



FOCUS
For Our Community Unity &
Support Addiction Prevention
Coalition

Focus Group and Key
Informant Interviews
Combined Report

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Prepared by:



Catalyst Research, LLC

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I. Executive Summary

In spring of 2025, For Our Community Unity & Support Addiction Prevention Coalition (FOCUS) conducted a focus group and key informant interviews to explore marijuana and nicotine use by Lancaster/Depew youth. These analyses were conducted to further understand the perceived risk of harm in regular use, why youth use these substances, and what might be helpful in reducing the likelihood of use.

In all, 14 community residents participated in the qualitative data collection exercises. Participants for key informant interviews and focus groups were chosen based on their knowledge of the community and local youth trends. FOCUS developed formal questions and protocols for administering the qualitative data collection sessions to ensure quality, actionable results.

Areas explored by FOCUS during the sessions included how harmful youth think it is for them to use marijuana and/or nicotine regularly, if different forms pose different harms, what adults should know about why youth use marijuana and/or nicotine, and what might help students deal with stressors that increase the likelihood of using these substances. Answers to these questions are critical to developing both targeted and community-wide education.

KEY FINDINGS



Youth have limited knowledge about the harms of marijuana use.

Although overall youth past 30-day marijuana has decreased, marijuana vape and edible use has increased. Perceived risk of harm of marijuana use has increased, but 40% of students still think there is little to no risk in using it. Education about short- and long-term harm of use is essential for informed decision making.



Youth do not fully understand the risks of nicotine use and addiction.

Past 30-day use of nicotine vaping has slightly declined while perceived risk has increased. Nicotine is extremely addictive and particularly detrimental to adolescent developing brains. Education about physical harm and the risk of addiction is important to prevent or delay use.



There is a need for community-wide education on underage marijuana and nicotine use.

Community norms, access to substances, and the daily struggles of youth are risk factors for consumption of underage marijuana and nicotine use. Advertising, legalization, and adult use send messages that substance use can be acceptable.



Overall, there is a significant need for community understanding about supporting youth to prevent underage marijuana and nicotine use.

Youth need support at home, in school, and in the community to deal with everyday stressors – school, homework, extracurricular activities, jobs, college, peer pressure, etc. Opportunities for healthy involvement in the community has been shown to reduce substance misuse.

II. Findings

This section contains a discussion of major themes identified during focus group and key informant interviews. Select, anonymous respondent quotes are provided for context. Focus group and key informant interviews were used to provide qualitative data to fill in knowledge gaps about perceived harm of using marijuana and nicotine regularly, why youth use, and what they feel would be helpful to address stressors that increase the likelihood of using.

Theme 1: There is a need for community wide education about the harms of youth marijuana use across all delivery methods (e.g., smoked, edible, etc.).

The first, and most prevalent, theme is the lack of awareness about the many risks of underage marijuana consumption. Marijuana use has changed drastically over the years. Potency has increased 4-fold – cannabis samples seized by the DEA from 1995 to 2022 show an increase in tetrahydrocannabinol (THC, the psychoactive substance in marijuana) percent from 3.96% (1995) to 16.14% (2022).ⁱ Additionally, marijuana has more delivery forms than ever, including smoked, edible, vaped, and others.

Nationwide, underage use has decreased while the perception of harm has increasedⁱⁱ. Results of the Community Level Youth Development Survey (CLYDE) administered in 2023 to Lancaster and Depew students showed that 4.9% of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders had used marijuana in the past 30 days, down from 6.8% in 2021. The perception of harm increased (57% in 2021, 60% in 2023) but 40% of students still think there is little or no risk in using. Although past 30-day use decreased, past 30-day use steadily increased with grade level - vaping marijuana increased from 1.4% (8th) to 9.6% (12th), and edible use increased from 1.4% (8th) to 3.4% (12th). [CLYDE, 2023]

When asked about the harms of regular use of marijuana, students said:

- I know all forms are bad for your system and body, but edibles can be the strongest
- I know that edibles are more potent than other forms – but don't know much about the risk of each
- I know vaping can be the worst form in terms of negative effects and long-term effects because vaping is bad for the lungs, throat, etc.
- Marijuana affects people mentally so they may not be in the right mindset to understand the long-term effects
- Most of the time it is smoked – mainly the form our peers use
- There is a consensus across the students in the focus group that peers do not know or understand the long-term effects

"[A] growing number of kids feel it's an acceptable and non-harmful way to cope."

