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COMMUNITY
SYSTEMS
GROUP



[COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT]

By Community Systems Group for the Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition of Alexandria



Alexandria 2013 Community Assessment Results

- *Conducted by the Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition of Alexandria (SAPCA)*
- *Designed and analyzed by Community Systems Group (CSG)*

Executive Summary and Recommendations

The 2013 Community Assessment was conducted by SAPCA in consultation with CSG to gather qualitative information about what is driving youth substance use in Alexandria. The information will be used to clarify the attitudes and norms driving the behavior, and applied to enhancing interventions SAPCA uses to reduce youth substance use. Five primary recommendations emerged:

- 1) Youth overall considered alcohol to be more risky than marijuana use. Influencing their decisions about “risk” were how much trouble they might get in from parents and law enforcement; how likely they are to get caught by parents, at school or by law enforcement; and what kind of physical or future-altering harm might occur. In all three cases, marijuana was perceived as less likely to produce a negative result than alcohol. Since low perception of risk predicts an increased likelihood of use, SAPCA may want to prioritize marijuana as a drug upon which specific action(s) should be taken. Additionally, SAPCA should consider how Alexandria may strengthen policy and procedure so that the perception of the likelihood of being caught and of receiving consequences increases among youth.
- 2) Over-the counter (OTC) drug abuse was defined as taking medicine not your own or taking it with the intention of getting high. There was clear cross-over from OTC abuse to prescription abuse in youth’s minds, which leaves room for SAPCA to create youth and adult conversations about “medicine abuse” as one theme.
- 3) Homes and friends were the most frequent sources of drugs or alcohol. Homes, with friends and at school were the most frequent places to consume drugs or alcohol. SAPCA, in addition to working with the Above the Influence Club at TC (SAPCA’s youth arm) to influence friends and peers, may want to prioritize addressing social hosting issues (not serving alcohol or providing the place to consume alcohol). They may also want to continue conversations with the schools about drug use at schools.
- 4) Both youth and adults recognized and asked for more family-friendly, youth-friendly safe places (like Community Lodgings) and events (e.g., festivals).
- 5) Adults perceive they can recognize the signs of drug use, although youth believe if they manage their behavior, they can get away with use. Adults seemed to believe that conversations about alcohol and drug use should wait until middle school at the earliest, but youth note witnessing adult use and abuse from a very young age and that they start talking among their friends no later than sixth grade. Waiting until middle school is likely too late. Adults do not believe in varying



their messages from middle to high school. These are adult education themes upon on which SAPCA may consider prioritizing work.

Assessment Design

CSG began design of the listening session question path using SAPCA's priority risk factors (i.e., perception of harm, availability), their own question pool, and the process followed in the "2008 GMU Qualitative Assessment of Alexandria Substance Use." Consideration was given to number of drugs to be explored, total number of questions and length of time of the interview. While the exact wording of the questions is different, the themes explored between the youth and adults are intentionally similar. As a result of discussions between SAPCA board members and CSG, youth and adult question paths were finalized.

The process was designed to allow local SAPCA volunteers to lead the process. To that end, a Listening Session Guide was provided with information about holding sessions, suggested demographics and the question path. CSG provided training to volunteers to assure their understanding and comfort in conducting the sessions.

Implementation

Between September and December 2013, six listening sessions were held with a total of 21 youth and 21 adults present. The sessions were implemented by eight volunteers who served as facilitators and recorders. Youth sessions were implemented in the recreation centers and other community centers, and adult sessions were implemented in the various community settings, but primarily at community centers. Youth session participants were recruited through already existing youth groups and through the recreation centers. Adult session participants were recruited through various community groups and current volunteers. One volunteer translated the questions to Spanish, and one adult session was held in Spanish.

Demographics

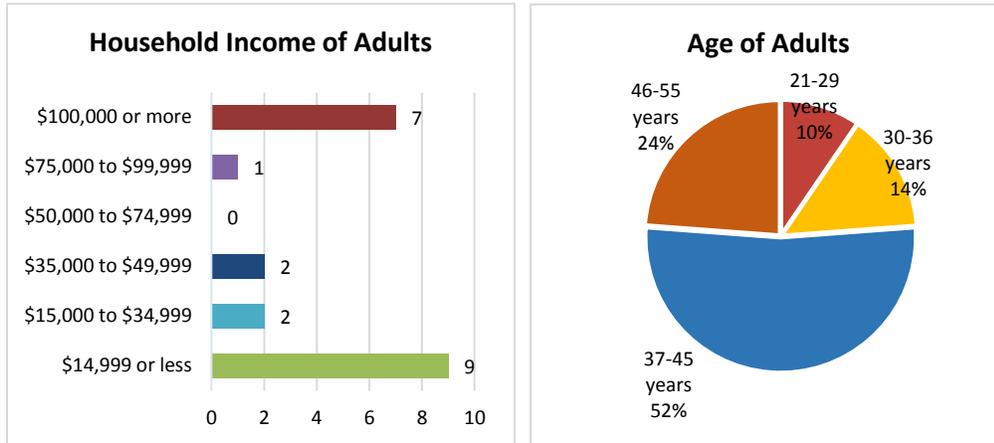
A representative sample of the target population was required to obtain the range of perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes that exist in the community. CSG provided SAPCA with specific recommendations based on Alexandria's population.

