

# Substance Use Among Youth Living in Kinship and Foster Care in Washington State



## Substance Use Among Young People Living Apart from their Parents

Substance use and abuse during adolescence are strongly associated with negative health and wellness outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Substance use is also strongly influenced by social experiences and family living arrangements.<sup>2</sup> Among adolescents in the United States, the overall prevalence of substance use<sup>3</sup> and perceived availability of drugs and alcohol decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup> However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may have increased substance use and abuse among vulnerable youth populations, such as youth involved in the foster care system, as a form of coping with uncertainty and added stress.<sup>4</sup>

Research suggests that young people who have experienced trauma and instability have higher rates of drug and alcohol use and abuse.<sup>6</sup> Substance use can function as an unhealthy coping strategy amid adverse childhood experiences (ACEs),<sup>7</sup> and early initiation of substance abuse often leads to dependency issues later in life.<sup>8</sup> Findings from the 2021 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey (HYS) indicate that youth living in kinship care and foster care were significantly more likely to have recently used drugs or alcohol compared to youth living with their parents.<sup>9</sup> Youth living apart from their parents have often experienced more ACEs than their peers who are living with their parents.<sup>2</sup> <sup>10</sup> Higher rates of substance use and abuse among youth living in foster care and kinship care are associated with higher levels of instability and traumatic experiences.<sup>2</sup> <sup>11</sup> <sup>12</sup> Young people with stable living arrangements who are connected to their communities and involved in healthy activities are less likely to use or abuse drugs and alcohol.<sup>13</sup> Research suggests that youth living in kinship care use drugs and alcohol at lower rates than youth living in foster care.<sup>2</sup> <sup>11</sup> <sup>14</sup>

## What is Kinship Care?

Kinship care refers to the full-time care of a youth by a relative or another adult who has a close relationship with the youth and their family.<sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup> Kinship care often offers youth greater stability that helps foster a sense of belonging and promotes healthy psychosocial development.<sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> Kinship care is preferred by many over foster care because it provides the least restrictive, home-like environment and helps maintain young people's cultural and community connections.<sup>16</sup> <sup>19</sup> Kinship care can take place with or without the involvement of the formal child welfare authority.<sup>20</sup> Formal kinship care arrangements are organized by child welfare services (CWS). 137,000 youth (approximately 34% of children involved in CWS) live in formal relative placements nationwide.<sup>21</sup> Most kinship care arrangements, however, are informal and arranged without CWS involvement.<sup>22</sup> <sup>23</sup>

Over 2.6 million US children (approximately 4%) are living in relative households apart from their parents.<sup>24</sup> Most kinship care arrangements (approximately 60%) involve youth living with grandparents.<sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup> <sup>27</sup> Recent legislation, such as the federal Family First Prevention Services Act (2018), has prioritized placing youth in kinship care and increasing support for kinship caregivers.<sup>28</sup> <sup>29</sup> State policies that prioritize kinship care placements significantly reduce the rate of young people entering or reentering foster care and increase the likelihood that young people have placement stability with a relative in their community of origin.<sup>25</sup> <sup>30</sup> <sup>31</sup> <sup>32</sup> Kinship care has been shown to minimize the trauma of being removed from parental care, and being placed with family members improves well-being, increases permanency, and improves behavioral health outcomes.<sup>14</sup> <sup>17</sup> <sup>31</sup>

In Washington State, 40,000 youth, roughly 2% of all youth in the state, live in kinship care,<sup>33</sup> and for every one youth living in a formal CWS kinship care arrangement, ten children are living in informal kinship care outside the foster care system.<sup>34</sup>

## Washington State Healthy Youth Survey (HYS)

This fact sheet used data from the 2021 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey to compare substance use between youth living in kinship care and youth living in foster care. The HYS is a biannual survey that includes 8th, 10th, and 12th grade public school students. The survey offers a representative sample of young people in Washington State and provides important details about their health and well-being.<sup>9</sup>

From the academic year (AY) 2018-19 to AY 2021-22, there was a 2.4% increase in enrollment among all 8th, 10th, and 12th graders in Washington State. However, enrollment among students involved in the foster care system decreased by 31.7%.<sup>35</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic intensified school disconnection among youth involved in the foster care system,<sup>36</sup> <sup>37</sup> <sup>38</sup> and HYS participation among youth living in kinship care and foster care dropped dramatically with lower enrollment rates.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the findings from the 2021 HYS likely undercount health and wellness disparities among young people involved in foster care.

## Living in Kinship Care

- 2.7% (3,469 Youth)
- 35.9% decrease in HYS participation from the 2018-19 academic year.

## Living in Foster Care

- 0.4% (463 Youth)
- 41.7% decrease in HYS participation from the 2018-19 academic year.

**Note:** Sample size N=125,996.

Based upon the HYS Question: Who did you live with most of the time in the last 30 days? 95.8% (142,296 Youth) were living with their parents.

Among all students, there was a 15.2% decrease in HYS participation from the 2018-19 academic year to 2020-21. academic year.

