

A group of five young people, three women and two men, are smiling and posing for a selfie outdoors. They are of diverse ethnicities and are dressed in casual summer clothing. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor setting with greenery.

THE RURAL REALITY CHECK: Lessons from a Community Needs Assessment Process

What It Revealed—and How It Forced Us to Rethink What Works, What Doesn't, and What Comes Next

We've all done a needs assessment that...

- Took months
- Told us what we already knew
- Didn't lead to action



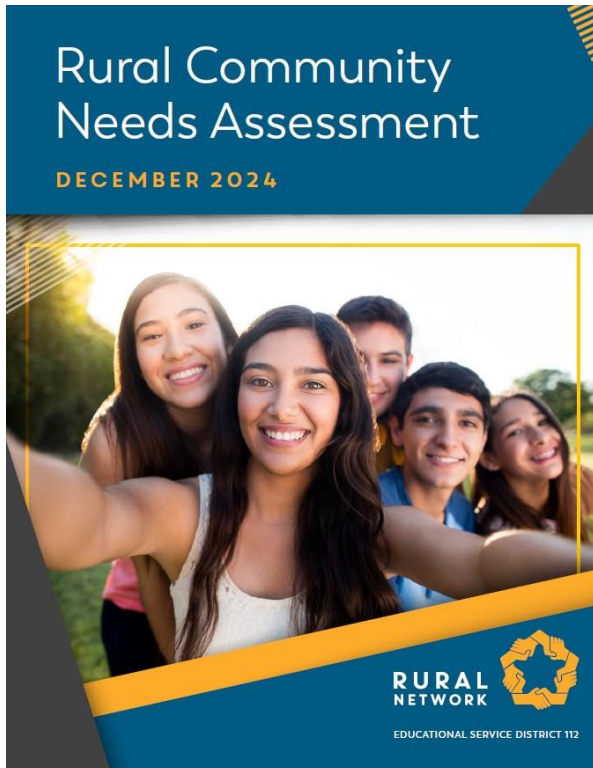


Our Goal...

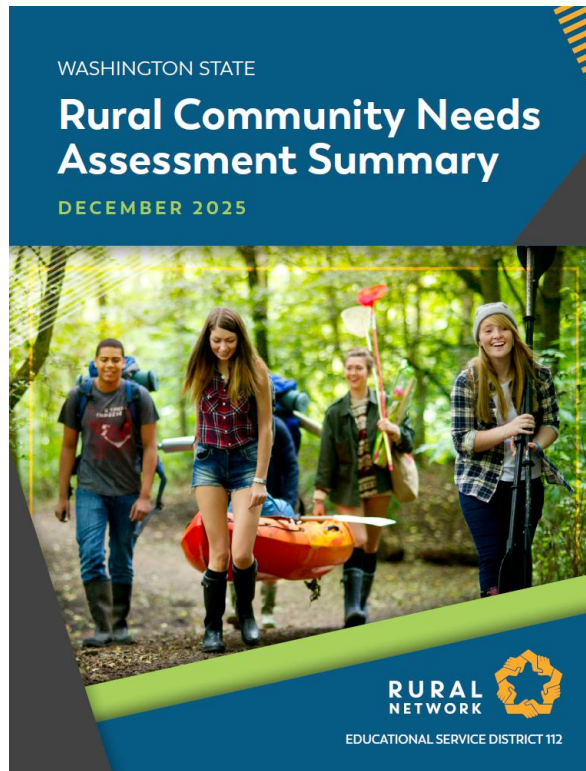
- Make data usable
- Center rural voices
- Create actionable insights



Two Reports Approach



- Full Report
- Technical
- Detailed
- 60-Pages



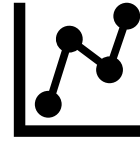
- Visual
- Usable
- Plain Language
- 30-Pages

Multiple Data Sources

STORY + DATA

Quote:

“We have to rely on each other out here...”



