

Drop Your Truth:

Teens speak up on nicotine, drugs, and mental health



What did we do?



8 Dane County high schools participated

- 7 gave paper surveys
- 1 surveyed electronically



Surveys were conducted in January and February 2026



Paper surveys were typed into a Google Spreadsheet



Evaluator reviewed responses & developed a coding scheme

- MaxQDA (data analysis software) coded responses to relevant theme(s)



Responses were recorded

- 6 duplicate records were identified and removed
- Note: One response represented feedback from 15 members of a smoking cessation club

What did teens say?

1. How have vaping, smoking or other drugs affected your life or the lives of people you care about?

- **34%** said these **substances had no or little impact** on their lives or the lives of people they care about.
 - Difficult to distinguish if students meant there is no impact because they don't spend time with people who use substances, or they don't think there are any negative consequences to using those substances.
- **62%** mentioned the **various impacts substances have had or could have**
- **4%** responses **could not be coded** to any theme.

Notes for all responses to this question:

- Very few respondents spoke of using substances themselves. Some students responded that "everyone" uses these substances, or there is secondhand smoke "everywhere".
- Only 14 responses alluded to using any substances themselves (note that one of these responses represented 15 members of a smoking cessation club).
- It is likely many students who do use substances did not admit that in the survey.

Impacts of using substances (in order from most to least)

Physical Health

A variety of health consequences were mentioned like cancer and death, respiratory problems, impacts to the brain, and general statements like "It is bad for your health", or "bad for your body".



Quotes from youth

"It made my lungs hurt and I would run out of breath really easy."

"Smoking has made a huge impact on my family. For example my nana had gotten addicted to smoking when she was young and later when she got a lung effecting sickness it only got worse. Once she recovered she quit smoking but the lasting effects were still there. She lived through breathing problems through the rest of her life and had many surgeries to try and help her breathing, in the end she was on oxygen and it was what ended up taking her life."

Addiction or dependence

Many mentioned knowing someone who was addicted or shared that they knew using substances can be addicting. Others spoke more indirectly about “the struggles of quitting”, how addiction can feel, or how they feel about others around them who are addicted.



Quotes from youth

“I have smoked before a lot and whenever I was mad, stressed or sad all I wanted to do was smoke so I depended on it so much.”

“I've seen my brother smoking his vape everyday so much when he doesn't have it he gets angry more than he ever does. Just shows how long he can't go without it.”

“I hear about people in my class who I know who vape and a lot of the time it's people who surprise me. One of my good friends is getting into that bad habit and it scare[s] me because I don't want it to become an addiction that changes who she is and her actions.”

“My mom quit once, but she's gotten addicted again and I worried for her health.”

Relationships

Many comments were general, like “[it] can ruin relationships.” But others were more specific in how substance use can affect relationships, such as through preoccupation with using, not socializing as much, or being cut out by people who do not use substances.

Quotes from youth

“I have had people in the past that I considered friends, but when I find out that they do drugs or vape, it makes me think they are just a bad influence which can end our relationship.”

“I've had relationships end, romantic and plutonic due to the fact that people prioritized drugs over the people they love and that hurts so much.”

“Getting in trouble with parents which creates trust issues which can be hard to get back.”

“I have lost my whole relationship with my father, and I barely know who he is anymore and it makes me feel so behind in life without him.”

“Avoiding others and unsocializing with friends.”

“It makes them dependent and I feel like they're preoccupied when we're hanging out”



General or other negative impacts

This category includes mostly general negative statements, such as “they affect others negatively” or “It ruins lives”. But it also included the cost burden, or getting in trouble with parents, the law, or sports teams.

Quotes from youth

“Sometimes my friends do and it makes me feel bad because it is so bad for you.”

“Some can't stop doing some substances and are dumping extra money into these substances.”

“They are really harmful and addictive. Many people use them.”

“Got people suspended from sports.”

“It has changed their life negatively and made them go down the wrong path.”

Behavior change of the person using

Students expressed how people changed after they started using substances, including lying and hiding their behavior.

Quotes from youth

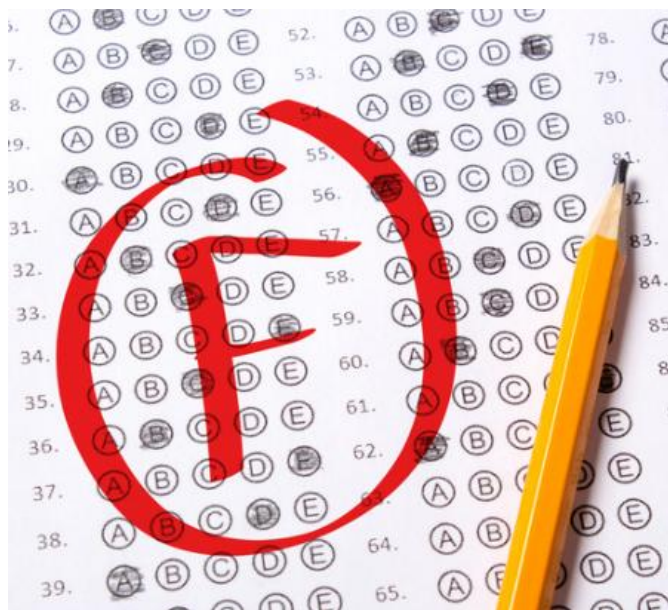
“I see the people who I have a relationship become "less" themselves and be more prone to have depression and feeling unworthy.”

