

# Vaping and Nicotine Use

## 1 Key Issue

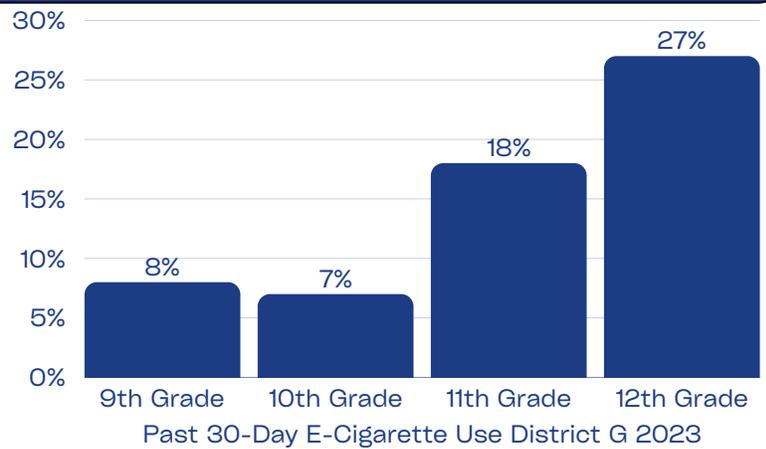
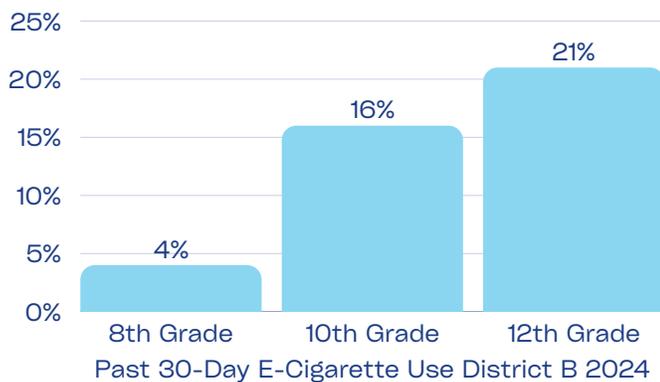
While most surveyed youth in Western CT do not vape or use nicotine, the past 30-day use of e-cigarettes ranges from 3% to 27% among those in grades 9-12.

## 2 Risk Factors

In 2023, 28% of surveyed youth who use e-cigarettes reported that they got them from a vape shop. One school district, saw an increase in that reporting from 26% to 39%.

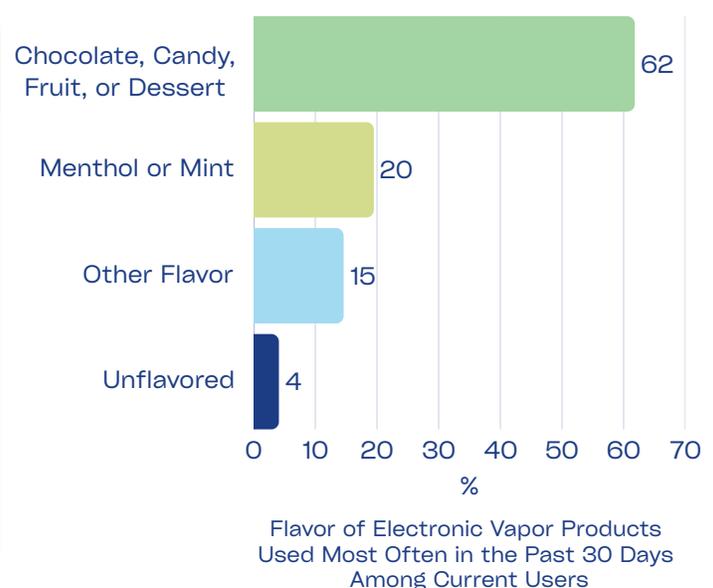
## 3 Recommendations

- Increase state and local regulation of vape shops to include density caps, limitation on signage, and registration checks and balances.
- Implement a **comprehensive flavor ban** on all tobacco products, including menthol flavored products.
- Amend the CT definition of tobacco and nicotine products to align with federal standards and ensure all vape and emerging nicotine products are included under CT tobacco regulations.



