

Healing With Feeling: Addressing Substance Abuse in Teens During the Covid-19 Pandemic

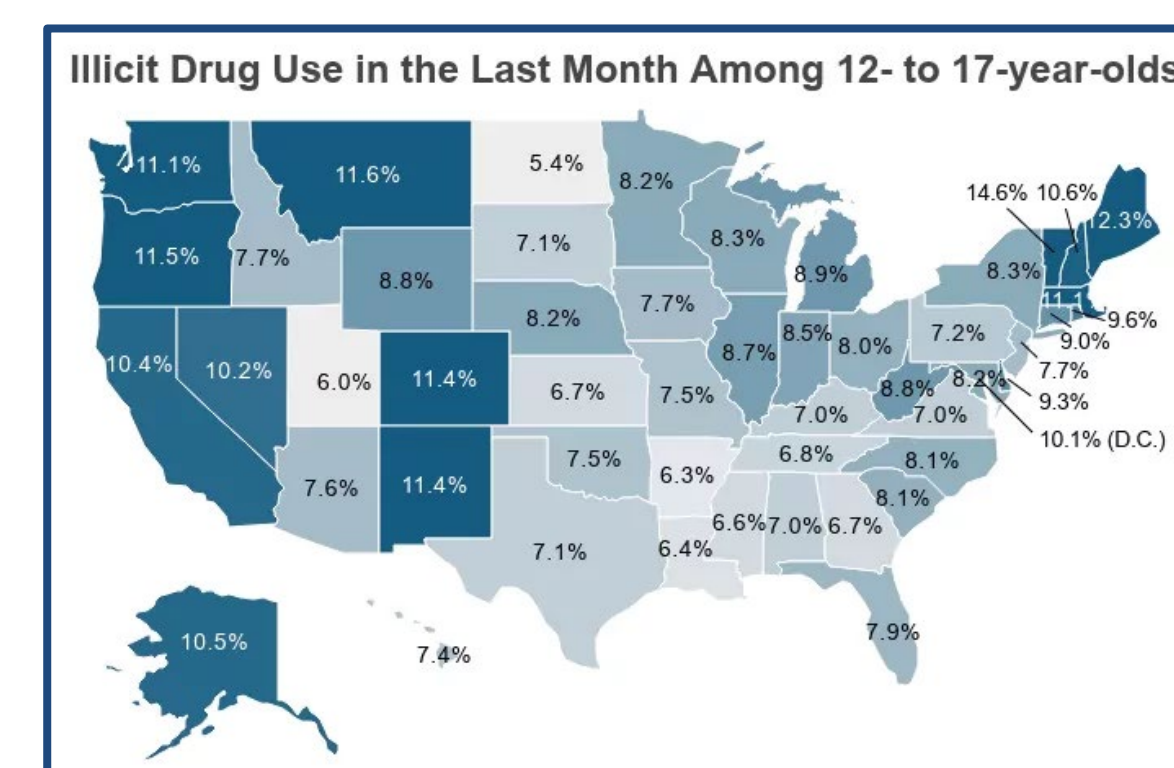
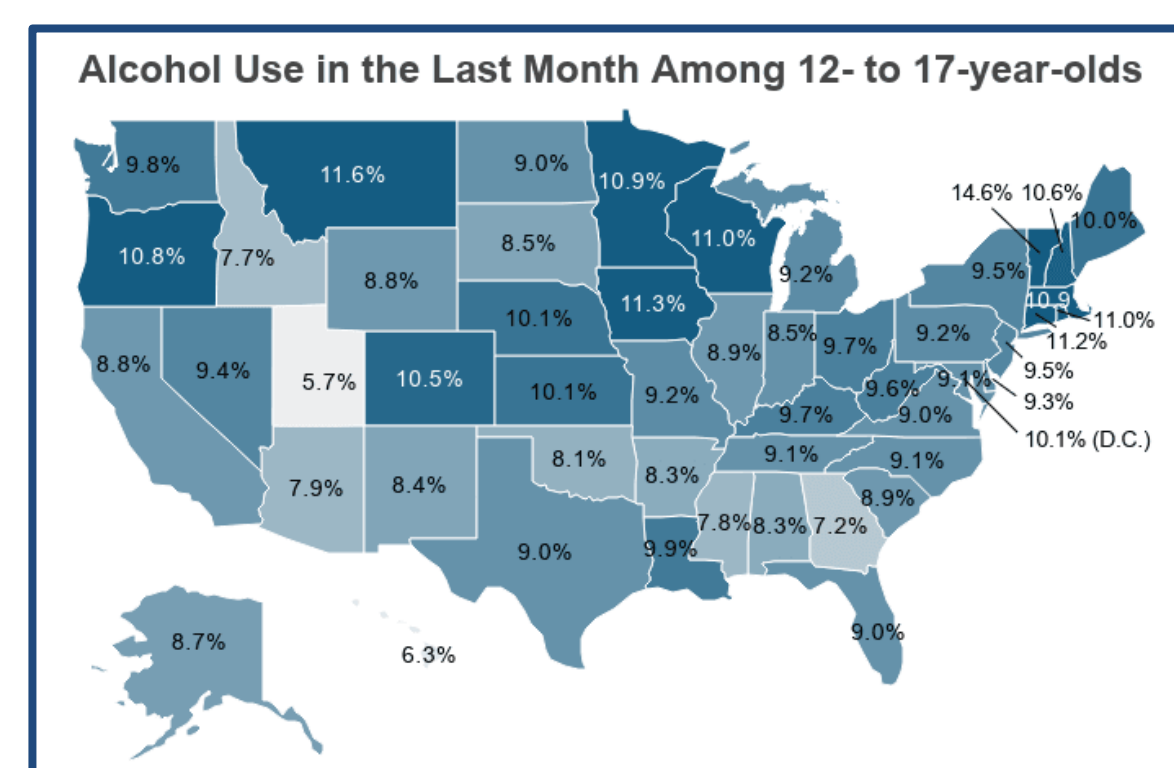
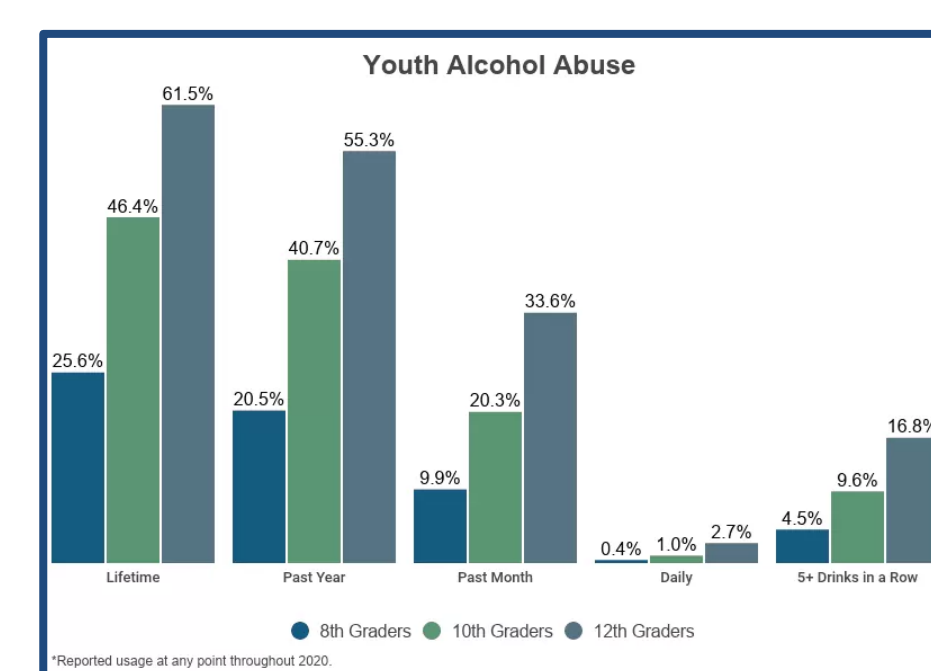