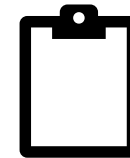
State Data



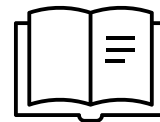
Listening Sessions



Youth & Key Informant Interviews



Surveys



Literature Reviews

Triangulation

Data



Community
Voice

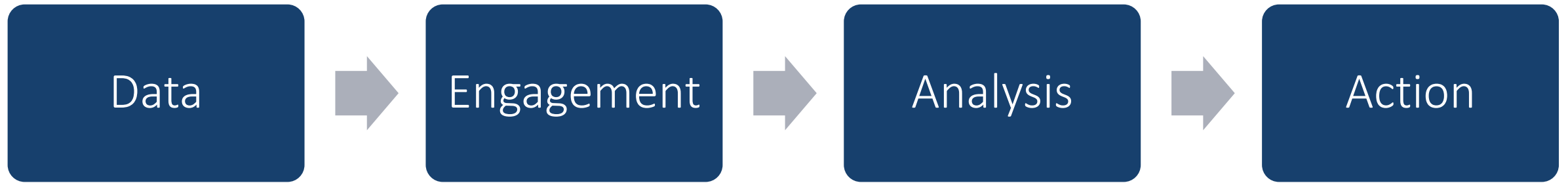


Lived
Experience



Alignment
=
Confidence

PROCESS



How will this be
used?



Rural Context

**“Rural is not just smaller—
it's different.”**

- Isolation
- Limited access
- Resource Gaps
- Higher poverty
- Demographics
- Strong community
- Resilience
- Family
- Connection

Finding #1: Assumption vs. Reality

One of our biggest findings challenged a core assumption.

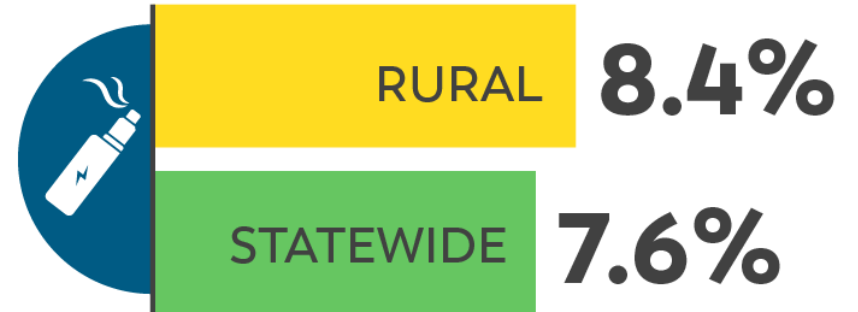
Rural youth substance use is not lower—and in some cases, it's higher.

If we get that wrong, everything that follows is off.

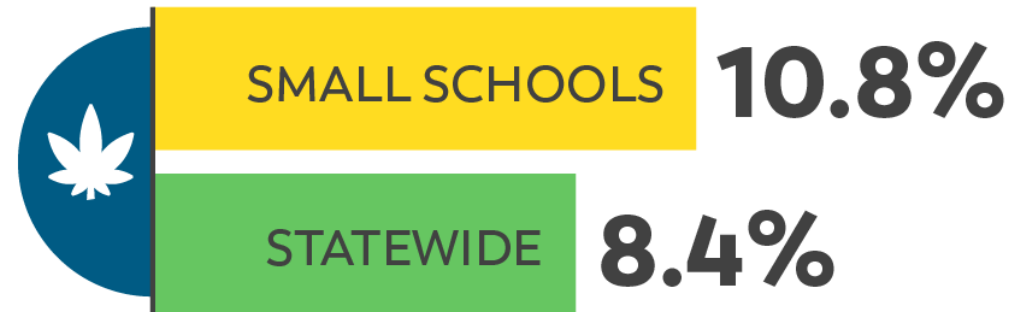
Why it matters? Wrong assumptions = Wrong strategies

PERCENT OF 10TH GRADERS REPORTING SUBSTANCE USE IN THE PAST 30 DAYS

CIGARETTES
OR VAPOR
PRODUCTS



MARIJUANA
OR HASHISH



(Washington Healthy Youth Survey 2023)

Finding #2:

Easy Access & Low Perceived Harm

We saw a strong pattern of access and low perceived harm

When something is easy to get and socially accepted, it becomes part of the environment.

Quote: “It’s just normal here...”