-Depew staff interviewee

Marijuana used in vapes is concentrated and can contain high levels of THC. This method is smokeless, sometimes odorless, and easy to hide or conceal.ⁱⁱⁱ Edibles have a delayed onset, a much longer-lasting effect, and the risk for overdose is greater due to potential of high potency.^{iv} For those who start using it in their teens, 1 in 6 become addicted, and health effects include impaired memory, decreased decision-making ability, altered mood, psychosis, and respiratory and heart problems.^v

Theme 2: There is a need for community wide education about youth initiation of marijuana use.

Why do youth in the Lancaster/Depew community use marijuana? CLYDE Survey results indicate that social acceptance, lack of coping skills, stress, and ease of accessibility all contribute to youth initiation. Thirty-seven percent of students think there is a chance they will be "seen as cool" if they use marijuana. Overall, 35.4% of students think they "are no good at all" and 33.2% have felt depressed or sad most days. Twenty-five percent have been bullied in school, 21% outside of school, and 20%

electronically. Twenty-three percent of students say that marijuana is very or somewhat easy to get. Youth access marijuana from people they know both under 21 years of age (54.9%) and 21 or over (25.5%). Some (21.6%) get marijuana at a party.

Focus group participants and key informants agreed that social pressure and coping are major drivers of marijuana use. Specific comments include:

- Everyone else is doing it and they seem fine so I will be fine too
- If you know one person, there are most likely 10 or more who do it
- It's expected socially and casually – some peer pressure
- Kids are struggling academically and/or at home
- One kid brought a vape to school for fun
- Popularity, to fit in
- Some are being bullied and use marijuana to deal with anger
- Some use it to help them sleep and eat better or to take their mind off things
- Stress relief, coping mechanism

"A lot of my peers struggle emotionally – adults aren't aware of some of the struggles youth deal with so I feel like these are some underlying reasons why youth use."

**-Anonymous
Lancaster/Depew student**

Theme 3: There is a need for community wide education about the harms of nicotine, in particular vaping and potential addiction.

According to the CDC, youth use e-cigarettes, or vapes, more than any other tobacco product. No tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, are safe, especially for children, teens, and young adults. Most e-cigarettes contain nicotine, which is highly addictive. Nicotine can harm the parts of an adolescent's brain that control attention, learning, mood, and impulse control.^{vi} Past 30-day use of nicotine vaping has declined slightly overall from 9.3% in 2021 to 7.3% in 2023 while the perceived harm (moderate to great risk) has increased slightly from 74.8% in 2021 to 75.5% in 2023. Past 30-day use of cigarettes has increased slightly from 1.5% in 2021 to 1.7% in 2023. [CLYDE, 2023]

When asked about the harms of nicotine use, youth responded:

- I have seen a lot of athletes change physically - seem more tired or sluggish
- I have seen people just start with vaping and escalate to other kinds of drugs
- It can influence relationships – losing trust from parents, borrowing money or products from their friends, doing anything for a vape by stealing or begging
- Nicotine is harmful but youth are confused about cigarettes versus vaping
- Nicotine is known for being extremely addictive, but youth think "this won't be addicting to ME"
- Vapes and cigarettes are harmful because they have other chemicals in them
- Vapes are advertised for flavors and fun, so they don't really know the full harm
- Youth believe that families want to help but don't know how because it is such an addiction

"My friends told me they're not addicted, and they can stop anytime but when they do – they realize how hard it is for them to stop."

**-Anonymous
Lancaster/Depew student**

Theme 4: There is a need for community wide education about youth initiation of nicotine use.

According to the CDC, “What may start as social experimentation with vaping can become an addiction. The most common reason students give for *trying* an e-cigarette is ‘a friend used them.’ Most vaping starts and is established during adolescence. Tobacco advertising targets youth, flavored products, accessibility, and social influences.”^{vii}

Youth responses about why their peers use nicotine include:

- A lot of people do it to fit in – everyone else is doing it, social acceptance, fitting in to avoid being bullied
- Come in many different types of vapes and flavors
- I don’t think adults know how popular it is – that pretty much every kid does it or how easy it is to get at vape shops
- There have been 3 additional vape shops in our area and kids don’t get carded because they are making money off peers buying the vapes
- Vape stores with LED lights and bright colors that attract kids, and ads on social media sites
- Vapes are also getting smaller and easier to hide
- Vapes don’t smell so they are easier to use in public spaces without getting caught
- Vaping is popular - pretty much every kid does it and it’s easy for people to get at the vape shops

*“I think it is easily accessible
– I see peers buying vapes
without getting carded or
anything.”*

**-Anonymous
Lancaster/Depew student**

The 2 key informants interviewed for this project echoed the student sentiments.

Theme 5: Youth voiced the need for more support – at home, in school, and in the community.