## 4 Community Strengths & Strategies

- The primarily volunteer-based **Local Prevention Council program** in CT is vital to prevention. Utilizing evidence-based strategies, their work has contributed to a reduction in youth use of e-cigarettes since 2019.
- Leveraging the Juul settlement funds, **the RBHAOS have a cohort of prevention professionals** across the state dedicated to reducing the harms of nicotine use among those most vulnerable - under 21.

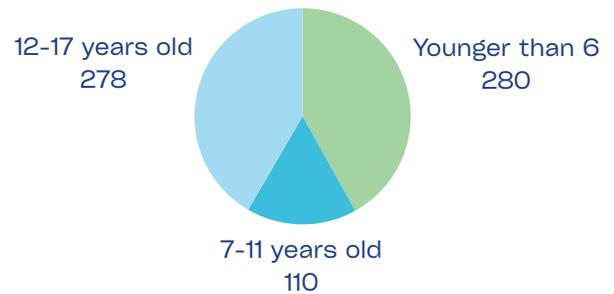


# Cannabis

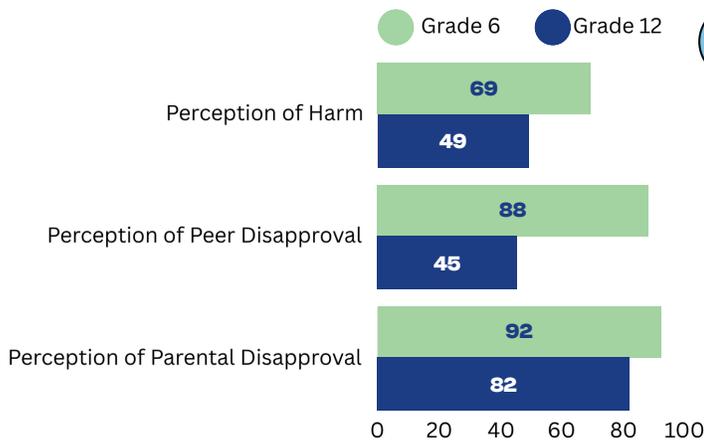
## Key Issue

1 While the majority of youth in Region 5 do not use cannabis, there has been an increase in the number of youth who have “ever used”, or are “currently using” cannabis. There has also been an increase in the perception that cannabis is easy to access.

## CT Poison Control Cannabis-Related Calls Ages 0 - 17 (2017-2024)



## Connecticut Youth Survey Data: Perception of Cannabis Use



Source: Connecticut Youth Voices Count Surveys, 2019 - 2024 (n = > 44,000)

## Key Findings

- 2 CT Poison Control reports that between 2017 and 2024, it received an average of 40 to 60 cannabis-related calls per month for children aged 17 and under.
- The perception of risks decreases as grade level increases. Cannabis is the substance with the lowest perception of risk among youth in grades 6 - 12.
- There are several instances of registered ENDS retailers (i.e. vape shops, smoke shops, convenience stores) selling illicit cannabis products; on regional surveys, youth report accessing cannabis products from these retailers.
- From a representative sample of regional youth surveys, among youth who reported vaping nicotine in the past 30 days, 44.7% reported vaping cannabis.

## Recommendations

- 3 **Institute a cap on smoke shop density** to prevent excessive retailer concentration and reduce youth access to cannabis products.
- Implement stricter packaging and labeling regulations** to prevent accidental consumption and ensure clear dosage guidance.
- Commit 5% of cannabis retail revenue to prevention efforts**, including dedicated funding for cessation programs to provide youth-focused intervention and treatment options.

