

Survey shows drop in youth drug, alcohol use in Franklin County, North Quabbin

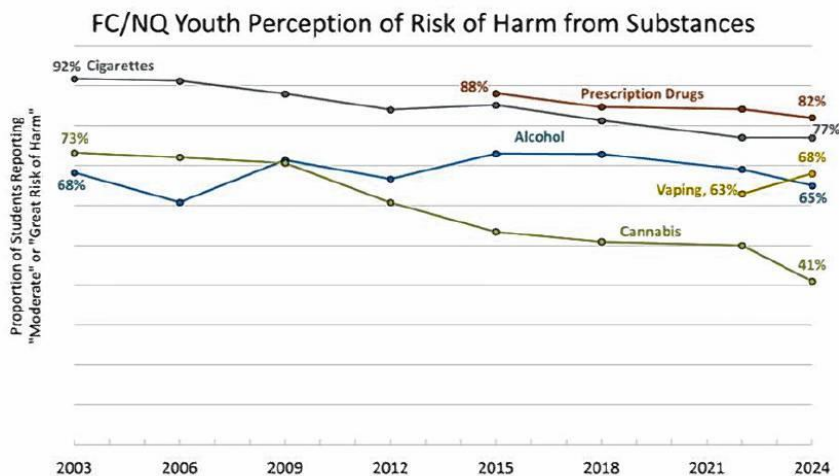
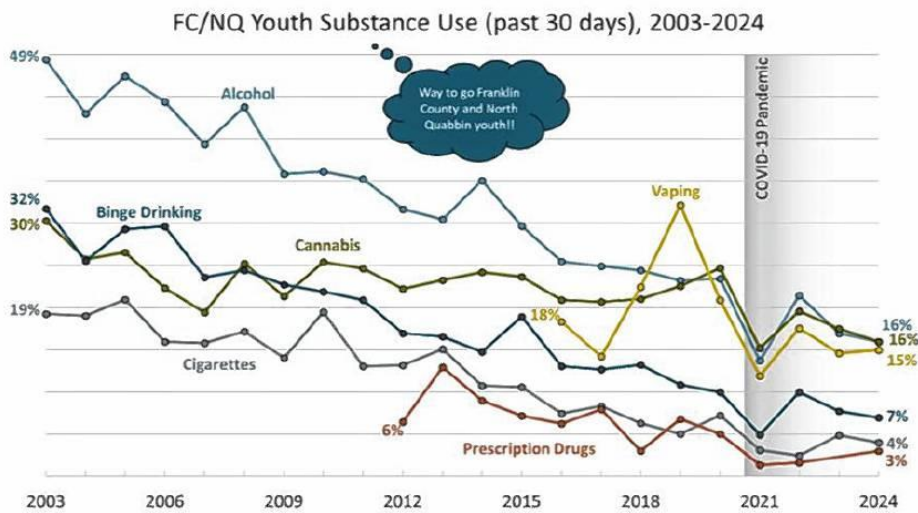
By ANTHONY CAMMALLERI, Staff Writer

<https://www.recorder.com/Survey-shows-drop-in-youth-drug-alcohol-use-in-Franklin-County-North-Quabbin-57471489>

Published: 10-20-2024 10:01 AM

Modified: 10-20-2024 5:08 PM

This article is the first in a four-part series diving into the results of the Communities That Care Coalition’s 2024 Student Health Survey. The Communities That Care Coalition is co-hosted by the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) and Community Action Pioneer Valley.



Teen drug and alcohol use in Franklin County and the North Quabbin region has steadily declined since 2003, according to the Communities That Care Coalition’s 2024 Student Health Survey.

CONTRIBUTED GRAPHIC/COMMUNITIES THAT CARE COALITION

Teen drug and alcohol use in Franklin County and the North Quabbin region has steadily declined since 2003, according to the Communities That Care Coalition's 2024 Student Health Survey.

Teen drug and alcohol use in Franklin County and the North Quabbin region has steadily declined since 2003, according to the Communities That Care Coalition's 2024 Student Health Survey. Contributed Graphic/Communities That Care Coalition

Results from a 2024 survey show that middle and high school students in Franklin County and the North Quabbin region are smoking, vaping, and using drugs and alcohol significantly less in 2024 than they have for the last 10 years.

