



# Substance Use Prevention Needs Assessment

by Amy Lewin, PsyD and Kevin Roy, PhD

March 2024 | University of Maryland School of Public Health, Department of Family Science | Prepared for Identity

## Background

A number of recent changes to the landscape of adolescent substance use have increased the urgency to better understand the Latino community's perceptions and needs related to this grave public health concern. According to a November 2023 report on Youth Safety and Substance Use delivered to the Montgomery County Council's Committees on Health and Human Services, Education and Culture, and Public Safety, opioid overdoses, emergency room visits and naloxone administration among youth are all up and Latino youth made up the largest proportion of opioid overdose related ER visits at 42%. Additionally, the county's public school system has recently seen a spike in the number of youth drug overdoses, according to Dr. Patricia Kapunan, Chief Medical Officer for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS).

Marijuana also poses risks. Marijuana possession and use has been legalized in many states (including Maryland on July 1, 2023), making it more accessible. Repeated exposure to marijuana during adolescence increases the risk of developing mental health conditions and future drug use, and marijuana can be laced with more dangerous substances.

Youth substance use affects the Latino immigrant community in unique ways. Research shows that while cultural traditions and beliefs contribute to both substance use risk and protective factors for Latino youth, structural issues increase their risk factors. These structural issues include language barriers, stigma surrounding substance use, lack of awareness about the resources available and reluctance to seek help due to legal and/or immigration concerns.

It is against this backdrop that Latino youth and parents (which for the purpose of this Needs Assessment includes caregivers and guardians) turned to Identity for help. They expressed concern over growing numbers of students who may be at risk for use of drugs like counterfeit pills, fentanyl and marijuana. Parents, in particular, asked Identity to provide recommendations for information and strategies around prevention and use of substances among Latino youth. As research confirms, prevention and intervention services should be culturally and linguistically appropriate to meet the needs of Latino youth and families.

Based on an eight-year history as collaborators, providing research and evaluation support to Identity on a wide range of initiatives, a team from the University of Maryland School of Public Health advised Identity on the Substance Use Prevention Needs Assessment and then prepared this report for Identity.

## Scope and Methodology

To inform this Substance Use Prevention Needs Assessment, the University of Maryland School of Public Health (UMD) research team worked closely with Identity staff to convene focus groups of community members to better understand their perspectives and needs related to this urgent issue. From August through November 2023, fifteen (15) distinct focus group discussions were facilitated by Identity staff. Eight focus group discussions were held with youth (three with high school students, three with middle school students, and two with Youth Opportunity Center/GED students); six focus group discussions were held with parents (three with high school parents, two with middle school parents, and one with family reunification program parents); and one discussion was held with educators. Overall, 54 youth, 48 parents, and five educators were included in these focus groups. The sample reflected a diverse community of both newcomers (recently immigrated from

Latin America) as well as those more established Latino families in the Montgomery County Public Schools system. Elementary school students were not included in focus groups because it is not developmentally appropriate.

Identity staff conducted and recorded focus group discussions in Spanish and took detailed notes on concerns, suggestions and insights. These notes were translated, and then reviewed by the UMD team of eight researchers (two principal investigators as well as five graduate students and one undergraduate student who have led interviews and focus groups with youth in Identity programs over the past three years). The team identified themes in focus group responses and, together with input from Identity staff, parents, and educators, developed a set of recommendations that integrate findings from the community with the limited available research on best practices.

The findings from the focus groups were written up by the research team and then shared by Identity staff with parents and youth to assess whether the key findings and recommendations accurately reflected their thoughts and experiences, and to determine whether there was any additional information that was missed in the original assessment. In this round of data collection, Identity staff conducted two focus groups and 10 individual interviews with parents; and three focus groups and 20 individual interviews with middle school, high school, and older out-of-school youth. Additional insights from these focus groups and interviews were incorporated into the findings and recommendations below.

Dr. Cristina Rabadan-Diehl also provided feedback on the draft recommendations. Dr. Rabadan-Diehl is a distinguished scientist as well as a member of the National Advisory Council of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. She also brings lived experience as a mother who lost a child to an accidental opioid overdose.

## FINDINGS

### **The most important and urgent need expressed by youth, parents, and educators who participated in this needs assessment was for better information on substances and substance use.**

- ▶ Youth uniformly described learning about substances primarily from social media and movies, and occasionally from peers, and expressed an urgent need for more information and support from trusted sources. Most felt that their parents and teachers were not currently good sources of information and support because they lacked knowledge and were not able to listen without judgment. Some suggested that they would like to hear more from mental health professionals and people who had lived experiences with substance use.
- ▶ Both middle and high school youth had many questions about drugs: where they come from, what they do to the body, what the dangers are and aren't, and what the effects of use are.
- ▶ Youth were also interested in learning about how to deal with bullying, and how to find emotional support and ways to cope with loneliness and social isolation.
- ▶ Parents wanted to have conversations with their children, but only when they had the right information about drugs.
- ▶ Parents wanted education about drugs themselves, but also about how to have open conversations with their children, how to know when a child is using, and how to respond when they suspect or know their child is using.
- ▶ Additionally, parents wanted information from trusted sources that understood their life circumstances and the unique challenges their children face.