PREVALENCE RATIOS FOR 10TH GRADERS’ CURRENT MARIJUANA USE



(Washington Healthy Youth Survey 2023)

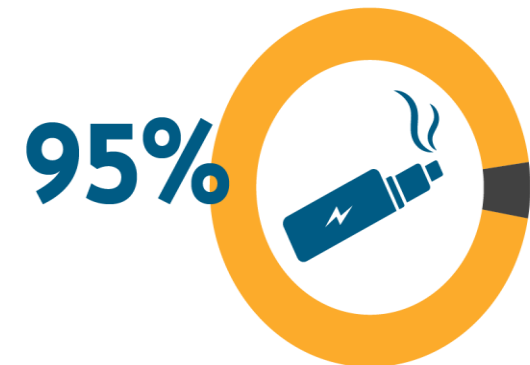
PERCENT OF 10TH GRADERS WHO SEE A **HIGH RISK OF HARM** FROM VAPING



(Washington wants to see an increasing trend.)

(Washington Healthy Youth Survey 2023)

PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS WHO BELIEVE IT IS **VERY EASY FOR YOUTH TO ACCESS VAPOR PRODUCTS** IN THEIR RURAL COMMUNITIES



(RNC survey, 2024)

Finding #3: Mental Health

Isolation and stress

Limited support access

Higher deaths of despair

Quote: “People just deal with things on their own.”

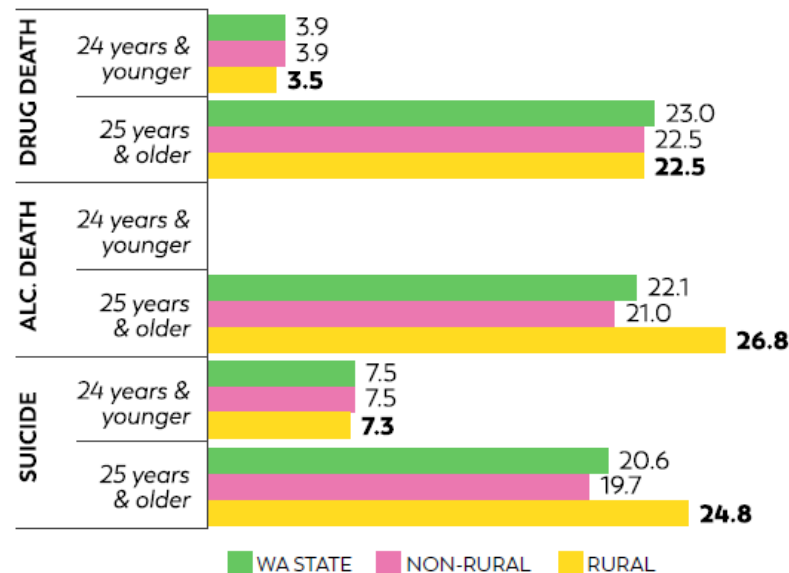


Figure 7: Deaths of Despair by Age Group in Rural and Non-Rural Areas, Rate per 100,000

Data Source: Washington State Department of Health. Center for Health Statistics. Death Certificate Data, 2020.

PERCENT OF 10TH GRADERS WHO
REPORTED CIGARETTE OR VAPOR PRODUCT
USE IN THE PAST 30 DAYS

WITH A MENTAL/EMOTIONAL DISABILITY

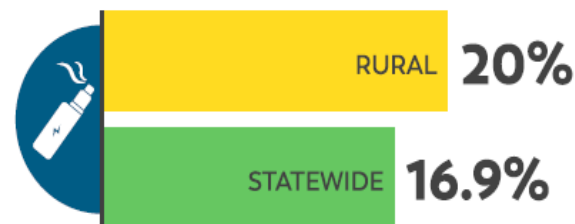


Figure 20: 10th graders that reported smoking cigarettes or using vapor products in the past 30 days who had a Mental/Emotional Disability

Data Source: Washington Healthy Youth Survey. 2023.

Finding #4: Rural Strengths

Prevention Assets in Rural Communities:

- Family
- Pride
- Resilience
- Meaningful involvement & Recognition
- Connection



Finding #5: Structural Barriers Matter



More support is needed to:

- Develop effective, rural and community-specific strategies
- Supporting older adults & aging populations
- Create and maintain up-to-date resource directories
- Serve veterans, Native Americans, & priority populations
- Strengthen rural agriculture
- Expand affordable childcare options
- Expand access to housing, education, healthcare, transportation, and economic development
- Advance workforce development opportunities
- Improve prevention, treatment, and recovery
- Address homelessness
- Increase access to mental health services

Implications/Priority Areas

When we step back, patterns emerge.