“My sister smokes marijuana and it ruined her life as she started spreading rumors, started stealing from family and couldn't keep a job longer than a month.”

“I don't know anyone who smokes or uses other drugs, but I have noticed people I know who vape are more negative, mad and almost have mood swings.”

Impact to school functioning

Especially on grades and school sports teams.



Quotes from youth

“It can change the way that they feel, act, and can majorly affect the way grades are.”

“I have never done drugs but my friends do. I've noticed that they have almost no money because they are constantly buying drugs. They also have poor grades and have dropped out of sports.”

“It affects your ability to think clearly, play sports and be successful at school.”

Personal impact

While most people talked about the impact of substance use on others, many spoke about other people's use affects them.



Quotes from youth

"I have friends who struggle with addiction. and sober people feel like they can't go to the bathroom because we have to wait for people to finish vaping only to get hotboxed while relieving ourselves."

"I've seen some of my friends doing it and it sucks to see people I care about do this."

"It affected my life negatively because I want the people I care about to be happy and healthy, because I don't want them to be dependent on a drug that makes them feel worse or even for them to die."

"Parents smoking cigarettes affects me with the smell and worrying about their health."

"My parents vape nicotine and it only affects me because I don't want them to. My mom quit once, but she's gotten addicted again and I worried for her health. My dad's been vaping for a while."

"My dad has smoked most of his life and it has affected his health and others. I have asthma from secondhand smoke. It's also affected our relationship. I went from living with him full time to him having another family. Now I see him 4 days a month."

2. Where are you or your friends exposed to secondhand vapor or secondhand smoke?

- **19.4%** said they **were not exposed** to secondhand vapor or smoke
 - "It doesn't affect me."
 - "I do not have any people who are close to me that are affected by vaping or smoking."
 - "Hasn't affected anyone I care about cause no one close to me does those things to my knowledge because of things like sports."
- The remaining **71.1%** mentioned being **exposed at one or more location(s)**.
- **9.5%** of comments that **could not be coded** to any theme.
 - Mostly these responses were "I don't know", "yes" or indicated that the students did not understand what "exposed to secondhand vapor or secondhand smoke" meant, as many cited [seeing secondhand vapor or smoke on] online sources.

Locations teens are exposed to secondhand vapor/smoke

Public Places

Including both indoor and outdoor locations, with many citing “downtown,” “downtown Madison,” or “State Street.”

“Public places where smoking is allowed.”

“Downtown or anywhere with a lot of people.”

“Public bathrooms.”

“Downtown areas that have shops where people can access these materials.”



Schools

Including school bathrooms (with some mentioning specific bathrooms), bathrooms near sports fields, or general statements about school. Some still mentioned bathrooms but alluded to preventive measures taken by the school.

“I try and mind my own business, but it gets to the point where I don't want to use the bathroom because of the excessive smell.”

“School bathrooms (less now).”

“Sometimes in school bathrooms or in football concession bathrooms.”

“In school bathrooms, most people smoke weed and a ton of people vape, so the bathrooms have a lot of smoke inside.”

Parties and Concerts

Many teens said parties or concerts were a source of secondhand smoke or vapor.



“Concerts and public events with large amounts of people.”

“Concerts and music festivals.”

“Places with other teens.”

“Parties or hangouts.”

3. How do you think vaping, drug use or smoking impact mental health either in yourself or others, if at all?

- **6%** said there was **no impact**, either because they did not know anyone who used substances, or because they did not think there were negative mental health consequences.
 - “Hasn’t affected my loved ones.”
 - “It doesn't cuz I've never been around it.”
 - “I don’t think it affects people.”
 - “It probably affects some people but I haven't done it so it doesn't affect me.”
- The remaining **86%** mentioned **one or more impact**.
- **7.5%** of comments that **could not be coded** to any theme.

Mental health impacts

Stress, anxiety, and depression

“Vaping, drug use and smoking all have negative side effects even though most of the time people try to use it as an escape to get away from whatever they don't want to be involved with anymore. It also causes break and trust in relationships.”

“They hurt mental health and can worsen previous mental health issues.”



“...it takes a toll on your mental health, increasing stress and anxiety.”

“...it provides a temporary, fake relief that makes the person end up in a worse place than they started.”

Anger and moodiness

“My friend’s mood was definitely worse when they were vaping they were short tempered.”

“Makes me irritable.”



“When not having it you're mad or upset.”

“It can make you distant and lose interest in activities.”

Thinking and decision-making

"It affects your ability to think clearly."