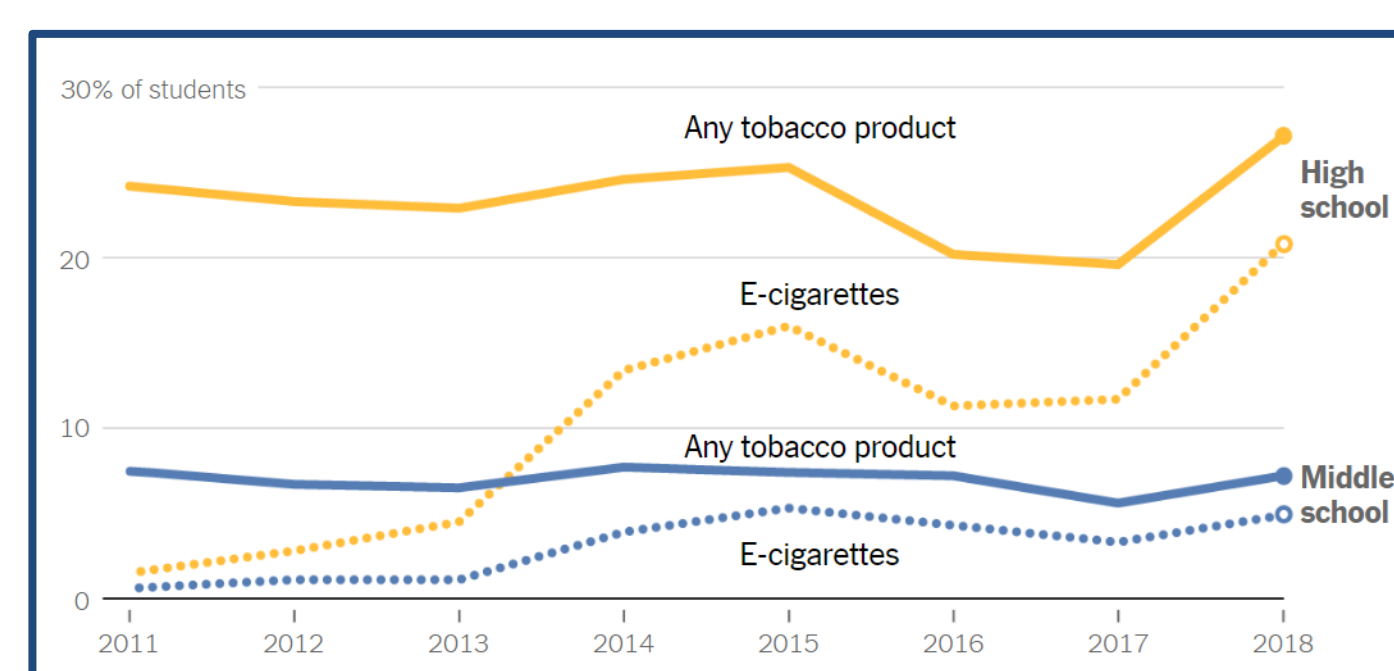
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Abstract

