

Results from National Assessment Data

Insights into Effective Substance Use Prevention Messaging for Youth

NATIONAL
COUNCIL
for Mental
Wellbeing

BACKGROUND

Adolescence is a period of significant change in identity and relationships. Data from national surveys indicate that a majority of youth will engage in some form of substance use before they graduate from high school.¹ After a decade of decline, a 2021 report showed that in recent years, alcohol use among youth of various age ranges had leveled off and marijuana use had fluctuated, with a decline in 2021.² However, overdose deaths of young people ages 14-18 increased 109% from 2019-2021.⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic created additional urgency to understand the impact of substances on young people, as well as the effect of continued adoption of policies legalizing medical and non-medical use of marijuana by adults across the country.

To learn more about the impact of COVID-19 on youth substance use, the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, with support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and in partnership with Lake Research Partners and Metropolitan Group, conducted national online assessments, discussion groups, key informant interviews and an expert advisory group of youth and youth-serving advisors in 2021 and 2022.

Online assessments were conducted nationwide with both youth-serving providers and youth ages 13-18 to assess the impact of COVID-19 on youth state of mind, knowledge and access to substance use prevention, messages, tools and resources. In conjunction with expert opinion and available literature, these data informed development of messages and resources to support youth substance use prevention.

This report highlights a selection of quantitative findings from the national assessments as insight for health care, education and social service providers on effective approaches to substance use prevention conversations with the youth they serve.

The National Council conducted four rounds of online assessments with youth, with each sample weighted by demographic factors, including age, gender, race and region, to ensure representative sampling of youth. Unweighted numbers, or total number of respondents, are included.

FIRST ROUND (February 2021)

Assessed impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth state of mind, knowledge and access to substance use prevention, messages, tools and resources through an online assessment with youth participants ages 13-18 (n=600 unweighted)¹.

SECOND ROUND (May 2021)

Tested draft substance use prevention messages with youth to identify preferred themes and language (n=600 weighted, 681 unweighted).

THIRD ROUND (May 2022)

Included an online assessment of the youth participants ages 13-18 (n=600 weighted, 800 unweighted). This assessment retested similar concepts as the first assessment to understand how youth attitudes and behavior have changed or remained the same over time, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic has progressed.

FOURTH ROUND (October 2022)

Tested additional substance-specific prevention messages with youth (n=600 weighted, 898 unweighted) to identify preferred themes and language.

¹ Total number of respondents.

ASSESSMENT RESULTS AND INSIGHTS

Wellbeing in the Context of COVID-19

The National Council's 2021 and 2022 national assessments offer insight into the pandemic's disruption in the lives of young people. The findings reveal critical data on the wellbeing of youth in the context of the pandemic, perceptions of substance use harm, youth values and effective communication strategies for reducing the risk of substance use.

Youth reported high levels of stress and social disconnection that puts them at risk for increased mental health concerns and substance use. Systematic support for youth is more important than ever to help alleviate the stresses of the pandemic on youth mental health and harmful substance use.

80%

of youth respondents agreed with the statement: "I miss seeing and spending time with my friends."³

68%

of youth agreed with the statement: "Sometimes the pressure I feel at school and at home feels like too much to handle."⁴

67%

of youth surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic would have a lasting impact on their mental health.⁴

