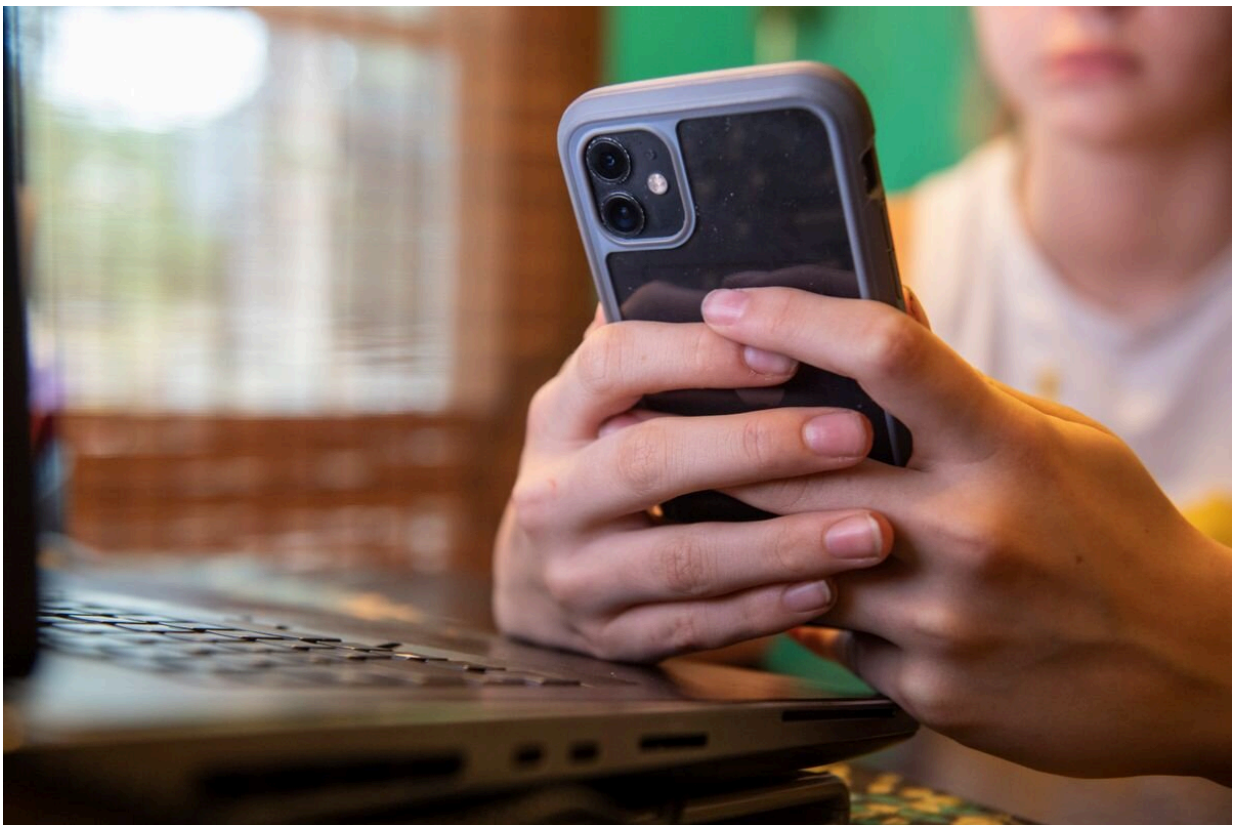


# No peers, no beers: Research shows youth substance use declined during the COVID-19 pandemic

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With stay-at-home orders during the COVID-19 pandemic, youth spent more time at home with family and were more isolated from in-person interaction with peers. Largely due to this social isolation from peers, substance use among youth declined, according to researchers at the WVU School of Public Health. Credit: WVU Photo/Brian Persinger

The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to concerns for youth mental health and social well-being, including its potential to spur substance use behaviors.

However, research from West Virginia University shows the opposite: youth substance use declined during the pandemic.

Hannah Layman, a social and [behavioral sciences](#) doctoral student, and Alfgeir Kristjansson, associate professor in the School of Public Health, examined the prevalence of youth substance use throughout the pandemic by focusing on 49 studies that observed alcohol, cannabis, tobacco and e-cigarette/vaping use.

Because substance use among youth often occurs outside the [home environment](#) and within the context of peer groups, teens and children had limited access and opportunities to partake while at home during the pandemic, the study concluded.

"One of the driving factors for youth substance use is access to substances," Layman said. "With stay-at-home orders, virtual schooling and [social distancing](#), children have been spending more time with family and are more socially isolated from peers than before. Although [social isolation](#) from peers may have a negative impact on their mental health, it may just be one of the desirable outcomes of the pandemic when considering substance use in children."

Layman and Kristjansson said that adolescence is typically the point in a child's life when peer socialization and the importance of peer respect increases while parental monitoring decreases.

This gives [young people](#) the opportunity to experiment with their identity and try new things. As far as substance choice, tobacco, vapes and alcohol are easily accessible and are seen as less serious compared to

"hard drugs," according to Layman and Kristjansson.

The researchers agree that more studies are needed to assess the long-term effect of the pandemic on substance use behaviors among youth. Although the pandemic may not have fostered increased substance use, further investigation is needed to understand differential risk across high-risk adolescents and differences by gender, the authors wrote.

Previous studies have shown an uptick in substance use among youth, particularly those living in resource-poor areas or in challenging family circumstances. And it leads to harmful results.

"Substance use can affect a young person's body in many ways such as the development of mental health issues (depression, anxiety, conduct problems, [personality disorders](#) and [suicidal thoughts](#)), injuries due to accidents, decreased bone mineral density, preventing proper brain growth and function, delayed puberty, liver damage and so much more," Layman said.

The state of West Virginia has been fighting a proportionally high prevalence of [substance use](#) and abuse for many years, according to the researchers.

Layman and Kristjansson said that compared to other states between 2013-2017, West Virginia ranked higher than the national average on the percentage of youth using cigarettes, marijuana and alcohol for the first time.

Layman said that some common ways to prevent this include increased supervision by caretakers, early intervention, open support when communicating, educating young people about substances and providing a good example for young people.

"Our findings also identified the importance of improving youth [mental health](#) and the value of telemedicine to address young people's health needs during the pandemic."

**More information:** Hannah M. Layman et al, Substance Use Among Youth During the COVID-19 Pandemic: a Systematic Review, *Current Psychiatry Reports* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s11920-022-01338-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-022-01338-z)

Provided by West Virginia University

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