

> A Snapshot of Student Voices Related to Drug and Alcohol Use During The Covid-19 Pandemic



In the following document we take a focused look at findings from the Voices of Wisconsin Students Project that are specific to the topics of drug and alcohol use during the COVID-19 pandemic. We highlight findings from the high school student focus groups. However, many of these same themes are reflective of the findings of the middle school reports and are relevant to middle school students as well. For more information and copies of the project reports, see <http://www.wipps.org/voices>

Many Students Perceived Increases in Drug and Alcohol Use during the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the pandemic, many students described what they perceived as a significant increase in the use of vaping products, alcohol, and drugs (especially marijuana), among their peers as a way to cope during COVID-19. As one student put it, "There's way more reaching out to drugs and alcohol." Seeing more references to drug and alcohol use on a social media was a main source of students' insights on this topic and "word of mouth," as they generally did not speak about this topic from a firsthand perspective in terms of their own personal use of drugs or alcohol. In some cases, students had a friend who had tried drugs, alcohol, or vaping during COVID-19. Some did not have any insight on the topic and did not want to speculate or comment, as they and their friend group were removed from situations where drugs and alcohol were being used. Several students described watching kids get high on camera during virtual learning or seeing family members in the background using drugs or alcohol.

The key reasons students identified as contributing to the increases are:

- lack of other healthy coping mechanisms for pressures, stress, anxiety, and declining mental health during COVID-19
- to alleviate feelings of fear, isolation, and loneliness and to feel better
- boredom
- more free time
- lack of supervision at home while parents are working (although it should be noted that a few students perceived that drug and alcohol use had decreased during the pandemic because of closer parent monitoring at home)
- tensions at home with parents and/or difficult home situations
- peer pressure

The focus group findings are consistent with a 2020 article in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* on The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Risk of Youth Substance Use.¹ This article highlights the need to better understand the nuances of how COVID-19 has potentially increased the use of substances as a coping mechanism, yet at the same time, lockdowns, more time at home, and increased time spent with parents might have decreased access to and use of substances.

¹[https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(20\)30412-2/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(20)30412-2/fulltext).

Some Perceived Decreases in Drug and Alcohol Use Due to Less Social Interaction

Only a few students had a perception that vaping, alcohol, and drug use had decreased, primarily due to fewer kids gathering socially or having parties during the pandemic, or because of being under their parents' supervision while at home. In a few cases, the decrease was described as more applicable to when students were on site at school. One

student in particular attributed it to differences in the students who chose to learn virtually versus those who were in-person. Specifically, "I just don't see it as common anymore, probably because half of my school is virtual, and half of it is still in person. And at my school, most of the students that are in person are freshmen and sophomores, and most juniors and seniors are online. And I feel like the other generations last year, who are now juniors and seniors, were the ones using it more last year. So that's why I feel like I don't see it as more in my community."

In Their Own Words...

Below we feature a sampling of student comments relevant to the topic of drug and alcohol use during the COVID-19 pandemic. **A comprehensive set of comments can be found in the reports.**

I think it's been increasing because with the increase of mental health issues, specifically within the people that I've talked to, it's been increasing because due to the increase of mental health issues, they're just trying to escape from it, and they're turning to drugs and alcohol to escape that.

I think it's gone up because I know before COVID, a lot of people would use alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism for their everyday life, and then you throw a one-in-a-million thing into their life that will massively affect it, it's just very stressful.

I think that with this pandemic, that a lot of people who like weren't using drugs started to use drugs just because of the stress, and they have nothing other to like, nothing else to like help them cope with what's going on.

I'm not completely sure if it's gone up, but I think now that we're like people are getting more bored and feel like they just want to get out, away from the quarantine and self-isolation, they want to get out with their friends and do something. And in my town, at least, there's not much to do, so kids are resorting to bad things like that, so I think it has increased drinking and use of drugs.

The most common thing is probably drinking and then vaping and then probably pot. A lot of people smoke. People just don't want to feel anymore. They're done.