It was recommended that about 20 adults participate in the listening session initiative, and that the primary adult indicator be based on socioeconomic status, as prior research indicates that socioeconomic status among adults is the most reliable indicator of adult beliefs and attitudes. Adults, already screened for Alexandria residency, were also asked to provide information on their age, ethnicity and whether or not they are the parent/guardian of a middle or high school student in order do a simple review to assure the sample: was weighted to parents of current middle or high school students, that the sample was not weighted to senior citizens or the young (below 25), and that the sample was not overly weighted to any one ethnicity.

The resulting sample was that the 21 adults from Alexandria who participated in the community assessment listening sessions were of equal racial/ethnic distribution among African

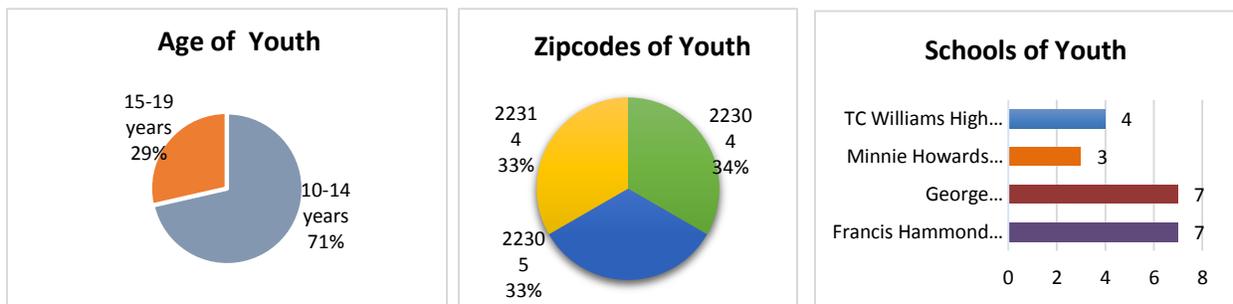


American/Black, Hispanic and White participants. The majority of participants were in the 37-45 age range, with no participants over age 55 or below age 21. There was a lot of economic diversity in participants, with almost the same number of people in the highest income bracket as the lowest income bracket and only five people in the four middle brackets. Most participants (62%) stated that they have a child who is currently middle or high school age.



It was recommended that 20 youth participate and that the primary youth measure be age, since the age of youth is a stronger predictor of youth beliefs and attitudes about drugs than ethnicity. The youth were also asked to provide information about their school and their zip code of residence, in the interest of demonstrating the youth came from multiple places in the city.

Youth participants were primarily between the ages of 10 and 14 years old, and were attending middle school. An equal distribution of youth came from three different geographical regions, represented by three zip codes and four schools. Ethnicity was not asked directly of the youth; however, the volunteers facilitating the sessions noted White youth are under-represented.





Results

In this section, we first provide a summary of themes from youth and adult listening groups. Following that is a more detailed analysis of the responses to each question asked of adults and youth.

Summary of Key Youth Themes

- Youth believe that alcohol use in particular will be detrimental for their futures in many ways, and that their parents would universally respond harshly to them using alcohol, potentially kicking them out of their house or sending them away. They seem to be aware Alexandria adults have been messaging that teen alcohol use is not good for them.
- The youth have an overall perception that alcohol is worse for them than marijuana. While they acknowledge the harm marijuana can do, they seem to think the consequences are less severe. Some of this may stem from beliefs that parents and police would react less strongly if they found youth using marijuana.
- In regards to prescription drug abuse, the youth recognize the harms, but seem to associate this type of drug use with psychological problems that require professional help and, thus, are sympathetic to peers who use.
- Overall, the youth state that awareness of the harms of all drugs makes them want to stay away from drug use. They care if the police were to catch them with drugs because of the consequences that would follow, and how it would make them a bad role model.
- There were no real differences in how youth obtain the drugs and where they use them. Primarily, they get the drugs from family members or peer connections. They use in their own homes, friends' houses, or at school.
- Youth believe parents and other adults in the communities can discourage use by building genuine, good relationships with them, talking regularly with them, and serving as positive role models. They want adults to not exaggerate so that they will be more believable. And the youth were particularly sensitive to the hypocrisy that they see when teachers and other adults who use discourage the youth from using.
- The youth believe that offering more positive alternatives for youth activities would discourage use, especially programs with a prevention specific focus. In particular, they noted the Community Lodgings program as one that offers a nice balance of activities, meeting people, discussions, and future planning so that youth learn more about themselves and what is possible for their futures.