Since 2003, the Communities That Care Coalition has surveyed more than 40,000 students from all nine public school districts in Franklin County and the North Quabbin region to evaluate youth habits and overall emotional and physical health.

Within a 30-day window preceding the 2014 survey, roughly 11% of students smoked cigarettes, 9% used prescription drugs without a prescription, 15% reported binge drinking, 24% reported using marijuana and 35% reported drinking. This year, the number of students in grades eight, 10 and 12 who reported using marijuana or drinking 30 days prior to taking the survey dropped to roughly 16% for both vices, while binge drinking rates dwindled to 7%, prescription drug use dropped to 3% and rates of cigarette smoking dropped to 4%.

Although the survey only began asking young people about vaping in 2016, when 18% of students surveyed reported having used electronic cigarettes within 30 days of the survey, vaping rates, now at 15%, have dropped slightly since 2016 and significantly from a peak in 2019 when roughly 32% of students reported vaping.

While the use of popular recreational substances such as cannabis, alcohol and tobacco has subsided in recent years, Communities That Care Coalition Coordinator Kat Allen said the region's teens see the substances as being less "risky" than they did in years past, with perception of the risks associated with cannabis use having shifted the most drastically.

"We have big money involved in the cannabis business too now," Allen said. "Regardless of the politics of legalization and some of the benefits that came from decriminalization and medicinal use, suddenly we have advertising, and the conversation changed quite a bit around cannabis."

Allen also noted that since marijuana was made legal for adult recreational use in 2016, use rates among teens have dropped, but perception of the drug's harm among teens has decreased significantly since marijuana hit the legal market. In 2016, roughly 52% of the teens felt cannabis use caused a "moderate" or "great" risk of harm. This year, only 41% of students consider the substance to be risky.

"A lot of young people see cannabis as sort of like the cure-all drug. We just need to keep remembering to send the message to our young people that it's different when your brain is developing than when you're an adult," Allen said. "It's a different thing for an adult to casually or recreationally use marijuana periodically than for a teenager to use cannabis."

Despite the rate of teens smoking cigarettes decreasing from 19% to 4% between 2003 and 2024, students' perception of the risks associated with smoking dropped from 92% to 77% of teens believing the practice was greatly or moderately harmful within the same time period.

Communities That Care Coalition Evaluation Coordinator Nick Hathaway speculated that the disparity between a decreasing student smoker population and an increase in positive perceptions on smoking might be due to changes in the approach to youth health education.

"There were a lot of anti-smoking ads back then," Hathaway said. "As smoking dropped off, a lot of the education dropped off, too."

Allen also added that teens' perceptions of substances and likelihood of using common substances are often influenced by their family members' and peers' perceptions of a particular substance.

"Sixteen percent of Franklin County and North Quabbin students reported use of cannabis in the past 30 days. ... If we break that down and we look at it by kids whose parents think it's OK and kids whose friends think it's OK to use cannabis, 48% of those whose parents and friends think it's OK to use use," Allen explained. "If kids think that their parents and their friends both think it's wrong, 2% of those kids use, so the messages that parents give around these substances is really important."

Anthony Cammalleri can be reached acammalleri@recorder.com or 413-930-4429.

Communities That Care Coalition survey shows decrease in youth self-harm, suicidal planning

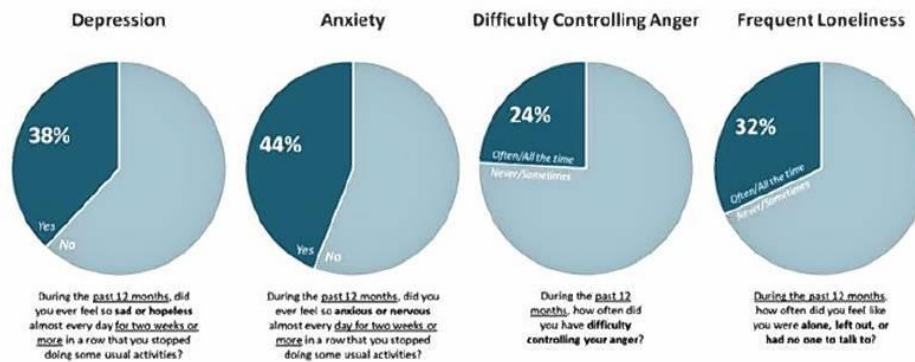
By ANTHONY CAMMALLERI, Staff Writer

Published: 10-21-2024 6:05 PM

<https://www.recorder.com/Communities-That-Care-Coalition-survey-shows-decrease-in-youth-self-harm-suicidal-planning-57585270>

