The 2023 Delaware Epidemiological Profile

Substance Use, Mental Health, and Related Issues:

Protective Factors
The Delaware 2023 Epidemiological Profile: Substance Use, Mental Health, and Related Issues

is prepared for

Director Joanna Champney and the Delaware Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health &
The Delaware State Epidemiological Outcomes Workgroup

The annual Delaware State Epidemiological Profile is a valuable data resource for strategic planning, decision-making, and evaluation. The report includes modules that highlight indicators of mental health and wellbeing, patterns of substance use and its consequences, and risk and protective factors for people in Delaware. The report also highlights crosscutting issues that warrant attention as well as populations that may experience disproportionate risk for these concerns.

This module is part of a series of materials. To review the Annual Epidemiological Profile Companion Guide (which includes data notes), modules on additional topics, downloadable slides, and infographics, please visit the UD Center for Drug and Health Studies Delaware Epidemiological Reports page. Links to presentations referenced in the annual profile are available from the Presentations webpage.

The SEOW is facilitated by a team at the Center for Drug and Health Studies at the University of Delaware that convenes a network of more than 100 representatives from approximately 55 state and nonprofit agencies, community organizations, advocacy groups, and other entities. The SEOW's mission is to bring data on behavioral health and associated issues to the forefront of prevention and treatment efforts in Delaware. To learn more, please visit the What is the SEOW? webpage.

The annual Delaware Epidemiological Profile is a publication of the Delaware State Epidemiological Outcomes Workgroup (SEOW) project. Funding for the SEOW has been provided by the Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health through funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Please address all inquiries to M.J. Scales, MPH, CPS, University of Delaware Center for Drug and Health Studies, Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice: mjscales@udel.edu.
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Protective Factors

Protective factors help to prevent and lessen the impact of trauma, substance misuse, or other behavioral health concerns. They exist at individual, family, peer, community, and societal levels (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019). Individual protective factors include personal characteristics such as adaptability, empathy, and good social skills, as well as a value on academic achievement, hope for the future, self-efficacy, and a willingness to follow rules. Family level protective factors include having safe, stable, and nurturing home environments with clear and consistent rules. Community level factors include social organization, norms, and community safety. School environments can serve as peer and community level protective factors. Healthy relationships, feeling connected, and supportive environments foster resilience, mental wellness, and the development of life skills (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

This module of the 2023 Delaware Epidemiological Profile provides an overview of protective factors and their association with behavioral health based upon the following data sources:

- Delaware School Survey (DSS)
- The National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH)
The Delaware School Surveys (DSS) are state-funded annual surveys administered to 5th, 8th, and 11th grade public school students throughout Delaware. There are two versions of the survey, one for 5th grade students and a secondary version for 8th and 11th graders. The DSS are designed to provide estimates of youth substance use and related factors, including protective factors. DSS data are used for National Outcomes Measures as well as state and local program planning and evaluation. The figures in this section highlight select data from the 2022 DSS. (For more information or to review the survey questionnaires and earlier reports, visit the DSS page of the University of Delaware Center for Drug and Health Studies website. Due to the data gap in 2020 as well as the changes in the methodology for the 2021-2022 administration due to the COVID-19 pandemic, results of the 2022 DSS should be compared with caution to previous survey results. Please see the Companion Guide accompanying this report for data notes.)

The 5th grade DSS includes a question asking students to identify the people in their lives who provide support and encouragement. They are allowed to select multiple responses. In 2022, three out of four students indicated that their parents were a source of such support. Friends were also identified by 59% of students. Approximately half of all students identified siblings or other relatives, teachers, and grandparents. However, as Figure 1 illustrates, about one in 20 of this youngest group of students surveyed reported that they had no one providing support or encouragement.

Figure 1: Sources of support and encouragement, 5th grade, DSS 2022

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of Support and Encouragement, 5th Grade, DSS 2022 (in percentages)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
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<tr>
<td>Siblings or other relatives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grandparents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friends' Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults in places of worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No One</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The 5th grade DSS includes several other questions about protective factors. In 2022, the vast majority of students (95%) reported that they got along well with their parents or guardians most of the time. Nine out of ten students also reported feeling safe at school and safe in their neighborhoods most of the time.