Like I see on social media all the time like kids who I have never seen before this year, like they just started partying. They just started doing things that like they haven't done before, because now we are so like secluded, and so that's like one thing that they can do all together. And so, yeah, I feel like it's definitely gone up.

So I've noticed vaping in my high school has definitely gone up a lot. But like drinking alcohol, that has been like a really prominent thing in my school for forever. Like I'm pretty sure our school is known for like having so many teenagers who get drunk all the time, and everyone is all like, oh, yeah, it's [community], like, of course, we're going to drink. And it's like you're a teenager.

I feel like because you're trapped in your house a lot of the time, and like even through quarantine, I feel like a lot of time a lot of kids began to feel lonely and alone and afraid. So kids just like became probably more suicidal, you know, with thoughts of like, hey, I'm alone or like I don't have anybody here. You know, it just, it was really hard for them, so maybe that is a lot of...the problem. You know, a lot of time, parents go to work, and you're stuck by yourself at home, you know. So I feel like a lot of the time they have the opportunity to do whatever they want, and, you know, release their stress that they say they have, or, you know, by using drugs and alcohol.

Some kids do it just because they can and because they have nothing else to do. But, also, some children [are] coming from abusive homes where school is the only place where they could go out. And since nothing else is really open, it's not like they can go to like afterschool programs or to open gyms and stuff like that, so that's how they cope with their home life.

I'd definitely say like in this virtual setting, some kids are just like, oh, I'm at home, and my parents are gone. Ooh, I got, you know, free time to do whatever. So there's definitely some of that happening.

A main part of it is, especially where I live, and I think just Wisconsin in general, we're known for having a lot of beer and stuff like that. I think a lot of my friends' parents drink, so they're, they don't care that their kids drink because they do it all the time, where like, I don't know, I just feel like they don't get in trouble about it. Or a lot of people I know, their parents supply it to their kids for their parties, and I just think that's, in my opinion, I think that's terrible. But, I mean, I think due to COVID, people just are doing whatever they want, or they've given up, and they can't choose what their child is doing anymore.

I think there is a little less partying, just because a lot of people's parents have closer eyes on them, I guess, the pandemic and stuff. So, there's a little less kind of like going out and doing illegal drugs and alcohol.

I would have to say that I would think it would have actually decreased the use of drugs and alcohol. Just because I know like from the people that I know that like do drink or whatever, it's usually like with their friends like at a party or something like that. So, I'm assuming that with COVID, there's less of those eventstype things, and less for people to actually have the chance to like drink. So, I would guess that it's less.

Project Background

The Voices of Wisconsin Students Project sought to better understand how Wisconsin students are coping with school, learning, and life in general during COVID-19 and to understand in more detail the nature of students' sources of stress and anxiety and their thoughts on what support they need. Equally important was to identify, strengthen, and reinforce examples of students' success and resiliency. To gather this feedback, the University of Wisconsin's Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) Research Partners and the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) conducted a total of 23 virtual Zoom focus groups in January and February 2021 with a total of 160 Wisconsin students (64 middle school students and 96 high school students). The students were from 38 different counties and 68 different rural, urban, and suburban communities. The students attend 96 different public, private, and parochial schools. Separate reports were prepared for middle and high school students. Copies of the reports can be found at <http://www.wipps.org/voices> or directly at:

<https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-High-School>

<https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-High-School-supplemental>

<https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-Middle-School>

<https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-Middle-School-supplemental>

WIPPS Research Partners responds to community needs by providing research and information that can help citizens and communities make more-informed decisions about issues that matter to them. In the case of this particular project, our goal was to provide information to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) from the perspective of students on the important topic of learning, coping, and building resilience during COVID-19. Objectivity and non-partisanship are core values of WIPPS Research Partners; we have no policy agenda in conducting this work. We do not make recommendations or take positions on public policy issues. This project was supported by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It was developed with input from many partners including representatives of the DHS, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health, and the University of Wisconsin - Extension. We partnered with the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) to provide valuable oversight of the research project through the Institutional Review Board; MCW faculty also served as members of the research team.

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