Access, perception, mental health, and community strengths all point us toward action.

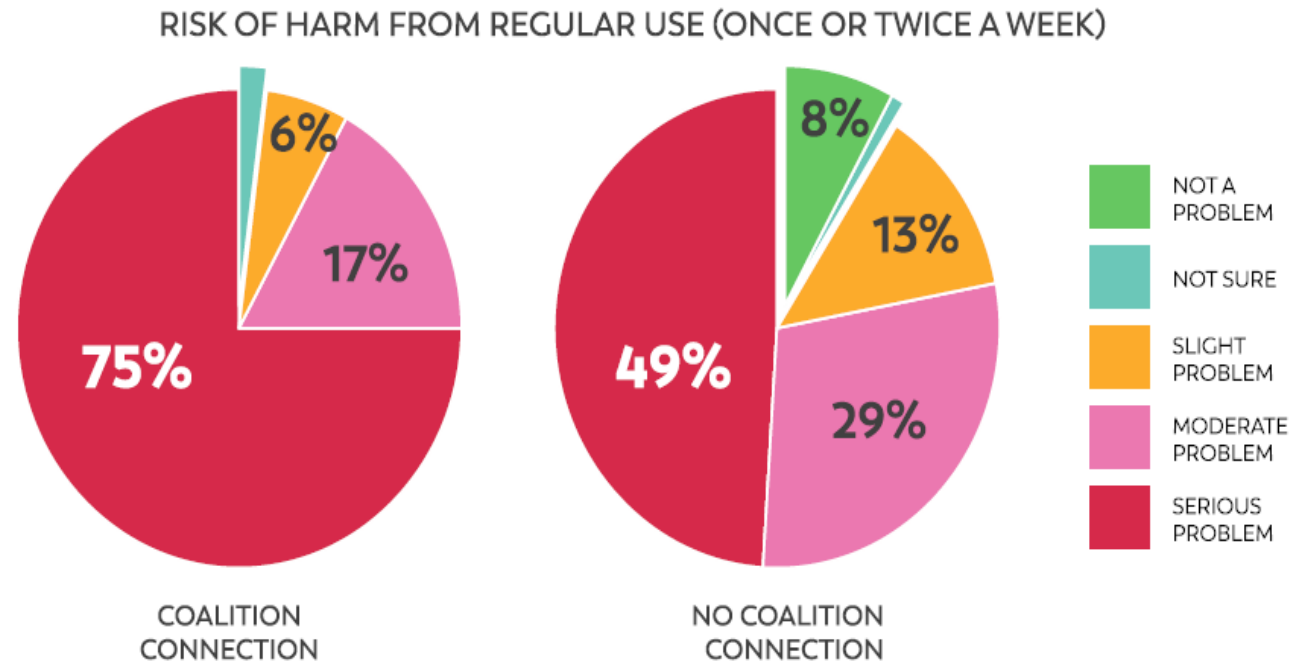


Figure 11: Perception of harm from marijuana use

Data Source: Washington Healthy Youth Survey, 2023.



Implication #1: Start Earlier

We need to focus earlier.

Prevention needs to
happen before behaviors
start, not after.





Implication #2: Change Perception

We need to address
perception of harm.

When something feels safe or
normal, behavior follows.

Prevention in rural
communities cannot just
focus on individual behavior.





Implication #3: Mental Health

Substance use was often a symptom—not just the problem

We need to integrate mental health into prevention.

These are not separate conversations.