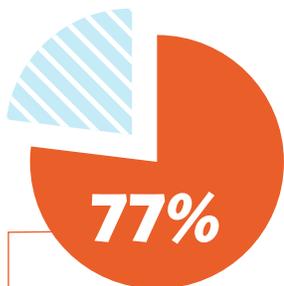
± 50%

of youth reported feeling a lack of genuine sense of belonging at school.⁴

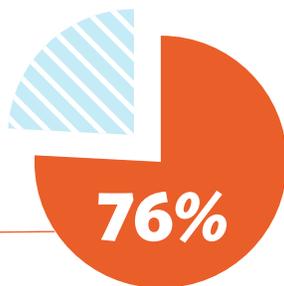
44%

of youth reported feeling stressed.³

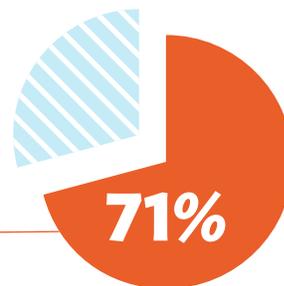
Though youth felt elevated levels of stress due to the pandemic, a majority responded positively to self-efficacy, resiliency and optimism. Youth-serving providers can approach youth from a strengths-based perspective when navigating conversations around substance use and the stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.



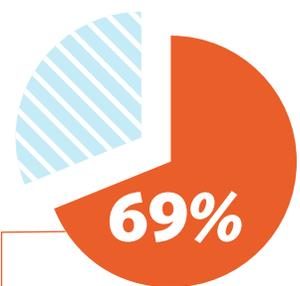
of youth agreed that they are a good person who has a lot to offer.⁴



youth agreed that they can stand up for themselves and what they believe.⁴



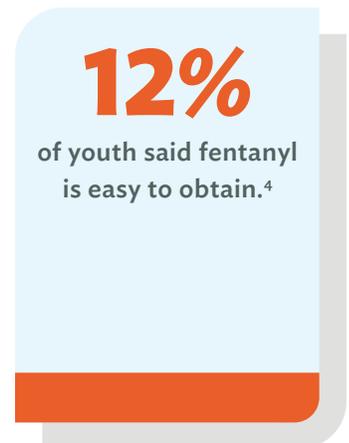
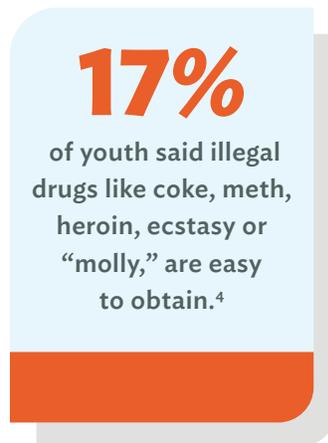
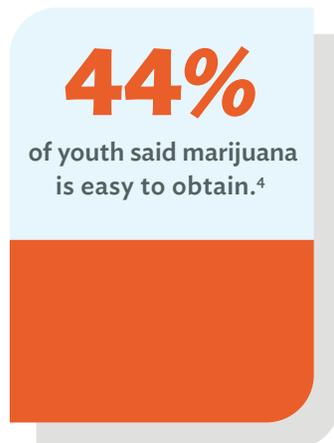
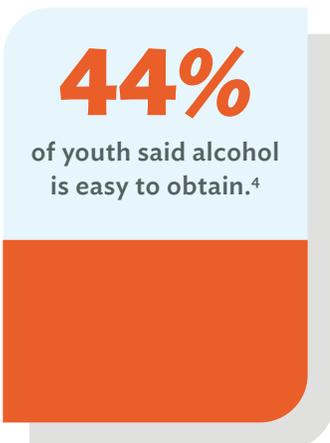
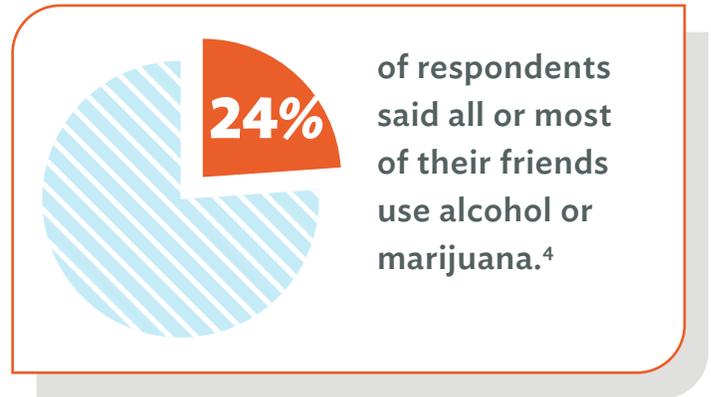
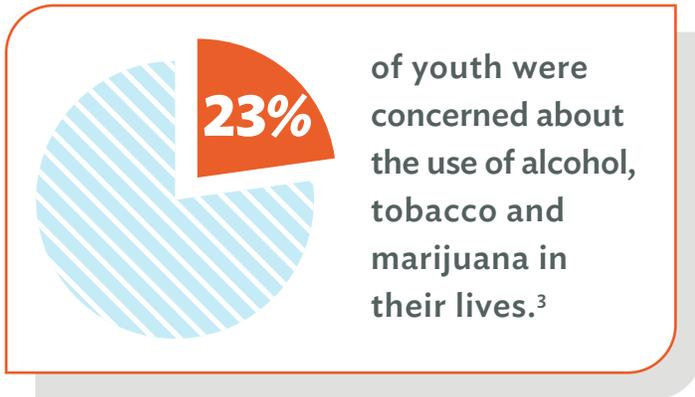
of youth agreed that they are hopeful about the future.⁴