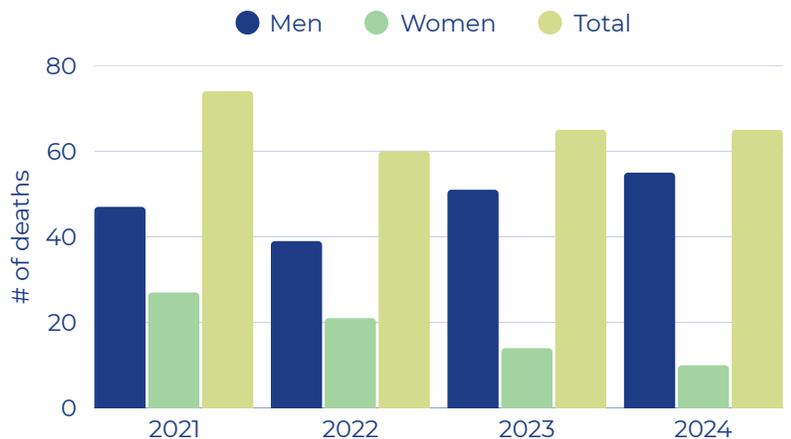
## Community Strengths & Strategies

- 4 Two Local Prevention Councils in Western CT were awarded \$57,000 each for an 18-month period of **Cannabis Coalition Prevention Grants**.
- Increased collaboration with DMHAS and DCP** has led to expanded outreach and educational efforts at licensed cannabis retailers and registered ENDS retailers.
- The establishment of the **Region 5 Underage Cannabis and Nicotine Workgroup** has incited an increased level of representation, awareness, and capacity for cannabis prevention strategies throughout Western CT.

# Suicide

## 1 Key Issue

Suicide is a **public health concern** with an impact that is felt across the lifespan and among our communities. Suicide deaths in Western CT have slightly decreased or stayed steady since 2021. Male deaths are consistently higher than female deaths in the region.



## 2 Key Findings

- In Western CT, while requests to 211 decreased slightly from 2023 to 2024, there was an **increase of almost 700 requests to 211** for crisis intervention and suicide.
- An average of 19.3% of students surveyed over five districts indicated having “seriously considered” attempting suicide in the past 12 months. In another two districts, 18.8% of students reported “attempting suicide ever in their lives”. This dataset found **higher reports of suicide attempts in female students** - a pattern consistently shown in regional data.
- Groups with notable risk factors that require attention include LGBTQIA+ individuals, emerging adults, and older men.

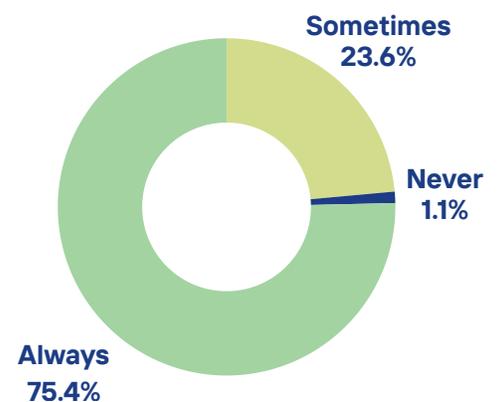
## 3 Recommendations

- Dedicate stable funding to the **Regional Suicide Advisory Boards** to continue and enhance the important prevention and postvention work being done across the lifespan in their communities.
- Gather regional adult mental health and suicide data, particularly adult men, to inform prioritization processes and suicide prevention and postvention planning.

## 4 Community Strengths & Strategies

- In 2023 and 2024 Western CT Coalition trained over **1,094 individuals** across various sectors and settings in Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR), evidence-based training that teaches simple steps to help save a life.
- The Regional Suicide Advisory Board trains and builds capacity around response after a loss that mitigates risk and promotes safety (suicide postvention), including supporting communities in creating local **Suicide Postvention Information Networks (SPINs)**.

How likely QPR participants are to ask someone “Are you thinking of killing yourself?” if concerned



# Mental Health

## Key Issue

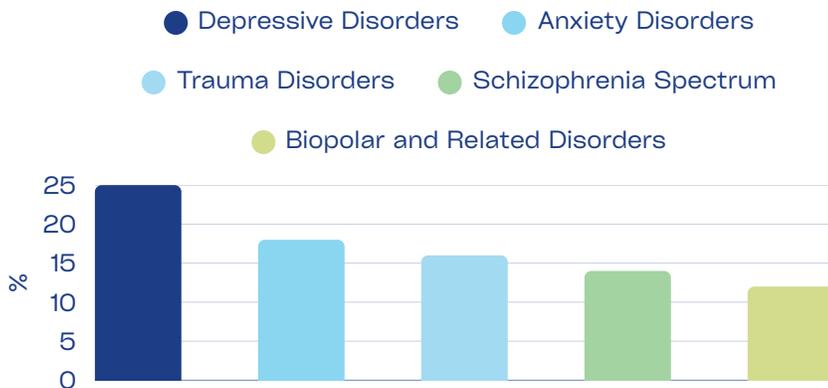
1 Mental health has a critical impact on thoughts, feelings and actions, and mental health concerns can determine how individuals handle stress, relate to others, and make life choices. In the 2025 Priority Report, **depression and anxiety were ranked as the top two priority concerns** in the region across all age groups.