Youth feel the need for more support. Students shared that, “We need to go to the root of the problem for what causes youth to use - we need comfort and understanding instead of punishment,” and “Youth just need support and compassion and understanding even if they are using or else they won’t want to reach out or ask for help or even recognize there is a problem.” Youth feel it is important to have a trusting relationship with a parent, teacher, counselor, or other adult to whom they could talk and ask for help. Sixty-nine percent of students indicated there are adults in school they can talk to about alcohol and other drugs; 86.4% said they have chances to talk to teachers 1:1. [CLYDE, 2023]

Opportunities for prosocial involvement in youth play an important role as a protective factor for substance use. Sports, scouting, community service, class activities and projects as well as inclusion in family decision making are strongly linked to reduced substance misuse. Engaging in prosocial activities creates positive peer connections and may reduce the likelihood of associating with peers who use substances, ultimately lowering the risk of substance use. Students mentioned that being a part of something, like a society or club, can help you not to want to do it as much. Participation in social support groups, clubs etc., may provide a place where they can discuss their feelings. Youth in the Lancaster/Depew community indicated that they have plenty of opportunities for prosocial involvement: in the community (70.2%), family (66.7%), school (79.6%), and with peers (59.5%). Ninety-seven percent of youth said there is an opportunity for school activities. [CLYDE, 2023]

Youth responded with these suggestions for support that they feel might help them to deal with stressors:

- Adults in schools need to know that kids feel a lot of stress and pressure at school
- Consensus about teaching students how to manage their stress levels and having understanding teachers/counselors/parents and adults that are trustworthy to help and support them
- Having counselors start a group where youth can talk to each other, especially if they're struggling and know they aren't alone
- Help with getting work done/tutoring, etc.
- Helping students learn balance because we are juggling a lot more than adults really seem to know or understand
- Helping youth navigate extracurricular activities at school, plus school, homework, and jobs
- Scheduled meetings with a counselor once or twice a year – counselors are there, but I think high school students don't use them as much because it's harder to reach out instead of something already scheduled
- Teaching youth how to organize could help so that their stress levels decrease

"Create more open lines of communication to help those who struggle."

"Coping techniques, relieving stress techniques, time to be a kid, not just academic focused."

- School staff interviewees

Adult key informant interviews supported youth requests.

III. Recommendations - Connecting Findings to Action

Recommendations are provided below to address underage marijuana and nicotine consumption and consequences:

1. FOCUS coalition Youth Committee to create messaging campaigns.

Strategic Prevention Framework focus area(s): Assessment, Planning, and Implementation

Seven Strategies for Community Change focus area(s): Providing Information

Development of targeted messaging for community youth to create awareness of the risks of underage marijuana and nicotine consumption and unintended consequences. These messages can be disseminated over social media, printed brochures and posters, and other means that the youth identify for effectiveness.

2. Targeted messaging for parents and other adults in the community.

Strategic Prevention Framework focus area(s): Assessment, Capacity, Planning, Implementation

Seven Strategies for Community Change focus area(s): Providing Support, Enhancing Skills

Development of messaging for community members to create awareness of the harms of underage use of marijuana and nicotine and why youth start.

3. Develop a social norms messaging campaign.

Strategic Prevention Framework focus area(s): Assessment, Capacity, Planning, Implementation

Seven Strategies for Community Change focus area(s): Providing Information and Support, Enhancing Skills, Modifying/Changing Policies or Laws

In the Lancaster/Depew community, 95% of youth choose NOT to use marijuana. More than 92% of youth choose NOT to vape nicotine. Many young people believe that most of their peers use marijuana and nicotine. Messages about "why" most do not use may influence their peers' decision making.

It is recommended that the coalition follow up on this data collection effort in spring 2026 to track how youth opinions and feelings have changed over time. In addition to focus groups and key informant interviews, it is recommended that FOCUS continue to administer the CLYDE Survey, consider conducting a community adult survey, and create goals and objectives to reduce underage substance use in the Lancaster/Depew community.

ⁱ National Institute on Drug Abuse, <https://nida.nih.gov/research/research-data-measures-resources/cannabis-potency-data>

ⁱⁱ Monitoring the Future, <https://monitoringthefuture.org/results/data-access/tables-and-figures/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/Vaping%20and%20Marijuana%20Concentrates-2020.pdf>

^{iv} <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/marijuana-rehab/risks-of-edibles>

^v https://nida.nih.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/marijuana_download_nidamed.pdf

^{vi} <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/e-cigarettes/youth.html>

^{vii} <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/e-cigarettes/why-youth-vape.html>