Summary of Key Adult Themes

- Overall, adults believe there are many similarities between alcohol and marijuana use and do not make many distinctions in either influences of use or how they address them. Despite youth differences in their perceptions of the two drugs, adults do not differentiate them very much.
- Adults believe that there are many influences driving alcohol and marijuana use, including parental attitudes and communication, peer pressure, the media, and society as a whole. The media, celebrities and changing laws were noted as particular influences of marijuana use.
- There are increases in use of both drugs due to getting older. As youth enter high school, they have more access to more peers and pressures to smoke marijuana. As they get



closer to college, they have more desires and pressures to try drinking so they are prepared for life after high school.

- In terms of how adults talk to their children about alcohol, again approaches are similar between the substances. They address a myriad of consequences and harms on multiple levels and do not vary message much between middle schoolers and high schoolers, only changing language to be more detailed with older youth. The focus is always on maintaining a good relationship and open communication with their children, notably the same message that youth gave in how to best influence them.
- They believe that approaches for discussing drug use have not changed, but that societal perceptions have. In particular, they note that the media and changes in laws have made alcohol and marijuana use more acceptable in some ways even as there have been attempts to also raise awareness of consequences.
- Adults varied in their comfort level in talking about both drugs, namely that many are not comfortable talking to younger children. Many believe that they do not need to talk to their children about drug use until they are older and already facing the issues at school and with their peers.,
- Similar to youth responses, the adults believe that attitudes and behaviors are a key influence on use. Adults need to be positive role models both at home with their own children and in community programming that can offer examples of fun without alcohol or smoking. However, the adults had mixed opinions about parents serving their children alcohol in their own home.
- In terms of punishment for use, parents believe that there are many things that they can do to take away privileges as well as what the police can do to deter future use. They did not differentiate between drugs but were somewhat split on the appropriate role of the police in prevention compared to enforcement of the law, with some believing that the police do not do enough and others thinking they are too harsh.
- Adults believe they can recognize the signs of drug use and that they are similar between alcohol and marijuana, with marijuana use potentially having longer term behavior changes.
- Adults are similar to youth in that they believe youth mostly get the substances from either homes/family or from peer connections.
- In terms of prevention, the adults differentiate the roles that various adults can play, with the parents playing the primary role and the school secondary. Other adults like police, doctors, and church members may also play a role. In alignment with youth responses, they believe the community as a whole needs to serve as positive role models and offer youth information and alternative options to encourage them to stay away.

Summary of Youth Responses by Question

1. When do you remember people your age beginning to talk about drinking?

The Alexandria youth offer a range of responses about when their peers started to talk about drinking, usually between 5th and 8th grade. One young person said it started as early as seven years old, or around 2nd grade.

a. What were they saying?



These youth mention a variety of things in how they first talk about alcohol. Some say that conversations are general and are about showing what they know about alcohol, including different types of drinks. A number of youth mention family members drinking, especially male family members (e.g. fathers, brothers) in this discussion. Finally, there was some talk about how they have wanted to try it or that they already have, even discussing drinking at school.

b. When do you remember people your age beginning to talk about marijuana?

Most youth think it began around the 6th grade.

c. What were they saying?

These early conversations about marijuana are more specific than alcohol in many ways. Not only do some youth talk about how they have smoked it before or that they know youth who have, there are much more specific positive beliefs mentioned about marijuana. They talk about how it is cool, fun, makes you feel good, makes you laugh, etc. As one stated, *“Kids say that it’s cool if you smoke, it feels good, you feel better, and it takes away, pain, stress and anger.”* They also noted that people post pictures on social media and have clothing with the plant on them. The only negative comment was that it can make your breath stink.

2. What do you think about students your age smoking marijuana?

Despite the positivity in their descriptions of what peers say, the Alexandria youth mostly expressed negative opinions about smoking marijuana. They said things like *“it’s stupid”*, *“kills their brain cells”*, *“it’s disgusting”*, and *“you won’t live as long.”* But some noted that things like peer pressure, the media, and celebrity culture encourage use. Finally, some stressed not doing it too young but *“after the 10th grade”* might be acceptable, and some do believe it to be calming and *“not good; not bad.”*

3. What does abusing over the counter medication mean to you? How would you define it?

In discussing over the counter medication abuse, the youth gave a few definitions to describe their understanding. Some believe it is simply taking too much medication so that you can *“get high.”* Others noted that it is about taking medication, either from home or elsewhere, that is not theirs. Lastly, some were more sophisticated, mentioning mixing pills to get the optimal effect and using social media to form organized peer groups to share information and substances.

a. What do you think about students your age abusing over the counter medications?

