

The Road to Prevention Care in Bennington County

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Understanding local patterns of youth substance use is an important part of developing and implementing appropriate substance use prevention programs. One of the most valuable tools for gaining insights into youth substance use is the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). The YRBS is a semi-annual classroom-based survey that collects information about risk behaviors, perceptions on behaviors and youth assets from high school and middle school students. Other substance use data complements this report. The semi-annual nature of the survey allows us to evaluate changes in behaviors and perceptions over time and can provide insights to where there is the most need for prevention efforts in the community. While substance use data and trends are important when planning prevention efforts, community readiness for these efforts is essential. Community assessments throughout Bennington County have found overwhelming support for prevention efforts. 89% of respondents to these community surveys “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that alcohol, tobacco, and other drug prevention programs are a good investment and 93% of respondents “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that prevention and reduction of youth substance use is an important issue for our community. This type of community support is extremely valuable for implementing successful prevention programs. It is important to note that despite this support, only 54% of respondents “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that our community is committed to preventing and reducing youth substance use and abuse. This statistic may indicate that while there is support for prevention work in Bennington County, there may not be strong motivation from the community to get involved with these prevention efforts.

Through community surveying of Bennington County residents, heroin use by youth was identified as the substance of greatest concern to the community. Along with heroin, alcohol, prescription drugs and marijuana round-off the top four substances of concern, in that order. This perception of great concern about heroin and prescription drugs likely stems from the fact that they have recently been a very visible and well-publicized issue in the area. The elevated risk is not reflected in YRBS data for Bennington County youth, as only 2% of high school students report using heroin in their lifetime and only 5% report using non-prescribed prescription drugs in the past 30 days³. Due to the much higher reported use of alcohol and marijuana by Bennington County youth, prevention efforts have focused on these two substances instead. This does not mean that the issues of prescription drug abuse and heroin use are being ignored, as alcohol and marijuana prevention efforts and strategies have significant crossover with prevention of other substances.

The changing landscape of marijuana legalization has made the topic of youth marijuana use a popular one. Currently 25 states and the District of Columbia have marijuana legalized in some form (either recreational or for medical use). As the number of states with legal marijuana has increased over the years, it is unsurprising that the percent of youth who perceive regular marijuana use to be harmful has steadily decreased both nationally and here in Bennington

1 Combined Bennington County Community Assessments

2 Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2004–2013.

3Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2015

4 Harding, Frances. *Parenting is Prevention*. February 14, 2013.

<http://blog.samhsa.gov/2013/02/14/parenting-is-prevention/#.V6VH-BQSnlI>.

County ^{2,3}. Despite a decrease in the percent of youth perceiving regular marijuana use to be harmful, there has also been a decrease in the percent of youth who are regularly using marijuana ^{2,3} (Figure 1). Despite an overall trend of decreased marijuana use in high school students in Bennington County, when looking at changes over the four years of high school there is a clear trend of increased marijuana use and a corresponding decreased perception of harm as youth get older (Figure 2).