## Youth Perspectives

In this needs assessment, both middle school and high school students reported exposure to people using selling drugs (particularly cannabis and alcohol) and in their schools (particularly in the bathrooms), in their neighborhoods, and at public places such as metro stations and bus stops. Relatedly, they reported that they are worried about bullying and peer pressure to use drugs and alcohol. These students had many questions about drugs, particularly about the effects of different substances on their bodies. They didn't currently have access to a trusted source of information but would all very much like one. At the same time, they believe that youth development staff in after-school programs, school counselors and therapists could be trusted sources of information.

They also wanted help with bullying, peer pressure, and mental health. The students clearly saw the connection between substance use and mental health. As one student stated when asked what should happen when a student is caught using, "The first thing is letting the parents know immediately. Then we need to get a counselor involved right after to get to the root of why they are using." The students also saw motivation and hope for a good future, and staying busy with activities, as important components of substance use prevention, and they asked for more recreational activities and programming. While some students had a parent, older sibling, or other family member they could turn to, all students said they wanted more relationships with trusted adults to have opportunities for open and safe conversations, skill-building, and learning.

The views shared in focus groups and key informant interviews were not surprising as adolescents in middle and high schools across the US have struggled with mounting mental health challenges in recent years. The influence of social media on anxiety and isolation among youth, heightened by the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to recognition of a mental health crisis for youth. Increasingly, youth use substances such as cannabis and alcohol to cope with anxiety, isolation, stress, and depression.

Latino youth face unique stressors and adversities that may increase their vulnerability. As youth and their families and teachers report, they are often lonely, anxious, stressed and depressed. Many are disconnected from other peers. Their social isolation is heightened by limited access to recreational activities in schools and communities, and they turn frequently to social media as a source of connection and information.

## Parent and Educator Perspectives

The parents who participated in focus groups were deeply concerned about substance use among youth in their communities and expressed significant worries about how to protect their children. They reported feeling comfortable having conversations with their children about substances but were asking for help in knowing *how* to have these conversations in constructive ways. They wanted to be able to provide useful information, to ask questions, and to listen in ways that engage their children. Currently, the only tool that they had in these conversations is fear. Most parents reported either threatening their children with a variety of punishments if they used drugs or pointing out negative consequences of drug use ("you'll end up in the hospital, cemetery, or jail"). They described telling their children that drugs cause cancer, or homelessness, or organ failure to scare them away from using. Parents recognized the limits of this "scared straight" approach. They wanted to have more open and informative dialogues with their children but didn't know how to do so.

Parents also expressed significant frustration with schools around the issue of substance use. Parents perceived schools as not providing adequate monitoring, particularly in school bathrooms. They perceived that schools know about substance use but don't intervene and don't institute consequences for students who are caught using or bullying others to use. Most parents agreed that suspension was not a useful consequence for substance use. They recognized that students who used substances might be happy to not be in school, and being unmonitored at home might only lead to more opportunities to use, and to fall behind in school. Instead, parents argued for schools to mandate meetings with counselors for students who are caught using.

Parents saw therapists as critical to substance use prevention and wanted more treatment options available for students. They asked for more educational and supportive programming, for both youth and parents, around substance use, as well as more activities and other programs to keep kids busy outside of school hours. They also wanted schools to keep in closer touch with parents, and to join with them as partners when there were concerns about a student using.

The desire to work in closer partnership with schools was a constant theme throughout all conversations with parents. Fathers and mothers alike talked about wanting closer relationships with their children's schools and more collaboration with school personnel. They saw this partnership as another important component of substance use prevention and wanted schools to do more to reach out to them in their own language and in ways in which they would feel comfortable.

Overall, they longed to contribute to the development and implementation of solutions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Substance use prevention and intervention in Latino youth is a complex problem that requires culturally responsive, coordinated, comprehensive and multi-pronged solutions that are delivered and sustained over time. The design and implementation of prevention and intervention must involve youth, parents, and other caring, trusted and knowledgeable adults and institutions. Multiple partners, such as families, community and faith-based organizations, local government agencies and MCPS, need to come together to address the issue at multiple levels.

While intervention with youth who are already actively using substances is critical, the following recommendations focus primarily on prevention of substance use and misuse among Latino youth.

### Youth

Latino youth are asking for more education from trusted sources about substances and substance use, beyond what is available in school, on social media or from peers. Youth are asking for education from sources that are culturally sensitive, that understand their unique histories and family stressors, and share some of their lived experiences. While they (and some educators) suggested youth development and mental health providers as potential sources of education, they are seeking education that happens across contexts, curricula and programs. They stressed the need for it to be accessible to all youth, including those who are disconnected from school.