The youth have mixed feelings about using over the counter medications. Many think it is stupid and that they should not do it. But they were also sympathetic for why youth might use. They recognize the importance of parental role models as well as peer pressure in influencing use. But more than that, they seem to think that using is a necessary coping mechanism for some youth



who are struggling and who therapy can't help. One youth said "*it depends on the situation; some teens are going through stuff and they turn to it when they can't cope.*"

4. What do you think would happen if your parents caught you using alcohol?

Alexandria youth expect that their parents would react in a very angry and harsh manner if they caught them with alcohol. Many of the youth said that "*they would beat me*" or send them away somewhere, including military/boot camp, their home country, foster care, or the police station. Or they would simply get "*kicked out of my house.*" Only one youth expressed a less extreme response, expressing that their mother would be disappointed.

a. What do you think would happen if your parents caught you using marijuana?

The youth mostly believe their parents would have a similar response as with alcohol. They think they will be beaten, sent away or kicked out of their home. One youth stressed, "*My parents would lose their trust in me.*" However, there were a few responses that expressed that their parents would not really care about marijuana because alcohol is worse.

b. What do you think would happen if your parents caught you abusing over the counter drugs?

Youth believe their parents would show more concern than anger in their responses about being caught with over the counter medications. Many stated that they believe their parents would talk to them or take them to a professional for help. Some used words like "*highly upset*", "*angry*", and that they would not trust them with medicine, but overall reactions were expected to be less strong than for alcohol or marijuana.

5. What do you think are the best ways for parents to discourage teen substance abuse?

The youth believe that the best way for parents to discourage drug use is by talking to their children. They stressed that they should talk frequently, "*almost every day,*" address peer pressure, and give consequences for what can happen. One noted that they need to find "*different ways to talk to their kids*" and another that "*if you tell us not to do it, we will do it*" so the focus really needs to be on having an interactive conversation about substances and not just telling them what not to do. Other suggestions included parents being a good role model and not doing it themselves, while also monitoring friendships, hiding medication at home, and even making their kids try it so they can experience the negative effects.

6. How do students your age get alcohol?

The Alexandria youth express that they get alcohol in a variety of ways. Some mention their "*connections*" including older friends or a friend of a friend. But mostly they say they get it from family members who either give it to them or from whom the youth takes it.



a. How do students your age get marijuana?

The youth show an overall consensus that marijuana “*is easy to get and you can get it from anywhere.*” They mention getting it from peers or that they “*know a guy.*” They are familiar with finding people who sell it. Otherwise, they also say that they can get the supplies and make it themselves.

7. Where do you think people your age drink alcohol?

The participants stated that youth drink basically everywhere that youth spend their time. They expressed using a water bottle to carry clear alcohol. They drink at home, at school, on the school playground, in the bushes, and especially at friends’ houses or parties. They note that “*there are lots of parties*” where older youth recruit younger kids.

a. Where do you think people your age use marijuana?

As with alcohol, the youth express agreement that they use marijuana “*everywhere.*” Here they seem to emphasize using at school more than at home, including in the school bathroom, on the playground, or under the bleachers.

8. What kind of harm do you associate with alcohol use?

The youth express an awareness of a plethora of harms associated with alcohol use. Not only do they acknowledge the physical effects like damage to the brain, liver, and lungs, but they also discuss how it influences functioning like memory, logic, and energy levels. They also note how it impacts behavior; “*You get crazy and do bad stuff.*” Many mention drunk driving and getting a DUI. Lastly, one youth mentioned how it can influence the future by hurting their career.

a. What do these kinds of harms mean to you?

The youth expressed beliefs that using alcohol could lead to a lot of negative impacts on their lives. They know that in the short term, it can cause you to do something you may later regret, as well as cause you to “*feel the pain later.*” But they also mention long term impacts such as causing addiction, making them have to leave school, getting them sent to jail, and maybe even ruining their career. For females, it could also cause birth defects for future children. Consensus was that it can be very harmful for the future.

b. Does knowing these harms and risks influence your decisions about alcohol use?

The youth universally agreed that these harms and risks scare them and make them want to stay away from alcohol use.

c. What kind of harms do you associate with marijuana use?



In considering the harms of marijuana use, only one youth stated that they didn't think it was bad; *"It's great, grand and wonderful."* All the rest acknowledge how it can harm their bodies, particularly lungs and brain, even leading to early death. It can also influence their behavior, causing them to be *"zoned out"*, to be less able to function, and to possibly make them hurt themselves. One youth noted that it is worse than cigarettes and another that it could be laced with other types of drugs. Finally, one mentioned that using marijuana could lead to other bad things like date rape.

d. What do these kinds of harms mean to you?

Despite the awareness of the harms of marijuana, only some seemed to connect that it can hurt their own lives by losing friends, hurting their family, and wasting their education. Others did not think the possible risks were that serious.

e. Does knowing these harms and risks influence your decisions about marijuana use?