of youth agreed that they can calm themselves down.⁴

Substance Use

Each assessment reveals important findings about youth perception of substance use. From the January 2021 assessment to the May 2022 assessment, there were modest increases in substance use among friend or peer groups, especially of marijuana. Youth generally seemed unconcerned about harm related to marijuana use.



Youth thought alcohol and marijuana were less harmful than other substances.⁴ Youth reported the ease they could acquire marijuana had increased in the past year. Similarly, marijuana was easier to obtain in states where recreational use is legalized. The rise in marijuana use and the growing diversity of novel cannabis products make it an area for further education among both providers and youth. Youth reported higher levels of exposure to substances through family members than friends.

ⁱⁱ Delta-8 THC is a legal and intoxicating hemp product not tested or approved by the FDA for safe use.



Providers should be aware of the likelihood of youth exposure to substances.

Since 2021, the number of youth who said that it was easy to acquire marijuana has risen from **30%** to **41%**.⁴

Youth in states where recreational marijuana is legal were less likely to think using marijuana causes a lot of harm (**39%-46%**).⁴

Youth indicated being more likely to gain exposure to substances through their family rather than friends. Compared to other drugs, youth were more likely to have exposure to alcohol and tobacco through **family**.⁴

Youth in states where marijuana is legal were more likely to say someone in their family has used marijuana (**33%-27%**).⁴

The May 2022 assessment revealed a knowledge gap: most youth reported a lack of fentanyl knowledge, yet the majority had concern that someone they know could be exposed to the substance while using drugs. **While youth seemed to be aware that fentanyl exists and is harmful, they didn't appear to know what fentanyl is or how it might affect them.** Despite reporting concern that someone they know might encounter fentanyl, they reported low levels of perceived harm for themselves when it comes to fentanyl exposure.

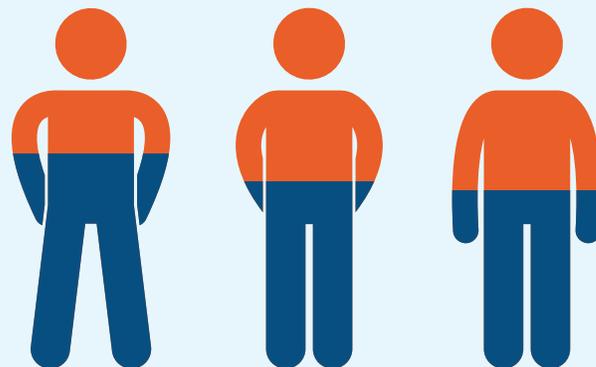
Given the increasing number of fentanyl-related teen overdose deaths⁵ in the United States, this is an emergent area for further exploration.