- ▶ Consistent with best practices in youth substance abuse prevention, we recommend more holistic programming for youth that also focuses on mental health and relationships.
- ▶ Substance use education is most effective in safe spaces in the context of non-judgmental trusting relationships and in settings that offer open communication, time for relationship building and culturally and linguistically appropriate messaging.
- ▶ To be effective, we recommend education must be both culturally and developmentally tailored. All youth, but particularly those who are newcomers, need to feel a sense of belonging and a supportive peer group. All youth need programming to help them cope with bullying and violence, both as victims and as bystanders. Programming that builds positive and supportive communities, that improves communication and social skills, and that addresses mental health and healthy relationships in non-stigmatizing ways would address known risk factors for substance use and are therefore essential components of substance use prevention efforts. Mentorship programs and other programs that provide youth with positive, supportive and close relationships with adults or older peers who could serve as role models would also be beneficial.
- ▶ We also recommend making available more academic support and more recreational activities, as academic success, engagement in enriching activities, and motivation for the future are all known factors that protect youth from substance use. Increasing academic support enables success and the capacity to envision a successful academic and/or vocational future and is another critical component of substance use prevention. Similarly, research demonstrates that recreational activities, including sports, arts, and leadership activities, can increase academic achievement, self-esteem, a sense of community and belonging, and can keep young people occupied, especially in the after-school hours when substance use is highest among school-aged youth. Such recreational activities need to be accessible and welcoming to all young people and based on principles of positive youth development.

## Parents

Latino parents are eager for more education from trusted sources that is accessible, in the language of their preference, and specific to their cultural context. They are asking for information about drugs and alcohol, risk and protective factors, how to know when a child is using or at elevated risk for using, how to intervene when a child is using, and how to have open and trusting conversations with children about drugs and alcohol. Parents are also asking for education regarding addiction, to understand the roots of stigmatized and punitive views and to receive support in safe and non-judgmental settings such as parent support groups.

- ▶ Despite many parents' perceptions that their children turn away from them in adolescence, parents continue to be an important influence on their children's decisions and behaviors throughout adolescence. Positive parental involvement and monitoring is an important protective factor against youth substance use. Equipping parents to recognize their children's needs, and to provide information, appropriate monitoring and involvement, and constructive support are therefore essential but underutilized components of best practices in youth substance use prevention. Thus, we recommend that the public schools actively communicate and engage with parents regarding the issue of substance use generally (through school policies, resources and suggestions for how parents can be part of the solution). We also recommend that the schools communicate with parents when they are concerned about a particular youth's mental health and well-being.
- ▶ Research shows that a close, supportive, and warm relationship with parents is one of the most important factors that protect young people from substance use. Therefore, we recommend education and related programming for Latino parents should also focus on more general parenting of adolescents in the context of their unique life circumstances. Several studies have found that family interventions designed to strengthen family relationships and interactions have had a positive impact on reducing substance use in Latino youth. Simply stated, programming that supports positive relationships between parents and adolescents is an essential aspect of substance use prevention.

## Other

Youth and parents asked for more monitoring of locations where bullying and substance use are taking place, particularly school bathrooms. Parents also asked for clearer consequences for substance use in schools. There is a challenging balance between helping students to feel safe, and criminalizing or surveilling young people, particularly those who come from historically oppressed groups and are quickly stereotyped, blamed, and punished. Policies are needed that are trauma-informed and based on principles of treatment and restorative justice, rather than criminalization and punishment.

- ▶ We recommend more accessible and culturally appropriate emotional support and mental health resources for Latino youth and parents. The link between mental health and substance use is well-established. Research has shown that prevention and treatment of substance use is limited without addressing the underlying mental health factors that lead to substance use. Emotional support and mental health education and treatment must be financially, logistically, linguistically and culturally accessible for the Latino community.
- ▶ Although the focus of this report is on substance use prevention, we recommend additional education, based on the model of harm reduction, be made available to friends and families as well as to young people who are already experimenting with or using illegal substances. Such education should include information from trusted sources about the dangers of illicitly manufactured fentanyl, the risks and consequences of mixing drugs, the lifesaving power of naloxone, and the importance of reducing stigma around recovery and treatment options.



### Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge and thank the many parents, youth and educators who contributed their valuable opinions, experiences, and knowledge to this Substance Use Prevention Needs Assessment. We would also like to thank Dr. Cristina Rabadan-Diehl whose expertise improved the recommendations. And we extend a special thank you to Dr. Luis Aguirre for his early input and help facilitating a focus group. This Needs Assessment would not have been possible without the financial support of the Latino Health Initiative of Montgomery County's Department of Health and Human Services. Of course, much appreciation to Identity for the opportunity to partner again on a community needs assessment, and especially to the Identity staff who collected the data.