

The Community Prevention and Wellness Initiative Decreases Youth Substance Use In Washington State

Adolescent substance use prevention is a critical priority to safeguard the health and future of Washington's youth.

Adolescence is a critical period of rapid growth and development, making youth particularly vulnerable to substance use and its consequences.¹ Preventing substance use during this stage can have substantial long-term benefits, including protecting the developing brain, reducing the risk of addiction, improving academic and social outcomes, supporting mental health, and promoting well-being.¹ Community-driven approaches are well positioned to advance this goal by tailoring prevention strategies to address the unique needs of the community.

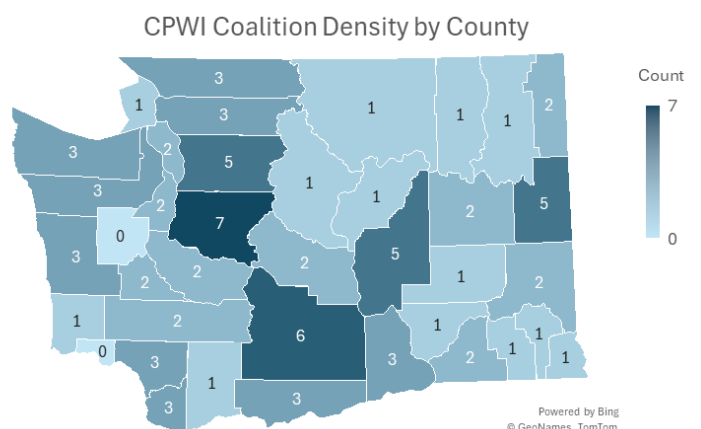
The Community Prevention and Wellness Initiative (CPWI) is an evidence-based and community-driven approach to preventing adolescent substance use and promoting mental health statewide.

The CPWI community coalition model is an adaptation of the [Communities That Care](#) model and the [Strategic Prevention Framework](#). The Washington State Health Care Authority (HCA) / Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery (DBHR) began CPWI in 2011 to direct funding and support to traditionally underserved, high-need communities throughout the state. Communities selected for CPWI have elevated risk factors for the development of substance

use disorders. By focusing on local issues with scientifically supported strategies in schools and communities across several domains of influence,² CPWI effectively addresses the unique challenges faced by these communities.

The growth of CPWI has led to over 3 million people reached by prevention activities statewide, with over 90 communities actively involved in local prevention efforts.

CPWI supports a range of evidence-based and promising prevention approaches including programs that directly engage families, school-based interventions, public awareness campaigns, and environmental strategies. CPWI evaluations show that the initiative has broad reach and builds strong local infrastructure for implementing and sustaining prevention programs that meet community needs. As of 2023, 3.18 million people have been reached by CPWI programs and strategies. Most CPWI coalitions are performing at or above expectations.³



CPWI has led to significant improvements in multiple substance use and mental health outcomes, and related risk and protective factors.

Evaluation findings using rigorous methods and data from the Washington State [Healthy Youth Survey](#) show that CPWI has a positive impact in several priority areas.

- **Alcohol Use:** Improvements in alcohol-related indicators accounted for 80% of the favorable behavioral health outcomes reported in CPWI evaluations from 2016-2023. This suggests that higher-need CPWI communities either closed the gaps with, or outperformed, lower-need, non-CPWI communities in these areas.³ Furthermore, the longer a school participated in CPWI, the greater the reductions in 10th grade lifetime alcohol use, heavy drinking, and binge drinking.⁵
- **Cannabis Use:** While both CPWI and non-CPWI schools had declines in lifetime and past 30-day cannabis use among 10th graders, CPWI schools experienced a faster rate of decline. Despite higher initial rates of cannabis use in CPWI schools compared to non-CPWI schools, the greater decline in CPWI schools highlights the initiative's effectiveness in reducing and preventing cannabis use among adolescents.⁵
- **Risk & Protective Factors:** CPWI evaluations from 2016 to 2023 show improvement in 70% of risk and protective factor outcomes for CPWI communities. An example of a risk factor is favorable attitudes toward substance use; protective factors include bonding to one's school or community. Many CPWI communities have either closed the gap with, or outperformed, non-CPWI communities in these outcomes.⁴
- **Mental Health:** Although rates of depressive feelings, suicide planning, and suicide attempts increased among 10th graders statewide, the rate of increase was slower in CPWI schools compared to non-CPWI schools.⁵ This demonstrates the strength of

focusing on risk and protective factors. Although CPWI communities mostly focus on substance use disorder prevention, the same approaches target important shared risk and protective factors, such as family management skills among parents, coping skills among youth, that can affect a broad range of behavioral health outcomes.⁶

By strengthening CPWI, we can sustain these positive trends and protect Washington's youth from the long-term consequences of substance use and mental health challenges.

Consider the suggestions below to help keep the positive momentum of CPWI moving forward.

- Prioritize ongoing support and allocation of resources for CPWI and similar community-driven initiatives.
- Facilitate strong cross-sector partnerships to foster a cohesive, unified statewide prevention strategy that amplifies the impact of CPWI and other prevention programs.
- Joining the [State Prevention Enhancement \(SPE\) Policy Consortium](#) and supporting their 5-year strategic plan.
- Invest in data sharing and integration across state systems to monitor progress and identify emerging trends.
- Stay proactive in monitoring and addressing emerging challenges like fentanyl and COVID-related mental health trends to ensure prevention programs remain adaptable to the youth's evolving needs
- Develop and implement policies that support the long-term sustainability of CPWI and other

proven prevention initiatives, including exploring new funding sources, fostering public-private partnerships, and aligning policies to support youth prevention goals.

- Prioritize investment in research and evaluation to identify effective strategies, understand which approaches work for specific populations, and determine the conditions under which they are most successful.

Suggested Citation

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References

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