In recent years, substance abuse among teenagers has steadily increased since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Teen substance abuse related deaths have only continued to rise since then; with nationwide substance abuse related deaths being 1,146 in 2021, a sharp increase from the 954 deaths in 2020 (UCLA health, 2022). Teen substance abuse is determined by many factors, such as mental health, home/school environment, etc. In order to cope with these difficult emotions, teenagers turn to drug use to numb the feeling. Studies have shown that art based therapy and afterschool programs are effective in mitigating the risk factors for teen substance abuse (OJJDP, 2016). In accordance with this research, we have decided to utilize the arts (writing, studio art, etc) to prevent adolescents from using drugs to cope with difficult emotions.

Epidemiology

Substance abuse in youth is seen as a high-profile public health concern. In the United States around 60% percent of teens have used drugs after the age of 14 (NCDAS 2022) and at least 1 in 8 teenagers abuse illicit substances each year (NCDAS 2022). In the D.C area alone, teens are 11.94% more likely to use drugs in the past month than the average U.S teen (NCDAS, 2022). Teenagers resort to drugs to cope with symptoms of anxiety, depression, and many other mental health disorders. Many teens often begin to abuse substances to minimize those symptoms or to feel numb (NIDA 2016). It is also very common for adolescents to experiment with drugs because of peer pressure and the feeling of being left out since drug use has become very common (NIH 2014).



Program Implementation

D.A.D.A.I.S.M (Drug Alliance Determined to Avoid Illicit Substances Mindfully) is an after-school art-based intervention program for youths recovering from substance abuse. Our program utilizes the arts (photography, writing, music, pottery) to limit risk factors that may influence a teenager to consume drugs. Potential risk factors could include home environment, personality traits, and/or conditions in their community. To limit these risks, our program would give adolescents a creative outlet to express any negative thoughts/feelings that they may be experiencing. By creating a safe space for adolescents to express any concerning thoughts they may be having, we hope to lower the amount of teens who suffer from substance abuse disorders. To measure the effectiveness of our program, a survey would be sent out at the end of every week for the students to fill out. Some questions include: “How have you been feeling mentally, physically, and emotionally since starting our program?” “Have you had the urge to use drugs since starting the program?” “Is our program a safe space for you to talk about how you’re feeling?” etc.

Theoretical Grounding

The stress of the pandemic, as well as school closures, job loss, and general instability has caused an increase in drug intake among adolescents. Due to adolescent brains having an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex, they are prone to more risky behaviors, such as substance abuse. Substances such as prescription opioids, alcohol, nicotine, and marijuana can permanently alter the brains of adolescents; and while substance abuse among teens has recently been on the rise, prevention programs such as art therapy and afterschool programs have proven to be effective in spotting and stopping early signs of substance abuse (OJJDP, 2016). According to a 2002 SAMHSA study, substance abuse costs the U.S \$510 billion annually, however this cost could be offset by the introduction of preventative programs (SAMHSA, 2016). Also, research has shown that art programs for youth struggling through substance abuse has led to self-empowerment improved communication and socialization, as well as improved academic performance within school (Randall, 1997)

Program Evaluation

The compromised objective with the recent incline on the abuse of many drugs within teens (ages 12-17) in the D.C and Maryland area, our program focuses to accomplish through the use of therapeutic and informative resources the reduction of impulses to utilize and relay on these harmful substance in particularly alcohol, marijuana, and/or nicotine. Long-term wise we are targeting to decrease the misuse of these drugs that result in the decrease of the possibility of future problems such as sever dependence. As with the use of in-person surveys where we ask them the same group of questions at the end of every week in order to get feedback as well as monitor and recorded that we are making as much progress as we aim for.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project is to address the striking disparities in drug use involving teens in the D.C & Maryland area. At the start of our thinking process we came up with many ideas, but decided to pick a problem that us as teens could relate to and understand; which would be seeing our peers succumb to drug use. With the data collected we decided to target the areas that are most familiar to us and are closer, which are D.C and Maryland. Continuing with our investigation and deciding to implement an art based program to help teens articulate their emotions through art, since most of the times teens have trouble verbally articulating their worries. With the intention and believe that our program, DADAISM, will help keep adolescents off the streets, limiting their exposure to illegal substances. As well as with being informed of the negative effects internally and externally of drugs, kids are less likely to continue to use and abusing drugs again. Which brings us to our last point: being a part of a community where you truly feel as though people love and care for you ensures that even if our teens feel the urge to turn to drugs, that they will always have a home where our common ground is the will and availability to always help and guide them.

Acknowledgements

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