College freshmen (**57%**), suburban youth (**50%**) and Black youth (**48%**)



were most **likely to have knowledge** about fentanyl.⁴

Among respondents, those most likely to say they **did not know** about fentanyl were



Asian-American youth (**60%**), home schooled youth (**52%**) and youth in 9th to 10th grade (**50%**).⁴



Of youth who reported fear that if someone they know using drugs, **77%** thought they would be exposed to fentanyl; however, **less than half** reported having knowledge about fentanyl.⁴

Youth who report concern that someone they know would be exposed to fentanyl:

80% female youth	80% Black youth	86% Asian-American youth
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Although more than half of youth reported receiving some education about substance use in school, only one-third of youth report awareness of existing prevention or cessation programs in their communities.³



Half of youth reported not receiving any prevention programming in the last 12 months.⁴



The number one source of information for youth on alcohol and drugs was the **internet**.³



41% of youth said their parents or caregivers communicated with them in the past year about alcohol, tobacco, marijuana and/or other drugs.⁴

The assessment results also identify demographic nuances in youth substance use perception and exposure, including perceived levels of harm. Levels of concern around substances, likelihood of exposure to substances and reasons for avoiding substances are helpful to know when having conversations about substance use prevention.



Access to alcohol was reportedly easier for Latinx youth, girls, suburban youth and rural youth.⁴



Access to marijuana was reportedly easier for Black youth, girls and Latinx youth.⁴



Girls (64%) were more likely than boys (54%) to say that using prescription drugs not prescribed by a doctor does a lot of harm .⁴



Black and Latinx youth were reportedly more likely to be exposed to substance use around them than other demographic groups.⁴



Youth in urban areas indicated they are more likely to be exposed to substance use around them, especially marijuana.⁴

Values and Prevention Messaging

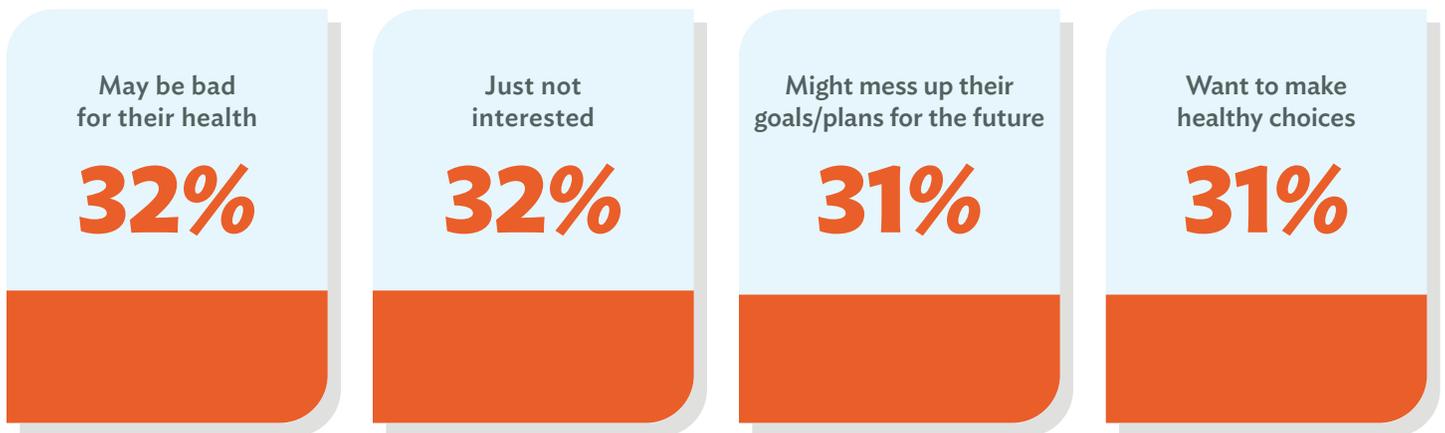
The National Council's findings on youth values and effective prevention messaging informed the [Getting Candid Message Guide](#) to help youth-serving providers communicate effectively with young people about substance use prevention. Building trust and rapport, including learning more about youth values, was identified as the first step in the communication pathway with youth. By identifying what matters most to youth, providers can incorporate youth values into conversations surrounding substance use rather than using values they may have thought were more meaningful to youth than they are.