## Key Findings

- 2
- In 2023 depression and anxiety were the top two most common mental health diagnoses at DMHAS treatment admission for adults in Western CT.
  - Schools surveyed across the region found **females reported higher rates of “feeling sad or hopeless”** than males, ranging from 22-37%.
  - One surveyed district in Western CT (N=1400) found 56% of transgender students reported “feeling sad or hopeless” for two or more weeks in a row; compared to 21.5% of cisgender peers.



of surveyed adults in Western CT reported feeling down, depressed or hopeless “**not at all**” or “only several days” on the past 2 weeks



Mental Health Diagnoses of Individuals Admitted to Treatment  
DMHAS Region 5, 2023

## Community Strengths & Strategies

- 4
- **Gizmo’s Pawesome Guide to Mental Health** book read-alongs and accompanying curriculum have been permeating Western CT, teaching mental health language and coping skills to young children and beyond.
  - **Urgent Crisis Centers** for youth, MHAT grants, and the expansion of School Based Health Centers are just a few current efforts to increase early identification and supports for mental health concerns and crises.

## Recommendations

- 3
- Increase early identification of risk factors and promotion of protective factors by increasing mental health awareness presentations and trainings like Mental Health First Aid.
  - Identify and develop more resources and spaces recognizing specific risk and protective factors of the LGBTQIA+ community, especially emerging adults.

# Prescription Drugs

1

## Key Issue

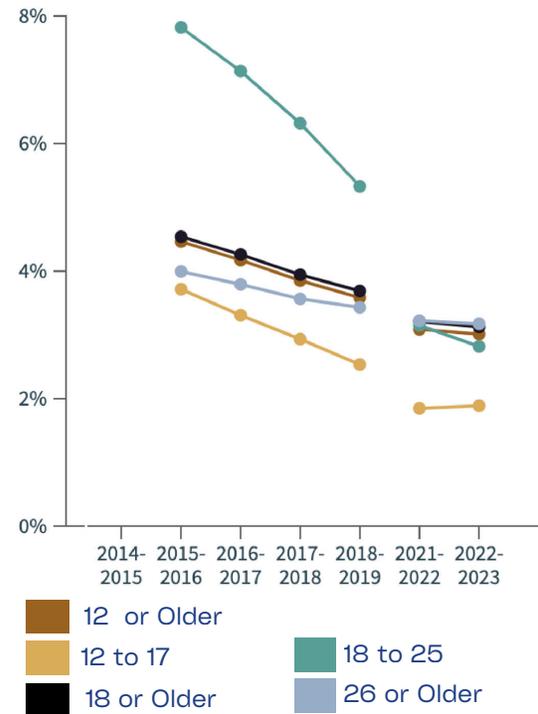
There have been decreases in Rx drug misuse in Region 5, particularly among youth. However, misuse of prescription drugs like benzodiazepines continues to be a concern.

2

## Key Findings

- Rx drug use decreased, particularly among youth, except among Hispanic youth where use continues to increase.
- Misuse of prescription drugs like benzodiazepines continues to be a concern.
- Adderall continues to be the most prescribed controlled substances in Western CT.
- 2024 HIDTA FTR data indicates that most counterfeit Adderall pills are pressed methamphetamine and contain no Adderall.

Past Year Pain Reliever Misuse in CT, by Age Group



3

## Recommendations

Despite overall declines, **misuse among Hispanic youth is rising (past 30-day use rose from 12% to 13.1%)**. This indicates a need for culturally and linguistically tailored interventions, especially in Spanish and Portuguese-speaking communities.

4

## Community Strengths & Strategies

Western CT offers strong behavioral health support through hospitals, school-based health centers, and expanding services. Community teams, harm reduction vans, and naloxone training increase access to care.