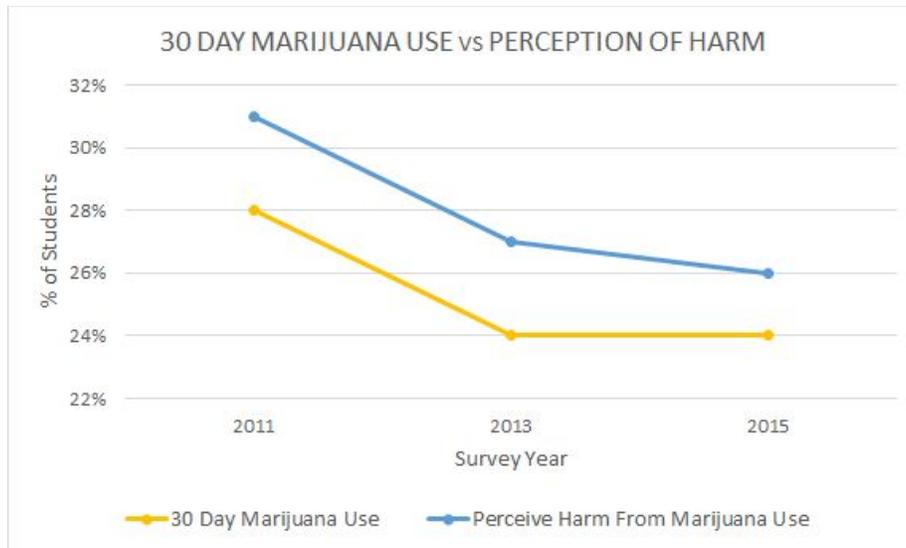


Figure 1. 30 Day Marijuana Use vs Perception of Harm

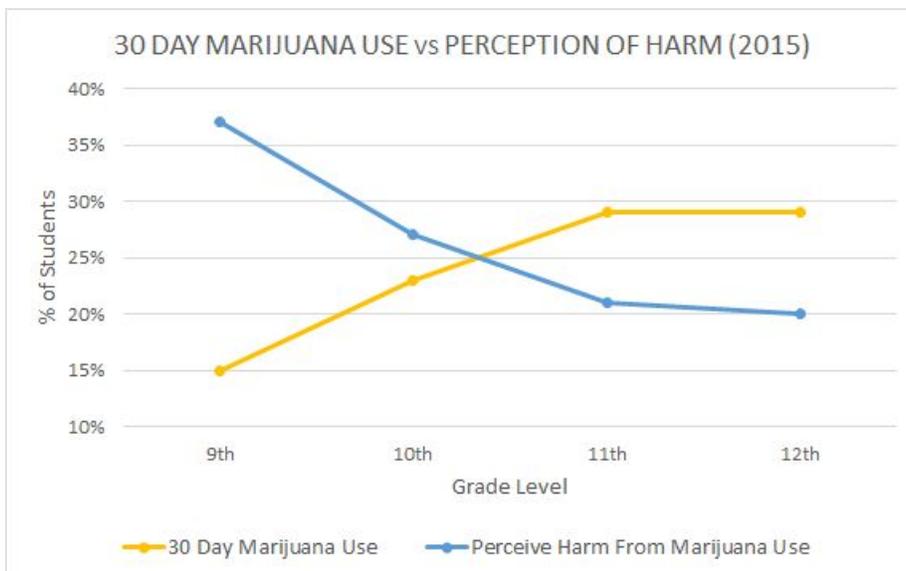


Figure 2. 30 Day Marijuana Use vs Perception of Harm (2015)

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According to Frances M. Harding, Director of SAMHSA’s Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, “A youth’s perception of risks associated with substance use is an important determinant of whether he or she engages in substance use”⁴. When comparing binge drinking (5 or more drinks in one sitting) in 30 day to the perceived risk, it shows that that binge drinking is significantly lower than the perceived risk of binge drinking (Figure 3).¹ This suggests that students who understand the risks and harms of binge drinking, will be less likely to binge drink.

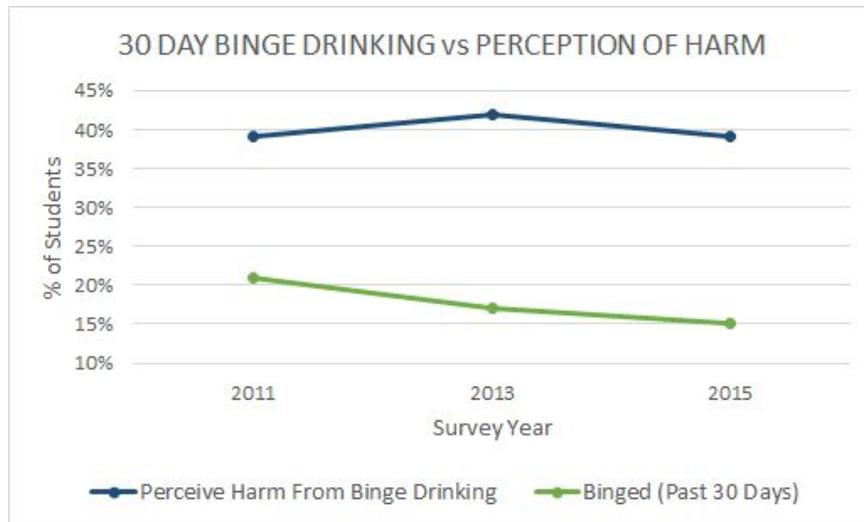


Figure 3. 30 Day Binge Drinking vs Perception of Harm

The Collaborative (located in Londonderry, VT) is a substance use prevention coalition that provides substance free events to youth and families in Bennington County. One major program, is the Refuse to Use program. The Refuse to Use program is when students in grades 7-12 take a pledge to remain substance free. The students are supported by a caring adult to remain substance free. Along with taking the pledge, the students attend sessions about alcohol, drugs, marijuana and other substances. In return, they receive a pass to Stratton mountain, the Dorset Festival, Riley Rink, or the Viking Nordic Center

The Alliance for Community Transformations (located in Bennington, VT) is a community based coalition with the mission of empowering, mobilizing and inspiring communities to act in collaboration towards delaying first time substance use and preventing substance abuse among youth, reducing substance use across all ages and promoting greater wellness and long-term health in the “Southshire” region of Bennington County.

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