Youth ranked mental and physical health as top priorities in all four assessments. Prevention messaging related to mental and physical health consistently rose to the top in both assessments and discussion groups with youth. Youth also expressed concern for their future and placed high value on family.



When asked about their values, **76%** of youth reported that **mental health** is one of the most or the most important things to them.⁴

The **top four** reasons why youth said they might choose not to use substances were:



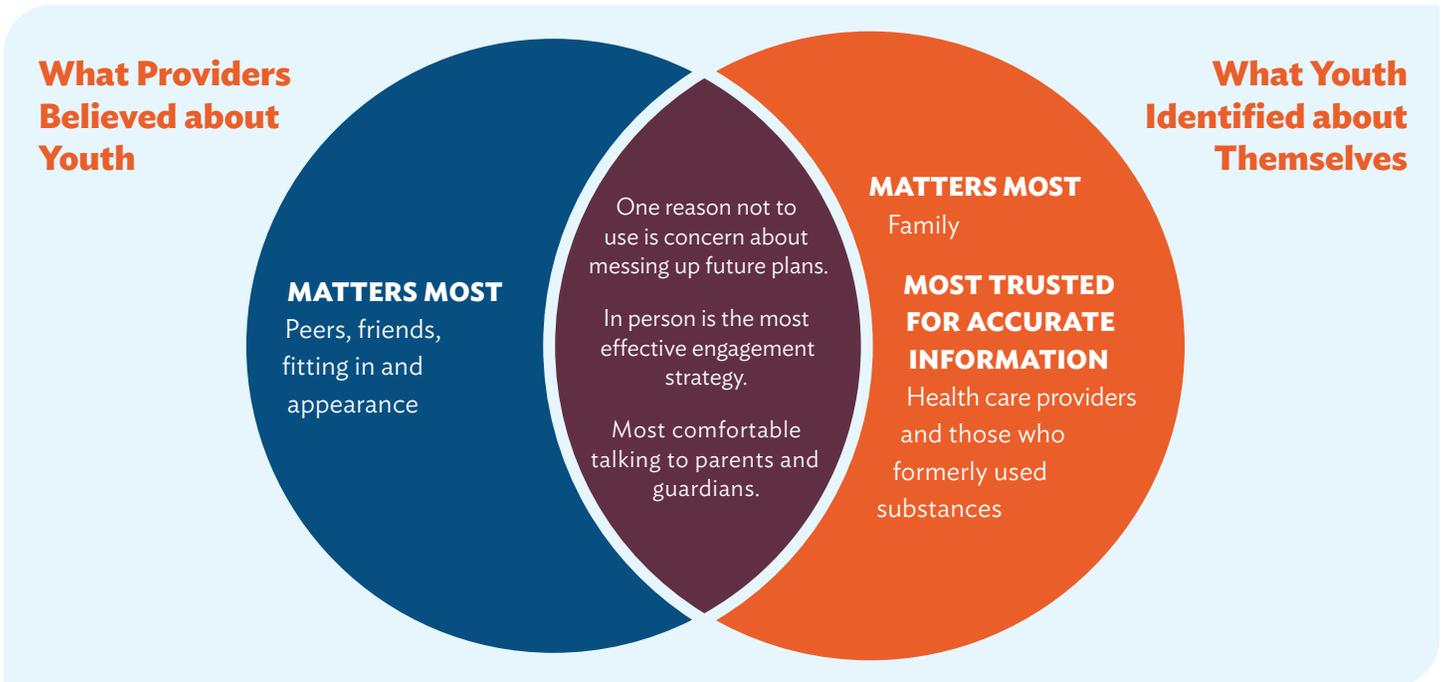
While providers expected that youth would identify peers, fitting in and appearance as what matters most to them, youth actually identified that **family** matters the most to them.