"It alters their brain to make them make bad decisions."



"They impact your critical thinking capacity."

"Substance abuse affects rationale."

Self-confidence and self-worth

"It made me feel like I was worthless and I kept doing it to make me "happy" but it didn't if anything it made it worse."

"It makes people hate themselves."



"Makes you feel mentally worse and bad about yourself."

"They may also be ashamed of their addiction."

Perceived positive impacts

Note: Most were not firsthand experiences.

"Might make them feel better."

"I hear it helps with stress and it relaxes them."



"In myself personally smoking thc has helped my depression, it calms my thoughts and keeps me distracted and feeling happy, as long as I limit the amount I use."

4. If you could give advice to someone younger about vaping, drugs, or mental health, what would you say?

This question was optional. Of those who answered (498):

- **93.2%** had some **advice or comments**.
- **4.8%** of responses that **could not be coded** to any theme.

Don't do it

Majority of responses said “don’t do it”, often with other sentiments about how hard it will be to stop, and that it won’t help you fit in. Students also often spoke of it “not being worth it”, even if there might be some perceived benefits early on.

“Find a better way to feel some relief instead of relying on unhealthy mechanisms.”

“Do not start drugs, smoking because it can be very hard to stop.”

“I would say just don't try it ever and hold yourself accountable even when it is hard to say no, because it can get bad very fast.”

“Don't do it even if you are offered or think it is cool, it really isn't worth it. If you are curious or thinking about it, talk to your parents or a trusted adult.”

“It's not good for you and won't help you cope or fit in with a group of people who didn't like you before. With all the consequences, it is not worth it.”

“Please don't do it, it's not worth it. It might seem worth it for the “high” when you first do it but it's really not it can control and ruin your life.”

Use them safely

Some had a more neutral response, advising on using substances more safely.

“If you do start to experiment with smoking, please be smart, buy from someone you can trust, don't bring your stuff to school and keep your priorities straight.”

“I would say create a commitment to yourself to not get addicted. I think its ok to try stuff but you have to know when its an issue.”

“Your body your choice.”

“Do it in moderation.”

“At least wait until you legally can to choose if you want to and realize the benefits.”

Other themes

Looking cool and fitting in



Lowered self-esteem



Self-medication and coping



Alignment with statewide project

These results had consistent content and themes to a similar questionnaire completed by Wisconsin students in 2025 as part of the [Unfiltered: Youth Voices Impacted by Nicotine](#) project. In this project, students and some adults responded to the question “How have vaping and nicotine impacted your life?”. The top identified topics were physical health, mental health, addiction, school, friends, family, and quitting. Similar topics were identified in our analysis, although quitting did not come up as often.

A more comprehensive analysis of the same 2025 data yielded 12 different themes, some of which were also observed in this project.

1. Family Use is Widespread and Emotionally Complex
2. School-based exposure is common and disruptive
3. Resilience, Refusal, and Identity
4. Peer pressure is present but often resisted
5. Emotional fallout from addiction
6. Loss and grief from nicotine-related illness
7. High health literacy and risk awareness

Limitations

Students were asked about the impact of vaping, smoking, and drug use. As [students may perceive vaping to be less harmful than smoking](#), they may not have factored vaping as much in their answers, and spoke primarily about smoking or drug use. According to the [Dane County Youth Assessment](#), 12% of high school students used e-cigarettes in the last 30 days, 12% used a THC vape, and 1% used cigarettes.

One school administered the survey online. The responses from that school were noticeably shorter and there were more non-codable responses.

Recommendations

- Consider the student responses in the context of what is known about access, curriculum, norms
- Policy change at concerts or outdoor events where youth are present (more smoke-free venues, including outdoors)
- Additional prevention measures in school bathrooms
- Prevention efforts targeted at self-esteem
- More positive mental health supports and coping mechanisms



Summary of coded responses

Who	Number of Mentions
Family	177
Friends/Peers	75
Self	15
Exposure	Number of Mentions
Public indoors or outdoors	247
School	235
Homes/Cars	105
Parties	30
Concerts	16
Advice	Number of Mentions
Don't start	373
Use "carefully"	38

Impact	Number of Mentions
Any mental health impact	411
Addiction/dependence	346
General negative mental health impact	284
Physical health	244
Relationships	98
General negative impact	89
Behavior changes of the person using	74
Impact on mood	52
Impact to thinking/decision making	32
Impact on school functioning	29
Impact to self-confidence and self-worth	22
Positive mental health impact	21

Acknowledgements

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Schools

- Belleville High School
- Middleton High School
- Oregon High School
- Stoughton High School
- Sun Prairie East High School
- Sun Prairie West High School
- Waunakee High School
- Wisconsin Heights High School

Community Coalitions

- Belleville Area Cares Coalition
- Dane County Prevention Alliance
- Oregon Area Cares Community Coalition
- Stoughton Wellness Coalition
- Sun Prairie Wellness Coalition
- Waunakee Community Cares Coalition