Even though some youth believed the harms were not that serious, they did overall say it makes them want to stay away from marijuana. *"Yes, does make you think twice about the things you will do and the possibility that you will make stupid decisions if you smoke."*

9. From whom or from where do you get information about the harms associated with youth substance use?

The youth shared a diverse range of sources of information about substance use. They mentioned family, including parents and grandparents, but also a number of people outside the home. They discussed school, teachers, Community Lodgings, health class, and even meetings like this listening session as providing information. More generally, many included the news as a source, as well as *"people who care"* and *"people who've experienced it."*

a. Are these people and places believable?

In considering the believability of the information sources, the youth were in agreement that it really depends. Some are believable and some are not: *"Only when they don't exaggerate."* Youth believe people will be more likely to be truthful if they know you. In addition, they think the news is believable because they provide evidence like pictures.

10. What do you think are the best ways for your school to discourage teen substance use?

The Alexandria youth were mixed about ways the schools can discourage drug use. Some think that talking about it more, outside of health class, in small group discussions, and even assemblies might help. They think there should be counseling and information for teens and parents. Adding more cameras at the school may also be a deterrent. But some youth think that



there isn't anything that the school can do, because they don't trust teachers especially when teachers themselves have used.

11. What can people in your community do to discourage teen substance use?

The majority of youth suggest that there are things that the community can do to address teen substance use. First, they think that they need to eliminate selling of drugs in the community. They suggest that adults need to be role models and offer activities and positive things for youth to do. Church was one example provided as an alternative activity. The youth believe that having counseling and support services may also help. And, lastly, they think more monitoring of youth at school and beyond would be beneficial including having scanners, more police presence, and taking away of cell phone for suspicious behavior.

12. How likely do you think it is that you will get caught by the police if you were using alcohol?

Many youth believe that they will be caught by the police if they use alcohol. Others think it is not as likely, because they know of a lot of people who drink. They mention that knowing the right place to drink and how to act when drinking are big factors in getting caught.

a. How likely do you think it is that you will get caught by police if you were using marijuana?

In contrast to alcohol, the majority of youth do not believe they will be caught using marijuana. They do not believe that parents or the police care enough to pay attention to their use. As one stated, *"Police don't care that you smoke, they care about what you do when you smoke."*

b. If you get caught, what do you think will happen?

The youth believe that if they get caught with drugs, a wide range of things might happen. Nothing at all might happen for a first offence or they might take you to your parents to punish where they could take away privileges. But on the other extreme, they believe they could be sent to a juvenile detention center or the government may take you away from your parents.

c. Would you care if the police caught you drinking alcohol?

The Alexandria youth universally agreed that they would care if the police caught them drinking alcohol. Reasons given included that it would go on their record, influence future employment, and make them a bad role model.

d. Would you care if the police caught you using marijuana?

The youth express that they would care if the police caught them using marijuana because of the negative consequences that would follow. One stated that they may laugh when it happens, due to being high, but *"would care later."*



13. What activities are available at school or in your community that provide good alternatives to teen substance use?

Some Alexandria youth noted that there are sports, afterschool programs, and the Community Lodgings program that offer alternatives to using drugs in the out-of-school hours. However, one youth pointed out that there are no activities related specifically to substance use prevention, like the cyber-bullying program the school runs to address that separate issue.

a. What activities should there be?

The Alexandria youth offered a lot of suggestions for the kinds of activities that should be available for youth in their communities. In addition to afterschool programs, sports, and community service, the youth believe there should be programs that really help them to deal with what is going on in their lives. Some suggested that there should be programs to talk about substance use, even having speakers who have been through it. Others think that they should have small group programs where they can meet and talk to new people, and they think that the focus should be more on positive alternatives and not about the problems of drug use. Some think the activities should be more about helping them to “*realize who they are and how to overcome problems*” including more focus on future planning and hobbies.

One program in particular was mentioned, Community Lodgings, a lot and seems to be a great combination of the desired program characteristics. The youth like this program because it is active with sports and trying new things, but they also have small discussion groups to talk about making good choices. The youth highlighted that the program also includes career assessment and planning to help them stay focused on the future.

Summary of Adult Responses by Question

1. Recent studies show that almost 1 in 5 freshmen in the City of Alexandria drink alcohol regularly.

a. What attitudes, beliefs or behaviors do you see in the community that might be an influence?

Alexandria adults believe that high rates of alcohol consumption are caused by a variety of sources. While many stated that peer pressure or simple access to older youth who drink may cause youth to consume alcohol, a majority noted that adults have a large influence as well. It is believed that parents condoning alcohol consumption, or at least not communicating with their children can be a major factor. Moreover, many believe it is societal culture as a whole that portrays alcohol as fun and cool in the media as well as the prevalence of alcohol at social events that encourages teens to drink.



2. What attitudes, beliefs or behaviors do you see in the community that would influence almost 1 in 6 to smoke marijuana regularly?