This article is the second in a four-part series exploring the results of the Communities That Care Coalition’s 2024 Student Health Survey. The Communities That Care Coalition is co-hosted by the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) and Community Action Pioneer Valley.

2024 Rates of FC/NQ Student Mental Health Challenges



Results from the Communities that Care Coalition’s 2024 Student Health Survey.

CONTRIBUTED IMAGE/COMMUNITIES THAT CARE COALITION

While rates of depression and anxiety among Franklin County and North Quabbin area students have steadily increased over the last 10 to 20 years, data collected this year in the Communities That Care Coalition’s Student Health Survey indicates a slight decrease in reported self-harm or suicidal planning.

Since 2003, the Communities That Care Coalition has surveyed more than 40,000 students in grades eight, 10 and 12 from all nine public school districts in Franklin County and the North Quabbin region to evaluate youth habits and overall emotional and physical health.

In a portion of the survey titled “Youth Mental Health and Wellness,” teens were asked questions such as whether they had recently contemplated, planned or attempted suicide or engaged in self-harm, or whether they felt too anxious or depressed to take part in day-to-day activities.

Although the percentage of students who reported feeling “too depressed for usual activities” increased from 22% to 38% between 2006 and 2024, the rate of students surveyed that reported suicidal thoughts decreased from 18% to 13% between 2005 and 2024, with peaks of roughly 21% in 2018 and 2022.

“All of the measures were really increasing starting around 2012, which does coincide with when most youth got smartphones for the first time. We’re really at these pretty epidemic levels here, but fortunately, the best news that we have from this year’s survey is we’re starting to see declines,” Communities That Care Coalition Coordinator Kat Allen said. “In terms of the depression and suicide measures, we’re seeing some relief. That is not to say that we need to back off and not pay attention. They’re all still too high. We’re still at a real mental health crisis, but we seem to be doing some things right, and we need to continue and increase those efforts.”

Even though the rate of students reporting they had attempted suicide dropped from 7% to 6% from 2003 to 2024, and the rate of students who had planned suicide dropped from its peak of roughly 14% in 2022 down to 11%, Allen noted that 62% of students surveyed had consistently felt too sad, hopeless, anxious or nervous to partake in their usual activities, had difficulty controlling their anger or felt alone.

This year, however, Allen said students were not only surveyed on negative mental health challenges they had experienced, but on signs of positive mental health as well. In the 12 months prior to taking the survey, 61% of students reported feeling “happy or joyful,” while 53% reported feeling like they had a sense of control over their lives and 53% of students reported feeling “excited or optimistic.”

Communities That Care Coalition Evaluation Coordinator Nick Hathaway said the decision to include questions about more positive mental health experiences was made in an effort to add context and perspective to the annual survey.

“It was just about giving a more robust picture of the spectrum of mental health that we’re looking at. The convention is to look at the problems, the struggles and challenges that people are having, but that’s really such a small part of the spectrum of the human experience,” Hathaway said. “Of the students that are having those ‘hard feelings,’ the majority of those students are at least experiencing those positive feelings, too. That’s not to dismiss the [mental health challenges students face].”

A demographic analysis of the survey results showed that race, age, gender identity and sexuality were all factors that correlated with mental health, noting that males generally reported more positive mental health than females or gender-diverse students, and that white and Asian students reported more positive mental health trends than their Indigenous, Latino or Black peers.

Hathaway said there was also a correlation between the amount of hours students reported sleeping each night and their mental health.

“This is a correlation that’s kind of causative in both ways. For instance, we know that more sleep and better sleep quality improves emotional regulation. We also know that anybody who’s experiencing more depression and anxiety is going to have a harder time getting good sleep,” Hathaway said. “It’s really a push and pull sort of thing, but it’s just something that we wanted to point out to encourage prioritizing sleep.”