The DSS Secondary questionnaire includes a similar question regarding who students believe provides support and encouragement. In 2022, 8th graders also indicated that their parents (80%), siblings and other relatives (55%), and grandparents (45%) were supportive. Not surprisingly, they were more likely than 5th graders to report friends (70%) as sources of encouragement. Equally concerning, however, is that one in 20 8th graders also perceived that no one provides them with such support.
The DSS Secondary survey also provides data that allow us to consider various protective factors and the prevalence of substance use, anxiety, and depression among older students. As Figures 4 through 8 illustrate, 8th grade students who reported experiencing specific protective factors were less likely to report substance use and mental health symptoms. For example, 8th graders who reported that they cared about doing well in school were about three times less likely to report using alcohol, marijuana, and electronic cigarettes than other students. Although students who did not care about doing well in school were also more likely to report symptoms of anxiety and depression than students who did care, these differences were not as pronounced.

Figure 4: Caring about doing well in school, substance use, mental health, 8th grade, DSS 2022 (in percentages)

For this report, the category of anxious is defined as students who respond that they have felt very nervous or anxious on more than half of the days in the past two weeks, and depressed is defined as students who respond that they have been bothered by feeling down, depressed, or hopeless on more than half of the days in the past two weeks.

It is important to note that while there is a statistical association between these factors, this does not necessarily mean that there is a causal relationship between them; in other words, we cannot say that one factor causes the other, and there may be other conditions that also influence the association. This holds true for all of the associations discussed in this report.
Strong relationships with parents and caregivers also serve as protective factors. The DSS asks students whether they get along with their parents and are given five different response options: *most of the time, often, some of the time, not often,* and *never.* For our reporting, we combined *most of the time* and *often* responses into one group, *some of the time* into another group, and *not often* and *never* responses into a third group.

![Getting Along With Parents and Past Month Substance Use/Mental Health, 8th Grade, DSS 2022 (in percentages)](image)

In 2022, 8th graders who reported that they usually got along with their parents were less likely to use substances or experience anxiety or depression than students who reported that they sometimes or rarely got along with their parents. The differences in reporting mental health symptoms were particularly dramatic. Among students who indicated that they typically got along with their parents, 22% reported anxiety symptoms and 14% reported depressive symptoms in the weeks prior to the survey. This is compared to 57% of students who reported that they rarely got along with their parents.
Students are also asked to rate how often they talked to at least one of their parents about how things are going in school. Once again, 8th graders who reported this protective factor were less likely to report risk behaviors; those responding to the 2022 DSS who reported that they talked to their parents frequently were less likely to report using substances or experiencing anxiety and depression, as highlighted in Figure 6.

![Talking to Parents and Past Month Substance Use/Mental Health, 8th Grade, DSS 2022 (in percentages)](image)

Figure 6: Talking to parents and substance use/mental health, 8th grade, DSS 2022

In addition to individual and parental factors, community environments can serve as protective factors for youth. The DSS asks students to rate their perceptions of safety in two settings where they spend a great deal of time: at school and in the neighborhood. Figures 7 and 8 highlight the 2022 prevalence rates of substance use and mental health symptoms associated with students’ perceptions of safety in these settings. Eighth graders who reported feeling safe at school and in the neighborhood most of the time or often were less likely than other students to report substance use, anxiety, or depression. More than half of youth who reported rarely feeling safe at school or in the neighborhood reported recent symptoms of anxiety. Approximately four in ten students who rarely felt safe in these settings reported recent symptoms of depression.
The numbers of 8th grade students who responded that they felt safe in the neighborhood some of the time or not often/never who also indicated past month marijuana or vaping use were too few to meet the threshold for data reporting (30 or more) and therefore these rates are not included in Figure 8.
Eleventh grade students are also asked questions regarding individual, parental, and environmental protective factors. When responding to the 2022 DSS, more than three out of four identified parents as a source of support and encouragement, and 71% identified friends. Just over half (51%) identified siblings or other relatives and four out of ten also identified grandparents and teachers. These rates are very similar to those reported by 8th grade students. In another striking similarity to both 5th and 8th graders, one in 20 11th graders also reported having no one to provide them with support or encouragement.

![Sources of Support and Encouragement, 11th Grade, DSS 2022 (in percentages)](source-bar-chart.png)

Figure 9: Sources of support and encouragement, 11th grade, DSS 2022

Figure 10 highlights associations between caring about doing well in school and the prevalence of substance use, anxiety, and depression among 11th grade students. Just as among 8th graders, students who reported that they cared about doing well in school were less likely to report using alcohol, marijuana, and electronic cigarettes than other students. Although 11th graders who did not care about doing well in school were also more likely to report symptoms of anxiety and depression than students who did, these differences were not as pronounced.
Substance use rates among 11th graders who reported typically getting along with their parents were lower than students who did not. However, there were more dramatic differences in the prevalence rates of anxiety and depression. Nearly half of students (48%) who reported sometimes getting along with their parents and two-thirds (65%) who reported rarely getting along with them also reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety in the weeks before the survey. This is compared to 24% of 11th graders who reported frequently getting along with their parents. Seventeen percent of students who indicated that they usually got along with their parents reported recent symptoms of depression, compared to 39% who sometimes got along with their parents and 61% who got rarely got along with them (Figure 11).

