

# Community 'champions' aid coalitions in promoting public health, new study says

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Communities seeking to form or sustain a successful prevention coalition may benefit from having a community champion who can support their efforts, according to a new study by Penn State and

UTHealth Houston.

Community champions are local leaders who promote the value of community-based programs that prevent substance misuse and other serious public health issues, said Sarah Chilenski, associate research professor of health and [human development](#) with the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center and co-author of a paper on the study published in the journal *Evaluation and Program Planning*.

"When people with clout are willing to talk about their local coalition's prevention efforts in regular conversations, in speeches or in public discussions, they can encourage people to get involved in local prevention efforts," Chilenski said. "That person isn't necessarily a coalition member. It's someone who believes in prevention and connects people with resources, programs, and leaders in the community."

Community coalitions help to coordinate the actions of diverse local organizations to implement programs, policies, and other activities aimed at promoting [community health](#), explained Louis Brown, associate professor at UTHealth Houston School of Public Health and the study's principal investigator.

"They are a vital part of civic efforts to promote healthy youth development and prevent substance misuse."

The research team examined how 19 community coalitions across Mexico functioned across their first 1.5 years and tested associations between initial community contextual factors and subsequent coalition functioning and outcomes. Coalition members participated in three waves of surveys about coalition context and functioning.

Out of the initial community contextual factors tested, only community champions predicted perceived community improvement. However, the

study also found that [community support](#) for [prevention](#) when the coalitions were forming predicted several measures of process competence.

"Process competence is a coalition's ability to coordinate action among members skillfully, with good teamwork that engages diverse stakeholders," said Brown. "Our findings highlight the importance of having a strong foundation of community support when trying to organize [collective action](#) to prevent youth substance use. By emphasizing the importance of health issues, local leaders may be able to foster conditions conducive to coalition success."

Another key finding was that community coalitions improved member engagement and process competence over time. Over the coalitions' first 1.5 years, member engagement increased, as did coordinator skill and participatory leadership style.

"There is a developmental trajectory for coalitions and there seems to be a predictable course and things ebb and flow as you move into implementation and sustainability. It's not linear, and it's not static," Chilenski said. "We need more studies to show how predictable it is. That can help with us understand the challenges faced by community coalitions and how to interpret them in context."

Lessons learned from the study about community coalitions in Mexico can be applied to community coalitions in the U.S. and other countries, Chilenski said.

"We are excited about the findings from this study because they inform the strategies civic leaders can use to strengthen collective efforts aimed at helping youth thrive," Brown added.

**More information:** Louis D. Brown et al, Initial conditions and

functioning over time among community coalitions, *Evaluation and Program Planning* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2022.102090](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2022.102090)

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