The adults believe that youth smoke marijuana for reasons similar to alcohol, but with additional emphasis on youth believing that it is not bad for you. Some think that youth peer pressure or poor parental relationships drive youth to smoke. Yet, many cited a “*glorification of marijuana use*” in the media and from celebrities, as well as recent changes in laws in states like Colorado and Washington, as reasons that youth may believe smoking marijuana is not dangerous, or at least better than smoking cigarettes.

3. The percent of youth regularly consuming alcohol grows steadily and makes a large jump in the 12th grade (in most communities, however, it steadies or decreases in the 12th grade).

a. What do you believe might be influencing the 12th grade increase in our community?

Many Alexandria adults believe this increase can be attributed to a lot of reasons associated with getting older. In addition to things like prom or getting a driver’s license, parents and families seem to be freer about drinking around seniors, all of which may encourage them to drink. Moreover, a number of adults believe that the biggest factor is that young people are approaching college. As one adult shared, “*I think kids are getting ready for college. My daughter did not drink until her senior year of high school. I think she wanted to see what it was all about before she went off to college where she knew there would be a lot of parties.*”

b. The largest jump in marijuana use occurs between 8th and 9th grades. What might be influencing that kind of jump at that age?

Similar to alcohol, adults attribute this to getting older, in this case the specific transition to high school. Starting in 9th grade, they attend a bigger school, are exposed to more youth, and have greater probability of access. In particular, many think that they are exposed to more and older friends who are already using and this encourages use. Many adults cited peer pressure as a major factor. In addition, culture, especially rap culture, and desire to be independent from parents may contribute.

4. Do you talk to your youth about underage drinking?

a. If you do talk with them, how do you go about doing this? If you don’t talk with them, is there any particular reason?

The majority of the adults from Alexandria regularly talk with their children about underage drinking. Among those that don’t, the reasons given pertained to believing that their children were still too young for this conversation. In terms of how they speak to their children, the



conversations and approaches are diverse. Some emphasize the physical effects of drinking, including impairing judgment, causing hospitalization or death, and even making alcoholism or addiction possible. Others discuss the legal consequences, drinking and driving, and trying to avoid that situation. Lastly, many focus on the future and how drinking can get in the way of achieving their goals, some even use themselves as a cautionary tale. As one mother said “*Don’t not give yourself a chance for the future; think about consequences.*”

b. How would you rate your level of comfort with doing this?

The adults’ comfort levels in discussing underage drinking varied as much as the approaches. Some adults are “very comfortable” with the conversation, but there are some that are only somewhat comfortable or not comfortable at all. Some of these adults have not yet had the conversations with young children while others are concerned about having the right vocabulary and how to make sure the messages get through.

c. Do you think the messages have changed over time?

When asked if the message around underage drinking has changed, most adults responded that they do not believe that the message has changed but that society has. As one person stated, the message of “*danger, legal consequences and addiction risks*” are the same, as long as you tailor language to appropriate age. But culture around alcohol has shifted in some ways. The media has played a role in desensitizing young people about alcohol. However, at the same time, drunk driving awareness has increased and it has become less taboo to talk about it and show youth how harmful it can be.

d. How did or would you talk with a middle schooler?

In speaking to a middle schooler about underage drinking, some believe that the messages are the same as for high schoolers and others try to tailor their language. Mostly, they discuss generalities of alcohol, its effects, and their expectations. Notable is that many described talking with middle schoolers in a more casual conversation, trying to drop messages into other discussions. They emphasize trying to maintain trust and open communication with their children so there are more opportunities to bring it up, rather than addressing too forcefully and causing the youth to shut down.

e. Would how you talk with a high schooler be different?

The conversation with high schoolers is similar with middle schoolers, with focus on maintaining good relationships as well as letting them know expectations and potential consequences. The only differences for discussing with high schoolers is that adults are perhaps more detailed and also connect alcohol and driving more.

5. Do you talk to your youth about marijuana?



Parents in Alexandria have a similar stance to marijuana as alcohol. Most talk to their children, and the discussion focuses on the negative effects, including decreased motivation, legal repercussions, and effects on the brain. Some do not yet talk to their younger children.

a. How would you rate your level of comfort with doing this?

Answers are similar to alcohol, with many comfortable, but some needing their children to age before they will be comfortable.

b. Do you think the messages have changed over time?

As with alcohol, it seems that society is what has really changed. The media, popular opinion about tobacco, and, most importantly, the legalization of marijuana in some states has influenced youth beliefs about it not being harmful. But adults don't think their message to their children has changed, other than frequency and language as youth age.

c. How did or would you talk to a middle schooler?

Many responses for talking about marijuana to middle schoolers were the same as for alcohol. Focus is on generalities and keeping conversation casual. One parent noted that they “*start talking about cigarettes and extrapolate to marijuana.*”

d. Would how you talk to a high schooler be different?

The messages are the same as for alcohol. Discussions are more detailed and there's more emphasis on negative consequences.