Survey Results: Level of concern by age group

0-11y	12-17y	18-25y	26-65y	66y+
Anxiety	Anxiety	Alcohol	Alcohol	Depression
Depression	Depression	Anxiety	Depression	Alcohol
Trauma	Tobacco/Nicotine	Depression	Anxiety	Anxiety
Tobacco/Nicotine	Alcohol	Tobacco/Nicotine	Tobacco/Nicotine	Rx drugs
Alcohol	Cannabis	Cannabis	Cannabis	Tobacco/Nicotine
Cannabis	Trauma	Suicide	Rx drugs	Trauma
Suicide	Suicide	Trauma	Suicide	Cannabis
Rx drugs	Rx drugs	Rx drugs	Trauma	Suicide
Cocaine/Crack	Cocaine/Crack	Heroin/Fentanyl	Heroin/Fentanyl	Cocaine/Crack
Heroin/Fentanyl	Heroin/Fentanyl	Cocaine/Crack	Cocaine/Crack	Heroin/Fentanyl

The chart above shows how survey respondents ranked priority issues across the age groups. The color coding emphasizes R5 perceived trends across the lifespan.

# Cocaine

## 1 Key Issue

Although the main focus of prevention work has been opioids over the last decade, cocaine use has remained a constant within the region. The average demographic of individuals with cocaine present in toxicology reports post mortem continues to be middle-aged, white, non-Hispanic men. The increase in deaths involving both cocaine and fentanyl raises concerns about unintentional polysubstance exposure.

## 2 Key Findings

In 2023, **55%** of Connecticut's unintentional overdose deaths **involved cocaine**. Western CT experienced **125 overdose deaths involving cocaine** (OCME). Of the western towns that have experienced these deaths, data show a disproportionately high percentage at **58.4% of all identified Western CT deaths occurring in Waterbury**.

## 3 Recommendations

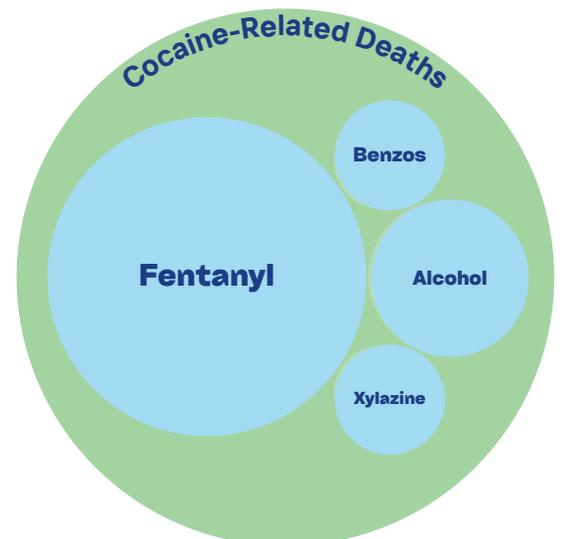
**Expand** access to portable **spectrometers** to support drug checking. **Expand** access to **safer smoking kits** to reduce injury among people who use drugs and promote places of connection and relationship building. Grassroots initiatives in Western CT are already reporting increased interest and engagement with these programs.



of Connecticut high school students surveyed in 2023 reported never having used some form of cocaine in their lives.

## 4 Community Strengths & Strategies

Western CT hosts many **harm reduction sites** and has access to resources for supplies that would not otherwise be available through state and federal funding. Apex Community Cares hosts harm reduction supplies at all four locations. Litchfield County Opioid Task Force highlights twelve more on [lctf.org/harm-reduction/](https://lctf.org/harm-reduction/), all of which provide safer smoking supplies and test strips.



# Problem Gambling

## Key Issue

1 Problem gambling, sometimes referred to as disordered gambling, includes gambling behaviors which disrupt or damage personal, family, or vocational pursuits. Symptoms include increasing preoccupation with gambling, needing to bet more money more frequently, irritability when attempting to stop, and continuation of the gambling behavior despite serious negative consequences.

## Key Findings

2 In focus groups, youth showed awareness of gambling risks like money loss and addiction. Common activities included sports betting, dice, card games, loot boxes, and lottery tickets—some received as gifts. Middle schoolers often gambled with snacks or game currency. Most reported seeing ads for CT Lottery, casinos, DraftKings, and FanDuel across media.

## Recommendations

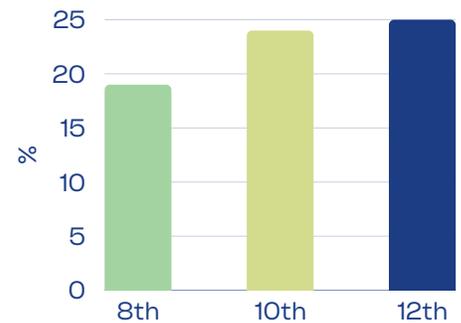
3 As sports betting grows, so does the need for stronger safeguards. Some states are exploring stricter rules—like loss limits and self-exclusion—to protect users. Experts warn current regulations are not enough, and betting platforms are being urged to adopt more ethical features like cooling-off periods and safety alerts.