## Recent Alcohol & Drug Use

Youth living in kinship care and foster care were both significantly more likely to have recently used drugs or alcohol compared to youth living with their parents.

However, youth living in kinship care were less likely to say that they had recently used alcohol or drugs. Compared to youth living in kinship care, among youth living in foster care the rate of:

- Having used marijuana and alcohol at the same time was **1.1** times higher
- Binge drinking in the past two weeks was **1.1** times higher
- Having used painkillers to get high in the past month was **2.3** times higher
- Having used non-prescribed prescriptions in the past month was **1.4** times higher

## Tobacco Use

- Youth living in foster care were **1.7** times more likely to say that they had smoked cigarettes and **1.1** times more likely to report having vaped in the last month.

## Use and Accessibility of Drugs & Alcohol

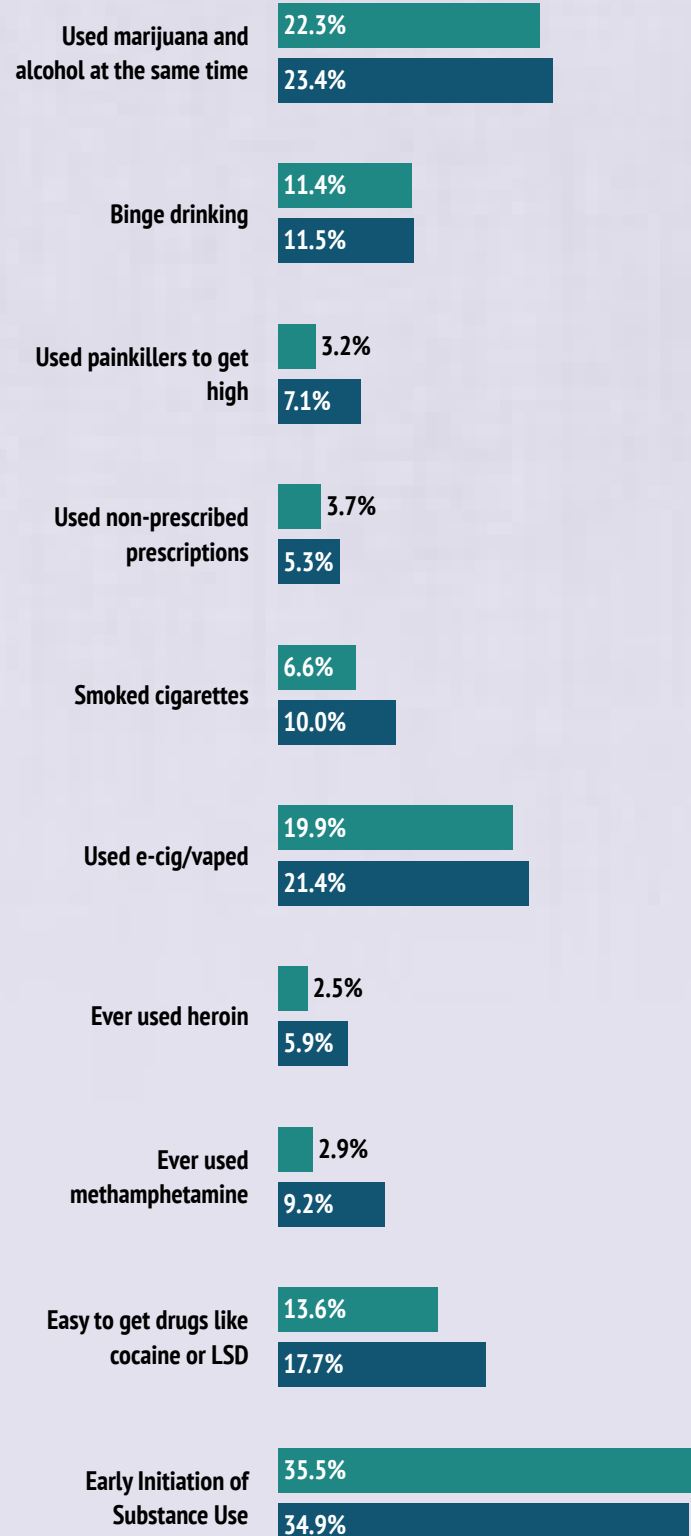
Youth living in kinship care were also significantly less likely to say they had easy access to drugs or that they had ever used drugs like heroin or methamphetamine. In comparison, among youth living in foster care, the rate of:

- Having ever used heroin was **2.5** times higher
- Having ever used methamphetamine was **3.6** times higher
- Having easy access to drugs like cocaine or LSD was **1.4** times higher
- Early initiation of substance use (drinking alcohol or smoking marijuana before age 13) was **1.5** times higher among youth living in foster care compared to youth living in kinship care.

## Key Takeaways from the Washington Healthy Youth Survey

- Youth living in kinship care typically have lower rates of tobacco, alcohol, and drug use than youth living in foster care.
- Kinship care is a protective factor that supports continuity in family, peer, and community connections. These connections may help to prevent youth from using and abusing substances.

● Living in Kinship Care ● Living In Foster Care



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