6. Among the youth who use alcohol regularly, 85% think their parents would disapprove. Among the youth who do not regularly use alcohol, 96% think their parents would disapprove.

a. Why do you think those youth who have used alcohol less likely to think their parents would disapprove than those youth who have not used alcohol?

When considering parental disapproval of alcohol and how it influences underage drinking, many people believe that negative parental behavior plays a big role. Lack of parental involvement in youth's lives or outright approval of youth drinking at home may lead youth to believe that their parents don't care if they drink and, thus, encourage them to do so. Additionally, many adults believe that youth witnessing their parents drinking regularly could be one of the biggest contributors.

b. Among the youth who use marijuana regularly, 70% think their parents would disapprove. Among the youth who do not regularly use marijuana, 94% think their parents would disapprove.



Responses about parent disapproval of marijuana are similar to alcohol. Many believe that parents may use or have used or may not show enough care for their kids in general. The legalization of marijuana has also influenced this issue. Overall, most believe that parents' attitudes are crucial to prevent use. *"If your parents are strict, then you're going to be afraid to even try. Some kids are just afraid of getting caught. If the parents are on top of things, then the child is more likely to be scared."*

7. What methods do you think are appropriate to use to deter your child from using alcohol or marijuana?

The parents in the sample believe that there are many things that they can do to deter their children from using alcohol or marijuana. Open communication is critical to maintain a good relationship with your kids, as well as to let them know expectations and consequences, connecting these whenever possible. Many cited that there would be punishments at home if they were caught using, especially taking away privileges such as driving, having friends over, grounding, etc. Some think that parents should also be able to go through their children's belongings to find drugs. Other suggested deterrents specific to drug use that include having urine tests and *"visiting a drug rehab facility of 12-step program to see how it has affected other people."*

8. What do you observe adults in your community doing to discourage substance abuse among youth?

In terms of what the community is doing to prevent drug use, many adults in Alexandria do not believe much is being done. They believe adults talk to their own kids, but also that parents work a lot and often leave youth unsupervised or send them to *"the rec center or elsewhere"* when they can't handle them. Changes in drug laws have made youth sell drugs younger, but some noted smoking bans in bars and restaurants to be positive steps in the right direction.

a. What do you believe they could be doing?

Respondents gave lots of ideas for what the community should be doing. In addition to talking to youth and staying involved, they suggested that there should be more tools to offer alternatives to youth, including possible programs where youth make a pact to not use and where they get incentives for sticking to the program. The community could also do more drug testing to deter them. Moreover, *"leading by example"* was a common suggestion and many believe that *"more community events could advertise that they are ALCOHOL FREE or smoking FREE events"* so that youth see positive examples of having fun without alcohol or other drugs.

9. Do you know of parents who provide alcohol to their children? What is your opinion of this?



The adults in Alexandria were mixed about parents providing alcohol to children. Many say that they do not know parents that do this and that they are opposed to it. Some recognize that it happens in some homes because either culturally the family allows young people to drink wine with dinner or because they believe that it is better for their children to drink at home than out on the street and with the wrong people. One adult believes that parents might not necessarily provide the alcohol, but turn a blind eye when it happens and do not stop it. Finally one parent believes that *“what a parent does in his or her own house is none of anyone’s business.”*

10. What do you think the police should do when they catch youth using alcohol?

When considering what the police do with youth caught with alcohol, responses provided a variety of options. At the least, many believed that the police should call their parents and hold them until they arrive. Some suggested programs that the youth should be put through such as Scared Straight, putting them through a rehabilitation center, or simply making them interact with other youth who have had serious issues with alcohol. In more extreme cases or multiple offenses, they believe that the youth should be charged, do community service, be suspended from school activities, or even lose their driver’s license.

a. What kind of penalties should they receive?

They believe that penalties should be similar to the actions that the police should take. Again it should depend on the level of offense and what exactly the law says, as many did not know. Suggestions about penalties included: community service, going to a rehabilitation center, loss of driver’s license, public humiliation, drug/alcohol education class, spending the night in prison, and fines.

b. What have you seen or heard of police doing?

Adults in Alexandria have heard of the police doing a number of things to address underage drinking. They break up parties, arrest suspects (especially parents who host), use breathalizers, help with prevention, etc. Some are less aware of what the police do or believe they should take more actions. But some believe that the police actually overreact and that young police officers in particular do not understand the community and act too harshly as a result. One stated that the young police *“should be schooled in social sciences, understanding cultural differences and how different cultures use discipline”* or that older police should educate them.

c. What do you think the police should do when they catch youth using marijuana?

When youth are caught by the police with marijuana, adults think the police should take the same actions as they would with alcohol. Suggestions focus on talking to parents, scaring the youth, having them go through a program or community service, or even charging them.

d. What kind of penalties should they receive?



Again responses did not differentiate between alcohol and marijuana. Alexandria adults believe youth should go to a rehabilitation center, take drug classes, attend a substance abuse group, do community service, or potentially lose their driver's license.

e. What have you seen or heard of police doing?