## Community Strengths & Strategies

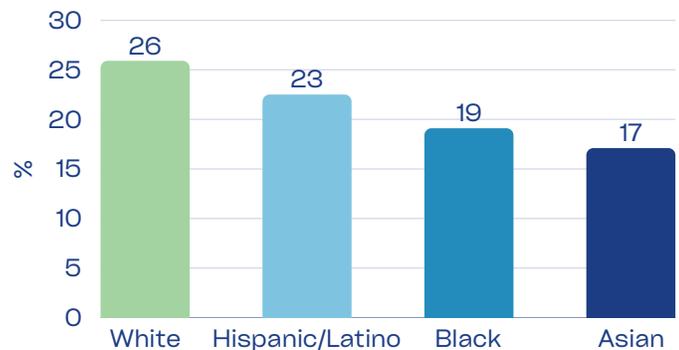
### Education and advocacy

- 4 • Promotion of Help Line, MCCA, and Self-Exclusion programs.
- In-person “Community Conversation” presentations (age-appropriate programs for elementary school through senior citizens).
- Tabling events at schools, public events.
- **The only 18+ inpatient treatment facility is in Danbury**

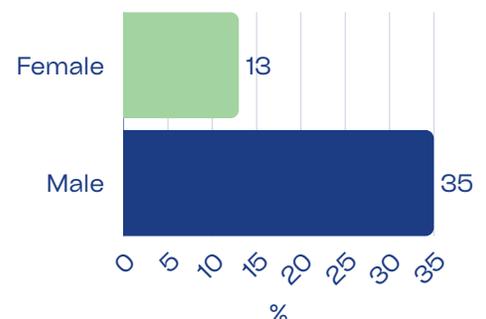
Prevalence of “Ever Gambling” High School Students: School “A” 2024  
Gambled 1< In 12 months



Prevalence of “Ever Gambling” among CT High School Students across Race/Ethnicity, 2023



Prevalence of “Ever Gambling” among CT High School Students across Sex, 2023



Sources: RG.org, Naugatuck, New Milford, Wolcott (2022)

# Alcohol

## Key Issue

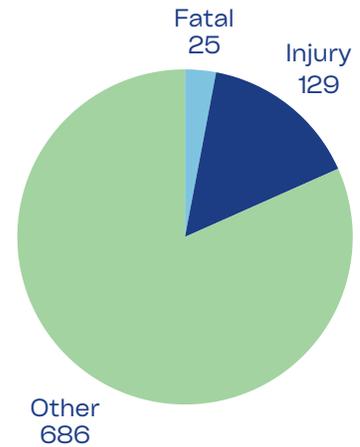
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- Alcohol was identified as the **top priority substance** in the 2021, 2023 and 2025 priority reports for Western CT.
- It ranked as the 3rd overall concern, after depression and anxiety, in 2025.

## Key Findings

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- Canaan, our **smallest community** by population, (1,082) **sold 75,536 nips in 6 months with one liquor store** (Nips Per Capita [NPC] 69.81). Our second highest NPC is Winchester/Winsted (NPC 27.46). Winchester previously had Western CT's highest nip sales per year, outselling our larger regional cities like Waterbury and Danbury.
- From 2015-2022, **26.3% of suicide deaths had alcohol in their system** according to toxicology reports. 19.7% had an alcohol BAC above the legal limit.
- Danbury, one of our three urban periphery communities, led the state in DUI arrests (138) between January and June 2024.



Between 2022-24, Western CT experienced an estimated 840 crashes involving a DUI; 25 of which were fatal and 129 which resulted in possible injury.

## Recommendations

3

- Develop and implement a multilingual, ADA-compliant Western CT community survey on alcohol use (including perceptions of risk, consumption, and consequences).
- Gather baseline data from a diverse cross-section of the community, providing region-specific insights that support prioritization, planning, and tracking through qualitative data across Western CT.



of recently surveyed students in one school district reported **not driving after drinking** or riding with driver who's been drinking three or more times in the last 12 months.