Anthony Cammalleri can be reached at acammalleri@recorder.com or 413-930-4429.

Survey shows teen screen use, on the rise since 2007, dips from 2021 peak

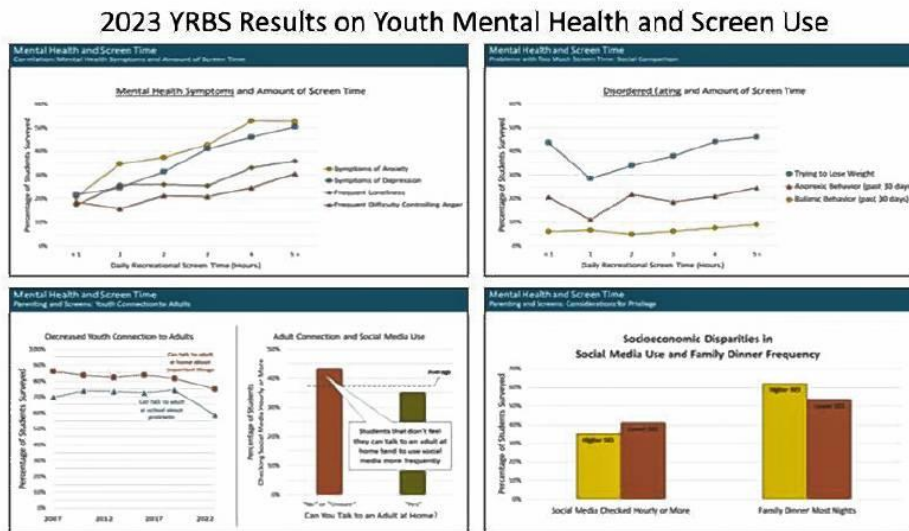
By ANTHONY CAMMALLERI, Staff Writer

Published: 10-22-2024 5:56 PM

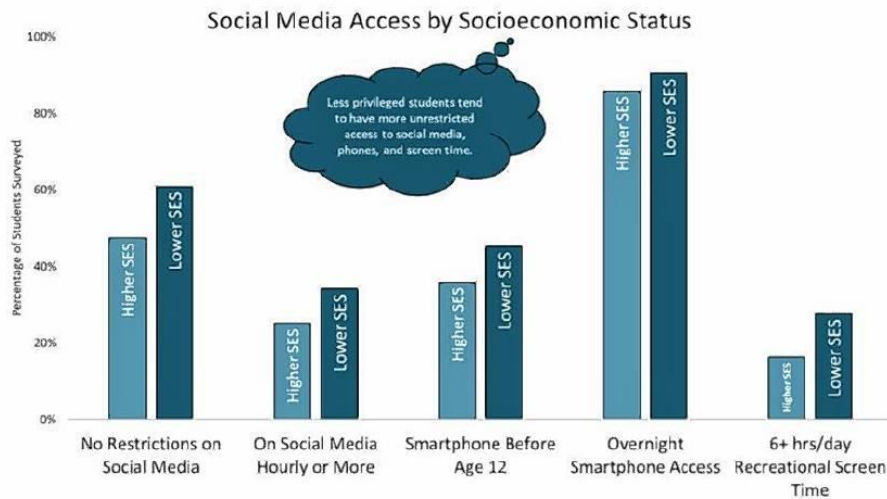
<https://www.recorder.com/Survey-shows-teen-screen-use-on-the-rise-since-2007-dips-from-2021-peak-57600776>

This article is the third in a four-part series exploring the results of the Communities That Care Coalition’s 2024 Student Health Survey. The Communities That Care Coalition is co-hosted by the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) and Community Action Pioneer Valley.

CONTRIBUTED IMAGES/COMMUNITIES THAT CARE COALITION



Data summaries available at [CommunitiesThatCareCoalition.com](https://www.CommunitiesThatCareCoalition.com)



Since 2007, the Communities That Care Coalition’s Student Health Survey results have shown an upward trend in the amount of time students spend on screens. However, roughly 65% of those surveyed reported more than three hours of screen time each day in 2024, representing a slight drop from the 70% in 2021.