60%

of youth said **family** matters most to them more than anything else.³

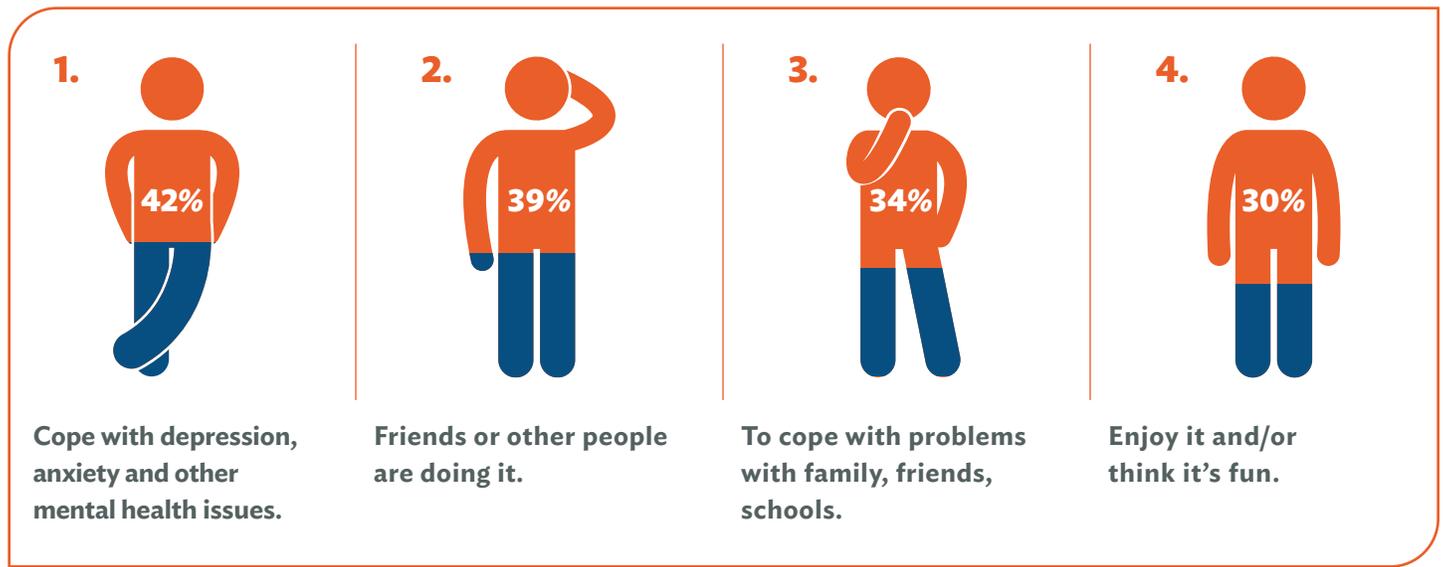
29%

of youth said **friends** matter most to them. Youth that were younger, White, suburban or residing in the Northeast were more likely to say friends matter most in their lives compared to their counterparts.³



Despite caring about their mental health, youth sometimes turn to substance use with the intent of improving their mental health or other challenging circumstances. It is essential that youth have access to information about healthy and sustainable coping mechanisms and self-care strategies.

Top four reasons why youth said they might choose to use substances:



To cope with how they are feeling without using substances, youth reported they would be most likely to turn to the arts, including music, artwork, reading and writing, followed by talking to friends and family or watching TV/playing video games.³

Knowing why youth might choose to use substances is invaluable information for identifying risk and protective factors, deciding how to frame conversations and for the selection of prevention messages that will be most likely to resonate.

Two ways of “framing” the conversation —



a **focus on the future** and



the **risk of addiction**

— were found to **resonate most**.