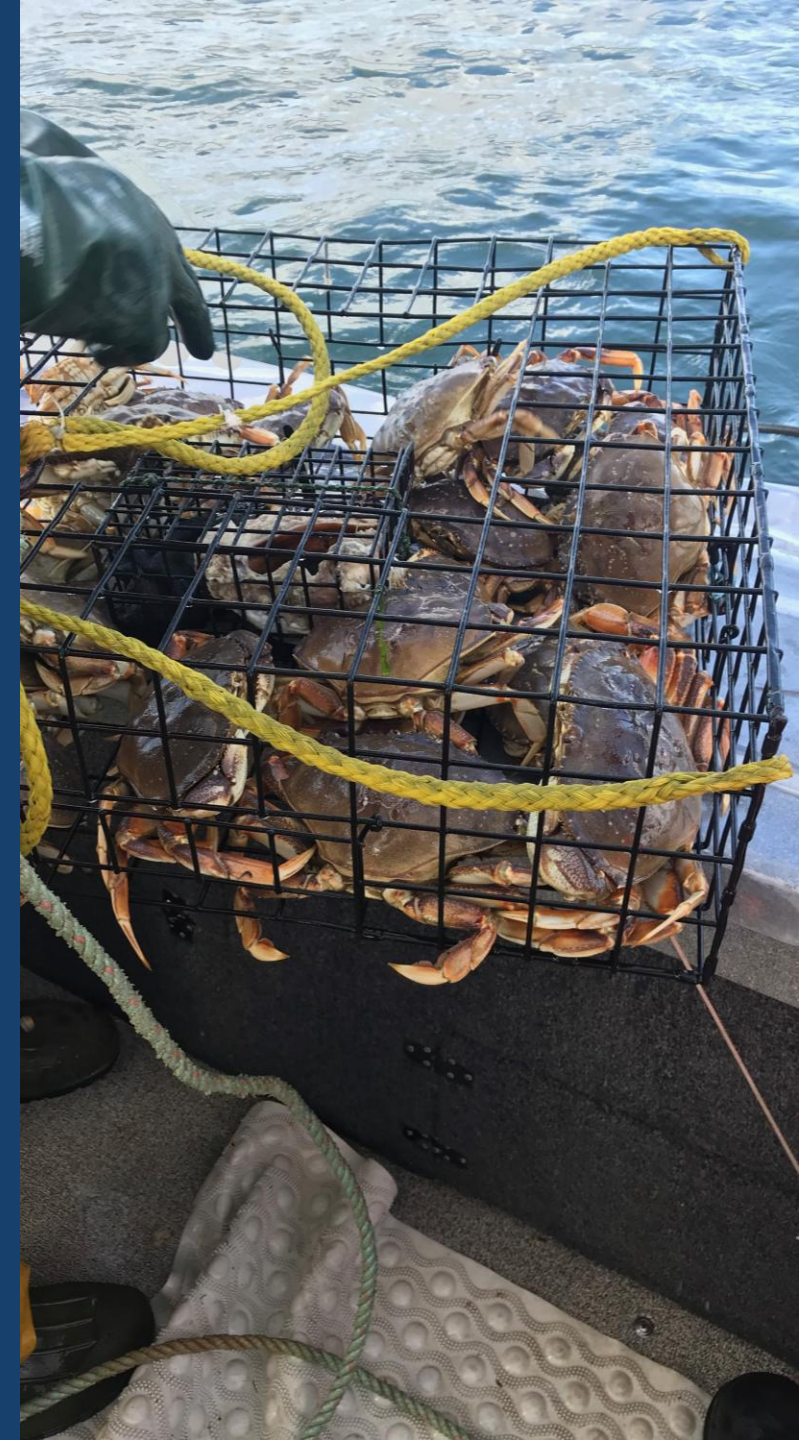


Implication #4: Design for Rural

We also need to address access barriers, workforce challenges, and youth engagement/voice and allow for flexibility.

And we need to recognize that rural communities are not all the same

Rural communities need capacity and flexibility, not just programs and templates.



Rural Network Key Priority Areas

1. FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

2. MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

3. SUBSTANCE USE PREVENTION,
TREATMENT & RECOVERY

4. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

5. HOUSING STABILITY

6. TRANSPORTATION

7. YOUTH RECREATION & ENGAGEMENT

8. CULTURALLY SPECIFIC SERVICES

Discussion:

What would you do?

What stands out?



What are we missing?



What would you prioritize?



What worked?



We are still figuring it out...
We don't have all the answers.

Prevention vs harm reduction

Scaling solutions

Addressing normalization

Real Barriers





Final Takeaway/Closing:
**“Good data doesn’t create change.
Usable data does.”**



**PREVENT
COALITION**

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**RURAL
NETWORK**

Prevent Coalition and the Rural Network are funded by the Youth Cannabis & Commercial Tobacco Prevention Program of Washington State Department of Health. Significant support comes from the fiscal agent, Educational Service District 112