Nearly one in every four teenagers surveyed in the Communities That Care Coalition’s 2024 Student Health Survey reported spending six or more hours a day staring at a screen, while roughly 65% reported more than three hours of screen time each day.

Since 2003, the Communities That Care Coalition has surveyed more than 40,000 students in grades eight, 10 and 12 from all nine public school districts in Franklin County and the North Quabbin region to evaluate youth habits and overall emotional and physical health.

The numbers represent a slight decline from 2021 when youth screen time peaked, with roughly 70% of those surveyed reporting more than three hours of recreational screen time each day. However, screen use among teens has been on the rise since 2007, when only 17% of youth reported spending three or more hours a day staring at a screen. Ten years ago, 38% of students met the same criteria.

“It’s a big increase. I find it striking that we had this huge increase with the pandemic, kids spending so much time online, but we haven’t really gone down from there,” Communities That Care Coalition Coordinator Kat Allen said.

Allen clarified that the screen time students reported was purely recreational and does not reflect computer time spent on homework or school. She noted that although the upward trend reflects national increases in screen time among adults, exorbitant screen time for youth can lead to exposure to pornography and extremist content.

In 2023, Allen said 23% of the surveyed students reported that they were exposed to pornography without consent in school — mostly in middle school, with roughly 7% in elementary school and another 7% in high school.

“Excessive screen time is related to poor mental health, less sleep, less exercise, excessive social comparison, less connection to adults, etc,” Allen said. “For young people, unsupervised screen time can also mean exposure to harmful content, such as extremism, hate speech, content that promotes disordered eating, pornography or online gambling.”

Communities That Care Coalition Evaluation Coordinator Nick Hathaway added that the stark rise in youth screen time might be correlated to the decline in age at which most children receive their first cellphones.

Hathaway also noted that the amount of time students spend on recreational screen time is closely linked to socioeconomic status, with wealthier families reportedly checking their children’s social media use more frequently than less privileged families.

“The percent of students who have no restrictions on social media is much higher for less privileged students, and the percent of less privileged students who are on social media hourly or more is much

higher,” Hathaway said. “The percentage of those who got a smartphone before age 12 was much higher [among this demographic], overnight smartphone access a little bit higher as well.”

As social media and internet use becomes more deeply ingrained in youth culture, Allen said parental controls over youth internet use — such as child-friendly phones with restricted internet access for younger students, or “contracts” with teens to set healthy screen use limits — can help mitigate the unhealthy consequences associated with screen time.

“It takes an awful lot of resources to be able to limit and monitor kids’ phone use and, in many cases, parents have to use phones for child care because they don’t have another option,” Allen said. “Youth continue to report a lot of screen time and the rates continue to increase.”

Anthony Cammalleri can be reached at acammalleri@recorder.com or 413-930-4429.

Survey shows seven-year peak in student bullying in Franklin County, North Quabbin

