely to speak English 'very well' compared to those who speak another language as their first language. Only a third (30%) of Spanish speakers in Somerset County speak English 'very well,' compared to 91% of Asian language speakers. (U.S. Census Bureau ACS, 2020) Rather than substance use-related services, a local faith leader

reported Latino youth in need of sex education services to prevent unwanted pregnancy. (Community in Conversation 2021)

Latinos and substance use

Substance use affects the diverse Latino communities in the Somerset Hills. Clergy members serving Hispanic families describe newly immigrated men working seasonal jobs and using substances, primarily alcohol, liberally during their months off work. Clergy report that women tolerate men's heavy alcohol use, and the men are rarely referred to substance use treatment services. (Community in Conversation 2021) While only 19 Latinos responded to the Community in Conversation online survey in 2022, Latinos were the least likely of any race to perceive binge drinking as a 'great risk.' Asian adults (85%) were most likely to report binge drinking as a 'great risk,' followed by White adults (39%), and Latino adults (29%).

While data are not available on what proportion of admissions are immigrants, 15% of Somerset County residents' substance use treatment admissions are Latino. (NJ DHS Substance Abuse Overview Somerset County 2020) Nicotine use is a disproportional burden to Latinos. At the county level, the highest percentage of current smokers are Hispanics (13%). (Community Health Needs Assessment Survey Data Somerset County, Bruno & Ridgway, 2021)

Despite the small sample size among Latinos in the Community in Conversation online survey in 2022, Latinos' responses indicated less tolerance of substance use in youth than the general cohort and less likely to 'strongly agree' that substance use disorder is a disease (61% of Latinos vs. 76%), and slightly less likely to 'strongly agree' that those in recovery go on to lead productive lives (43% of Latinos vs. 46%). [An opportunity exists to decrease the stigma of substance use disorder in the Somerset Hills Latino communities.](#)

Conclusions

As the legislation of substances evolves, the patterns of use and attitudes will evolve as well. Community in Crisis is well-positioned to respond to these changes and meet the needs of the Somerset Hills. This annual assessment will fill the gap created by the inconsistent administration of the Pride youth substance use survey.

This second community assessment of substance use in the Somerset Hills paints a picture of a community of individuals still recovering from the mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic but moving toward a return to life as normal. Mental health did not rebound as soon as restrictions eased but has worsened in the past year. As schools and parents labor to address adolescents' mental health struggles, substance use prevention efforts have not been at the forefront of their minds. The "head in the sand" effect that we described last year in which parents were concerned about

community-level youth substance use but had little concern about their own teen's substance use has persisted in substance use, but not regarding mental health. Parents expressed high levels of concern about their children's mental health.

We continue to measure attitudes around marijuana as the legal landscape changes in New Jersey. As marijuana availability increases, we will continue to watch availability for those under 21 years. Marijuana use may continue to increase in acceptability as more adults use marijuana, which may affect perceived risk and youth use.

The opioid epidemic continues to worsen with the ubiquity of fentanyl. As naloxone becomes more available, nonfatal overdoses may be difficult to monitor using police-provided data. Special attention should be given to adults and older adults who are increasingly overdosing.

CiC will publish a summary of this report on the CiC website and distribute it to community leaders and CiC supporters.

Appendix A: Domestic Violence Incidents

The Board of Trustees recommended tracking domestic violence incidents as a proxy measure of substance use. Bernards Township Police Department has provided the following data on domestic violence incidents since 2019. Efforts to access these data from other police departments are ongoing. Data in the chart below includes domestic violence incidents reported through March 31, 2022.

Figure 11