Three others —



relationships,



activities and



self-affirmation

— were identified as **only slightly less motivating**.³

- Youth ages 13-15 were more likely to strongly agree that drugs can potentially change or control one’s future.
- Female youth and Latinx youth were less likely to agree with statements around extracurriculars when compared to male youth and White and Black youth.
- Youth ages 13-15 were more likely to find framing around the negative impact on relationships convincing.

To understand how to implement effective substance use prevention messaging with youth, respondents were asked how they most often find information about substance use. They were also asked about who they trust for accurate information about substances versus who they feel most comfortable talking with about substances and about their communication preferences.



While youth said they trust doctors, nurses or other health care providers the most for accurate information about substance use, they are less comfortable actually speaking with them on the topic.



Rather, youth indicated that they feel most comfortable speaking with **parents/caregivers and friends/peers**.

This crucial finding underscores the need for effective prevention conversations with youth. Youth-serving providers' ability to develop rapport and comfort with sensitive conversations can bridge the gap between those they serve and the accurate substance use information they need.



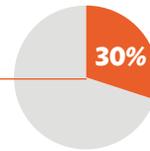
Among youth overall, doctors, nurses or other health care providers were the most trusted sources of accurate information about substance use (**52%**)



followed by parents or caregivers (**45%**).⁴



When it comes to the groups that youth are most comfortable speaking with, only **7%** of youth ranked health care providers as the most comfortable to speak with.⁴



When looking at age differences, **30%** of younger youth said parents or caregivers are their most trusted source of information,



but older youth were more likely to say health care providers are their most trusted source with only **13%** of older youth saying parents or caregivers are their most trusted source of information.⁴

While **younger youth** feel most comfortable speaking to **parents or caregivers (36% most comfortable)** and **friends or peers (19%)**, **older youth** were most likely to choose **friends or peers (20%)** **parents or caregivers (14%)** or their **significant other (14%)**.⁴



The **internet** is how youth said they most often look for information about alcohol and drugs.³



The best way to **communicate** with youth would be **in-person**.³



Youth also said people who formerly used substances are a **trusted source** for information and are among those with whom they would be **comfortable speaking**.⁴

Findings on youth values and prevention messaging make utilizing a data-informed approach like the [Getting Candid: Communication Pathway](#) invaluable. This resource will guide youth-serving providers with techniques to have effective conversations about the risks of substance use according to youth values and their perceptions of substances.

For more information on this process, see the [Getting Candid Message Guide](#).



CONCLUSION

The National Council's 2021 and 2022 national online assessments reveal important data on the impact of COVID-19 on youth wellbeing, perceptions of substances use, youth values and effective communication strategies for substance use prevention. It is more important than ever for providers to practice and become comfortable having collaborative conversations about mental health and substance use with youth given their elevated levels of stress, perceived lack of belonging and reported mental health concerns related to the pandemic. Better education and substance use prevention strategies are needed for youth, especially given the mixed perceptions on the harm of substances such as alcohol, marijuana and tobacco.

The ever-changing cannabis policy landscape and the introduction of novel products that are relatively unknown to youth, like Delta-8 THC, makes education around cannabis a priority. For more information on youth and cannabis, see the [Cannabis Resource Center](#). The opioid epidemic and rise of deaths due to fentanyl increase the importance of connecting youth with the knowledge and resources they need to understand the risks associated with substance use. Providers play a unique role as trusted messengers of health-related information. The [Getting Candid Message Guide](#) provides adults with tips on building trust and rapport, a communication pathway for talking about substance use and key messages youth identified as effective.

For more information about this project, go to TheNationalCouncil.org/Getting-Candid.

WRITTEN AND EDITED BY:

**William Sloyer,
Amanda Stark,**

**Teresa Halliday,
Pam Pietruszewski,**

**J'Neal Woods-Razaa
and Flannery Peterson**

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