



NEWS

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Office of Drug & Alcohol Releases Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS) Data Highlights

Norristown, PA (Sept. 5, 2018) – The Montgomery County Department of Health & Human Services Office of Drug and Alcohol works with community stakeholders to identify issues in order to create effective initiatives that attempt to decrease unhealthy behaviors and improve the overall health of the community. Because adolescents represent the next generation, it is important to understand how drug and alcohol use may or may not be affecting them.

One tool that has been especially helpful in understanding the knowledge and behaviors relating to drug and alcohol use among youth is the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS). PAYS is conducted every other year, and it is distributed to students in sixth, eighth, tenth, and twelfth grades to assess knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors towards alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. Not only does PAYS gather data on the prevalence of certain behaviors, it asks questions that help guide understanding as to why these behaviors occur. It also provides statewide data so comparisons can be made from the local level to the county level to the state. In 2017, 22,067 students in Montgomery County took the PAYS survey. The survey is anonymous, voluntary and confidential.

As in previous years, alcohol and marijuana are still the two most commonly used drugs among youth. They are also the first substances to which youth are generally exposed. Since 2013, alcohol use has been decreasing among tenth and twelfth graders. Compared to 2015, the amount of twelfth graders who reported ever having tried alcohol decreased by more than 5 percent and, within the past 30 days of being surveyed, slightly more than 40 percent of twelfth graders stated they had consumed alcohol.

Though the rates of alcohol use among older students are decreasing, there has been a slight increase in use among sixth and eighth graders. Twenty-five percent of eighth graders admit to taking alcohol found in their home without permission. This occurs at higher rates than getting alcohol from friends, siblings, or other relatives. However, among all of the grades, the lifetime use of ever having tried alcohol (40.8 percent) was below, the state level (43.3 percent).

Marijuana is the second most commonly used substance among youth. There is a slightly lower perception of risk associated with marijuana (72.3 percent) compared to alcohol (71.6 percent), and more students report a willingness to use marijuana than in previous years (13.9 percent in 2013 and 16.4 percent in 2017). With that being said, marijuana use has been decreasing among tenth graders and leveled off among twelfth graders.

Tobacco use, on the other hand, has substantially decreased over the years. Its use in Montgomery County is much lower than statewide use. Meanwhile, the use of electronic cigarettes and vaping has been on the rise. Although vaping is often viewed as a safer alternative to cigarette smoking, the risks are not fully known at this point as vaping products are unregulated by the FDA and health studies are in progress.

While public health initiatives have effectively targeted tobacco, the opioid epidemic is currently at the forefront of issues. It is important to point out that the use of prescription narcotics is low among youth in Montgomery County with a little over 1 percent reporting use. The same rates apply for other drugs such as cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens, ecstasy, and even prescription stimulants (like Adderall), which are decreasing in usage.

Schools and families within the county have been doing well at creating environments for youth that engage them with meaningful learning and foster positive behaviors. Nearly three quarters of eighth graders reported good family attachment and noted that their families offered both opportunities and rewards for social involvement. These are important factors to consider because they are effective in dissuading youth from engaging in drug and alcohol use.

The Montgomery County Office of Drug & Alcohol partners with school districts to review their PAYS data and assists with identifying strategies to support youth. The office funds several programs that focus on life skills, emotion regulation, and suicide prevention and awareness. These programs are free to school districts participating in the PAYS survey. For more information, visit <https://www.montcopa.org/1339/Drug-Alcohol>