## Community Strengths & Strategies

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- New relationships with local retailers and other civic groups have enabled WCTC to focus more attention on adult alcohol use.
- Western Connecticut Coalition distributed over 1,500 coasters with information on standard drink sizes to more than 30 local restaurants.

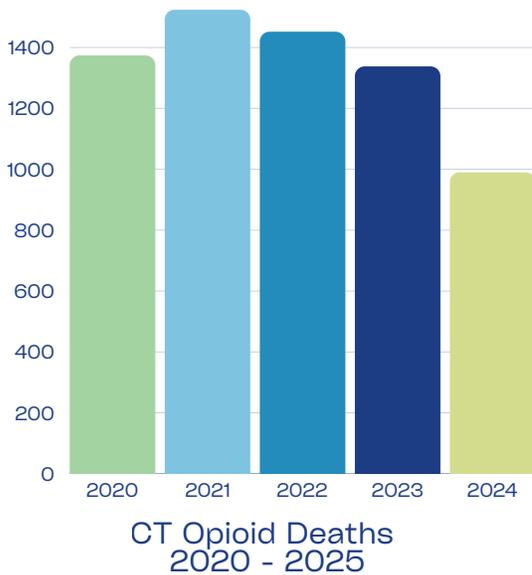
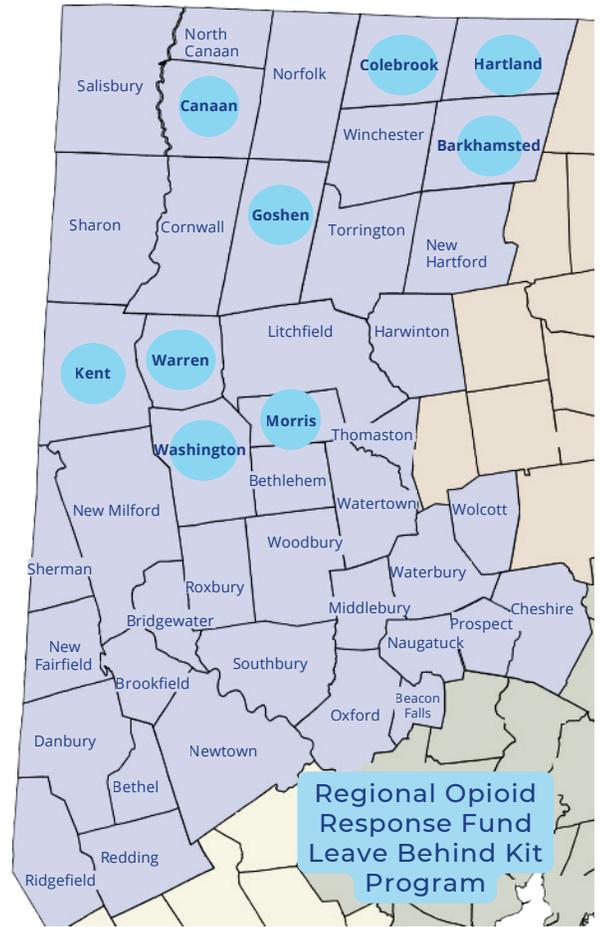
# Opioids

## Key Issue

- 1 • Fentanyl remains the most common opioid involved in overdose deaths.  
• Fentanyl is widely used in street drugs under the guise of other substances (e.g. cocaine, Adderall, Xanax), that have been illicitly and nearly imperceptibly pressed into pills.

## Key Findings

- 2 • Opioid deaths are **decreasing**.  
• The **State Opioid Response (SOR)** funds are ongoing in their support of opioid-related initiatives both statewide and in Western CT. These funds are dedicated to promoting awareness, education, and access to naloxone. The Change the Script and Live LOUD media campaigns, alongside local activities, remain valuable community-based resources.



## Recommendations

- 3 • Use the Regional Opioid Response Fund (RORF) model for smaller towns to maximize municipal settlement funds in smaller towns.  
• Streamline ODMAP data & other spike alert programs for more accurate reporting.

## Community Strengths & Strategies

- 4 • **3 active opioid workgroups** in Danbury, Torrington, Waterbury.  
• The use of harm reduction strategies are common in Western CT among:
  - Mental health counseling
  - Medical centers
  - Street outreach
  - Drop-in centers
  - Shelters