The adults seemed to be divided on what the police have been doing to address marijuana use specifically. A few people have heard about arrests and prosecution, stating that it is “*definitely harsher treatment than underage drinking.*” However, more say that they are not aware or have not heard of the police doing anything.

11. How can you tell whether your teenager has been drinking alcohol? What signs do you look for?

The participating adults look for mostly physical signs that youth have been drinking alcohol. Many state the eyes are key, either in youth having “*glassy eyes*” or youth using eye drops a lot. Red, blotchy skin or the smell of alcohol are other signs. Other adults note the ways their youth behaves as evidence, including avoiding eye contact, coming home late, acting aggressive, or showing other personality changes. In one case, the parent said that they knew their child drank because he told her; she did her best to respond appropriately and discourage the behavior.

a. How can you tell whether your teenager has been smoking marijuana? What signs do you look for?

The signs of marijuana use are similar to alcohol. Eyes again are critical with a focus on them being red and the youth avoiding eye contact. They also believed that you can smell if they are using marijuana. Other behaviors to note are if the youth seems overly giddy or overly tired, “*slow moving and mellow.*” One adult noted long term evidence of drug use to be “*change in behavior, grades dropping, loss of interest in future, friends, school, etc.*” and the presence of a new group of friends at school.

12. If you were to talk about the potential harms of alcohol use with your youth, what kind of harms and risks would you describe?

In order to express the harms of alcohol use to young people, the adults of Alexandria noted, first of all, that it isn't just about what you say to them—it is important to model appropriate behavior and not drink in front of them. But in terms of messaging, many discuss the importance of delaying when they start drinking because of its influence on a growing brain and how it can increase likelihood of becoming an alcoholic to drink at a young age. In general, they expressed that highlighting the negative physical consequences is critical. Many pointed out how it can damage your liver, kill brain cells, cause accidents, and even cause death. They stress the dangers of addiction and alcoholism, especially when it runs in the family.



Beyond physical effects, they also highlight the possible legal consequences and other ways that drinking can influence the young person's future. They discuss how drinking impairs judgment and can cause poor decision-making including driving under the influence, violence at parties, and breaking the law in other ways which can lead to court involvement. It can also make you feel like "*more of a daredevil*" and cause you to put yourself in harm's way or possibly hurt someone else. One adult stated simply that it "*makes you stupid.*" One noted that for females it could lead to a bad situation with a boy that may be difficult escape. And ultimately, they discussed how this all could influence the career young people pursue, as well as generally negatively affect their future lives.

a. If you were to talk about the potential harms of marijuana use with your child or teenager, what kind of harms and risks would you describe?

In discussing the harms of marijuana use, many noted that they would use similar tactics to discussing alcohol but with some alterations. They add that there are extra health risks of using marijuana that can lead to cancer. Many believe that youth don't think of marijuana as a drug and don't realize it can be a gateway to other drugs. Some stressed the legal consequences, with marijuana arrest thought to be worse than alcohol. Lastly, a number stated that behaviorally marijuana has other consequences such as decreased motivation and focus which can have exponential influence on young people's future as well.

13. Do you know where youth get alcohol? If so, where? There is no need to name individuals.

For the most part, many believe that Alexandria youth are getting alcohol from their homes. They either take it from their parents or may have older siblings or friends that buy it for them. Other possibilities include that they might get it from stores that do not ask for identification, may use fake IDs, or could even ask people outside of liquor stores to purchase for them.

a. Do you know where youth get marijuana? If so, where? There is no need to name individuals.

In contrast to alcohol, adults believe that youth likely get marijuana mostly from friends or "*friends of friends.*" Some think they might also be buying it off the streets in more dangerous situations or at school from other students who are dealers.

14. What role do you think parents / police / schools / others have in substance abuse prevention?

In considering prevention, many of the Alexandria adults believed that you need to differentiate the different roles to address what they each can do. They believe that parents play the most significant role and that they must be involved in their children's lives. Parents need to know their children and what motivates them, as well as make sure they share information and



communicate expectations and risks. Then, many believe that the schools are the second most important source of information and their job is to educate about these things along with everything else they teach in school. Schools should promote alcohol free activities, bring in community leaders, have anti-drug/alcohol programs, and be consistent about punishment.

The adults then discussed that the police should be “*supplemental*” as an education support for the schools. They can discuss consequences, share stories, and make sure youth know the laws. Some believe that the police role is crucial, but there was some disagreement that the police do not do enough with prevention because they are the enforcers of the law and once they are involved “*it’s probably too late.*” Some also cited doctors and the church as possible sources of additional information and programming to prevent use.

Overall, they believe it is critical for all adults in the community to work together in sharing information and role modeling. There are many universals in how all adults should communicate with young people, letting them know the dangers and consequences of using drugs. And it is also helpful to provide incentives for staying away, making it seem unappealing and “uncool,” and showing them that they have other options in life.