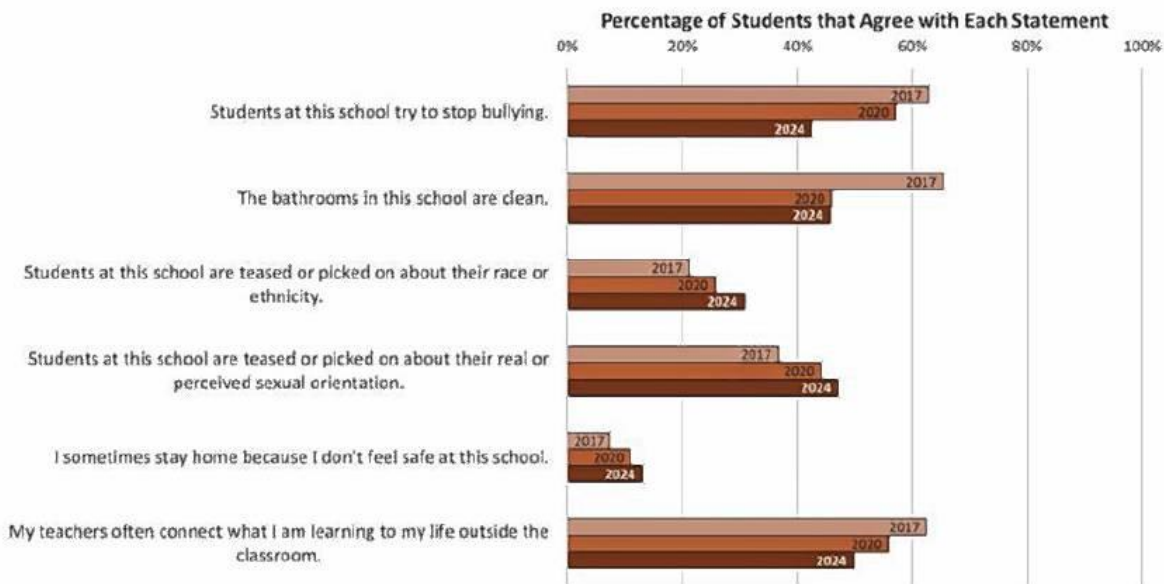
By ANTHONY CAMMALLERI, Staff Writer

Published: 10-23-2024 5:58 PM

<https://www.recorder.com/Survey-shows-seven-year-peak-in-student-bullying-in-Franklin-County-North-Quabbin-57617183>

This article is the last installment in a four-part series exploring the results of the Communities That Care Coalition's 2024 Student Health Survey. The Communities That Care Coalition is co-hosted by the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) and Community Action Pioneer Valley.

FC/NQ School Climate Changes for the Worse



CONTRIBUTED IMAGE/COMMUNITIES THAT CARE COALITION

Data from a 2024 survey conducted by the Communities That Care Coalition reveals a peak in reports of bullying in Franklin County and the North Quabbin region.

While results of the Communities That Care Coalition's 2024 Student Health Survey have shown improvements in teens' mental health and substance use habits, students reported a seven-year peak in instances of bullying and discriminatory teasing.

Since 2003, the Communities That Care Coalition has surveyed more than 40,000 students in grades eight, 10 and 12 from all nine public school districts in Franklin County and the North Quabbin region to evaluate youth habits and overall emotional and physical health.

For the third year, the coalition has administered the Department of Education School Climate Survey, which addresses students' safety in their schools and perceptions of their environments.

This year, roughly 12% of survey respondents reported that sometimes they stay home because they do not feel safe going to school. When the survey was first administered in 2017, approximately 7% of responding students answered similarly. In 2020, this rose to roughly 10%.

Between 2017 and 2024, the number of teens who reported that other students at their schools tried to stop bullying decreased from roughly 62% of respondents to 42%. This decrease coincides with higher reported rates of racial bullying, up from roughly 21% to 30%, and bullying based on one's "real or perceived" sexual orientation or gender identity, up from roughly 35% to 45%.

According to Communities That Care Coalition Coordinator Kat Allen, the increases in racial or sexuality-based bullying reflect a broader national trend. She added that the regional statistics could either be interpreted as an indication of a student population that is more aware of the harassment, or as a sign of an uptick in bullying.

"These statistics are complicated — you can conceive of good and bad explanations of this. It could be that bullying is going up, and it could be that students are more sensitive, more knowledgeable of it," Allen said. "A lot of this, I believe, starts at a national level. If we're seeing more conflict, teasing, picking on people, at a national level, whether it's online forums, on TikTok, on social media, and it seems to be playing out locally."

Allen emphasized that bullying is tied to aspects of personal identity such as race and sexuality, and that perceptions of the problem's severity vary across the demographics surveyed.

The survey results show that 58% of LGBTQ students believe students at their schools are teased about their sexualities; whereas, only roughly 42% of heterosexual students agree.

Similar disparities in students' perceptions on bullying exist among races, too. Nearly 60% of Black students responded that they believed their classmates were teased about their racial identities, whereas roughly 48% of the Latino students surveyed, 41% of Asian students, 37% of Indigenous students and 30% of white students felt the same.

"It's important to notice that, it's not just that students are being teased or picked on, but they're being teased or picked on about their race and ethnicity and about their sexual orientation," Allen said. "Some of that is perception, but that perception really matters, and it means that we as adults need to catch up and help out more. ... It's really happening across all of the school districts."

Anthony Cammalleri can be reached at acammalleri@recorder.com or 413-930-4429.