Eleventh grade students who reported talking to their parents about how things were going at school were also less likely to report substance use but the differences were not as substantial compared to associations with other protective factors (Figure 12). However, greater differences among the rates of depression and anxiety symptoms are noted. While one in four students who frequently talked to their parents reported recent symptoms of anxiety, almost half (46%) of student who rarely talked to their parents experienced these symptoms. Eleventh graders who rarely talked to their parents were more than twice as likely to report depressive symptoms compared to students who usually talked to their parents.
Getting Along With Parents and Past Month Substance Use/Mental Health, 11th Grade, DSS 2022 (in percentages)

![Bar chart showing getting along with parents and past month substance use/mental health.](chart1.png)

Figure 11: Get along with parents and substance use/mental health, 11th grade, DSS 2022

Talking to Parents and Past Month Substance Use/Mental Health, 11th Grade, DSS 2022 (in percentages)

![Bar chart showing talking to parents and past month substance use/mental health.](chart2.png)

Figure 12: Talking to parents and substance use/mental health, 11th grade, DSS 2022
Similar to 8th graders, 11th graders who reported frequently feeling safe in their schools and neighborhoods were less likely than other students to report substance use, anxiety, or depression. Approximately half of youth who reported rarely feeling safe at school or in the neighborhood reported recent symptoms of anxiety. Forty-nine percent of students who infrequently felt safe in school reported recent symptoms of depression and 42% who rarely felt safe in their neighborhoods reported such symptoms.

Figure 13: Feeling safe at school and substance use/mental health, 11th grade, DSS 2022

Figure 14: Feeling safe in neighborhood and substance use/mental health, 11th grade, DSS 2022

5 The numbers of 11th grade students who responded that that they felt safe in the neighborhood not often/never who also indicated past month marijuana or vaping use were too few to meet our threshold for data reporting (30 or more) and therefore these rates are not included in Figure 14.
The National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH)\textsuperscript{6} provides national and state prevalence rates of many aspects of childhood health and wellbeing, including several key protective factors, as reported by their parents. Respondents are asked a number of questions regarding their child’s home life and family supports which contribute to our understanding of the prevalence of protective factors in Delaware.

The NSCH includes a series of four questions that calculate a Family Resilience Composite Measure. The questions ask parent respondents to report if their child lives in a home where family members: talk together about what to do; work together to solve problems; know that they have strengths to draw upon; and stay hopeful even in difficult times. Four out of five Delaware parents indicated that their child lived in a home with these four supports in place most or all of the time. This was slightly lower than the 85% reported by the national sample.

![Figure 15: Family Resilience Composite Index, Delaware and national comparison, ages 0-17, NSCH 2020-2021](image)


\textsuperscript{7} Additional Delaware data on protective factors and other indicators of child health and wellbeing gathered by the NSCH can be explored using the interactive Data Resource Center for Child & Adolescent Health: \texttt{https://www.childhealthdata.org}. 
The table above highlights several individual and family level protective factors addressed in the NSCH questionnaire. The most recent results suggest that three out of four Delaware parents believe they receive emotional support with parenting; a majority of families eat together frequently; and in more than half of Delaware homes someone reads to younger children at least four days a week. Of concern, only six in ten children in Delaware (aged 17 and under) get the recommended hours of sleep for their age. These are comparable to national findings.

In terms of community supports, more than four out of five Delaware youth have an adult outside of the home that they can rely upon for advice. A similar percentage of Delaware youth (81.2%) appear engaged in school. A slightly lower percentage (67.8%) were involved in organized, after-school activities or lessons during the year before the survey. The vast majority of parents (81.8%) reported that they usually or always attended their child’s events. They were less likely to report that their child was engaged in community service or volunteer work, with fewer than one in three (29.4%) participating in this type of activity. Delaware rates of school and community engagement are generally comparable to national rates.

Finally, access to affordable healthcare contributes to health and wellbeing throughout the lifespan. According to the 2020-2021 NSCH, three-quarters of Delaware youth have insurance coverage that is usually or always adequate to cover their needs, and less than two-thirds (62.6%) had received both preventive medical and dental care in the previous year.
References


