

# ***IN THEIR EYES:***

## **The Causes of Youth SUD and Solutions**



November 2021

### **Empowered Southeast Asian and Latinx Youth (ESALY) for Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Prevention**



# A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE CAMBODIAN FAMILY

The Cambodian Family is so excited to present the findings from our newest program *Empowered Southeast Asian and Latinx Youth for Substance Use Disorder Prevention* through this report - **In Their Eyes: The Causes of Youth SUD and Solutions.**

Although this past year was challenging due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we still successfully conducted a series of listening sessions dedicated to garnering youth input, which is presented through this report.

Reflected here are the attitudes and beliefs of the youth perspective on substance use in Santa Ana, drawing from a series of listening sessions beginning in 2020, and summaries of the key recommendations our youth made towards Substance Use prevention. We hope this report helps enrich your understanding of substance use disorder in youth from communities of color in the second largest city in Orange County, California.

This report is the result of the hard work, collaboration, and support from our wonderful funder at The Center at Sierra Health Foundation and our amazing partners - the Mental Health Equity Collaborative (MHEC), Santa Ana Building Healthy Communities (SABHC), Charitable Ventures, and our incredible Youth Advisory Council (YAC) right here at The Cambodian Family. For this, we are so grateful for everyone's support and contributions.

Let's continue to come together, work hard, and improve the lives of our diverse youth in California.

With Love,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Vattana Peong', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Vattana Peong, MPH  
Executive Director

# Empowered Southeast Asian and Latinx Youth (ESALY) for Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Prevention YEAR 1 – Youth Listening Sessions Brief

In March 2020, The Cambodian Family (TCF) launched a new Substance Use Disorder (SUD) prevention program for Southeast Asian and Latinx youth in Santa Ana<sup>1</sup>, California called Empowered Southeast Asian and Latinx Youth (ESALY). ESALY, supported by Elevate Youth a program of Sierra Health Foundation in partnership with the California Department of Health Services (CDHS), focuses on social justice youth leadership development and substance use disorder prevention through racially and culturally responsive approaches to SUD and youth-led policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change. As a new program led by youth, TCF held three listening sessions from September through December 2020 to explore youth perspectives on substance use and to identify the impacts of substance use policies and practices in Santa Ana. This brief highlights top level findings from those sessions.

## Listening Session Recruitment

ESALY program and partner staff developed multilingual outreach flyers to recruit Black or African American, Southeast Asian (Cambodian, Vietnamese, etc.) or Latinx participants, ages 12-18 from Santa Ana.

In total, 47 youth participated across three listening sessions. Gender, race/ethnicity, grade, and experiential demographics are summarized in the table below:

Gender	Female	54%
	Male	40%
	Gender Non-Conforming	4%
	Prefer not to Answer	2%
Demographic		Percent of Participants
Race/Ethnicity	Chicano/Mexican	44%
	Vietnamese	29%
	Cambodian/Khmer	13%
	Other Latin American	2%
	Black or African American	2%
Grade	12th Grade	25%
	11th Grade	31%
	10th Grade	15%
	9th Grade	13%
	8th Grade	4%
	7th Grade	13%
Challenging experiences	Mental health/emotional challenge	28%
	Housing insecurity	6%
	Food insecurity	6%
	Contact with justice system	2%
	Experience with foster care	2%

<sup>1</sup> The Cambodian Family has a strong history of working closely with the Southeast Asian refugee and Latinx communities in Santa Ana, including youth. Since Southeast Asian and Latinx youth face disproportionate policing, cultural stigmas, and other unique circumstances related to substance use, this program is directed specifically to these communities. In time, The Cambodian Family would like to see similar programming expand beyond this Santa Ana pilot.



## Findings

In addition to the listening sessions, participants completed an exit survey (20 questions) which captured demographic information and supplemented experiential information (shared in listening sessions) with alcohol and drugs, access to community support services, and perspectives for policy and systems changes to address alcohol and drug use. The following represents the qualitative and quantitative data gathered from participants.

### Exposure to and Reasons for Drug/Alcohol Use

Most participants knew other youth who use alcohol or drugs. Some students also shared that their parents/ adult caregiver or family members (e.g. cousins) also utilized alcohol or drugs. Some shared that the youth that they know use, but keep it secret, as they do not want to be judged. Most participants reported having not tried alcohol or drugs themselves – even though many have been offered alcohol or drugs at school. A number of participants shared that among those they know that use drugs they don't think it's harmful because they feel that it's something that they can quit. A few others shared that some friends who use drugs don't realize how their use is affecting their relationships with others, sharing that the use of drugs makes them "not the same."

The following are the top 10 reasons for substance use reported by youth participants:



Reason(s)	Percent
1. Friends use them	87%
2. To feel happier/forget about problems	81%
3. To relax/de-stress	74%
4. Feeling pressured by my peers	66%
5. Curious	62%
6. Seen family using them	53%
7. To have fun	53%
8. Media (television, social media, ads) and music makes it seem cool	51%
9. To feel good	49%
10. Other youth (not close friends) use them and offer	47%

## Commonly Used Substances

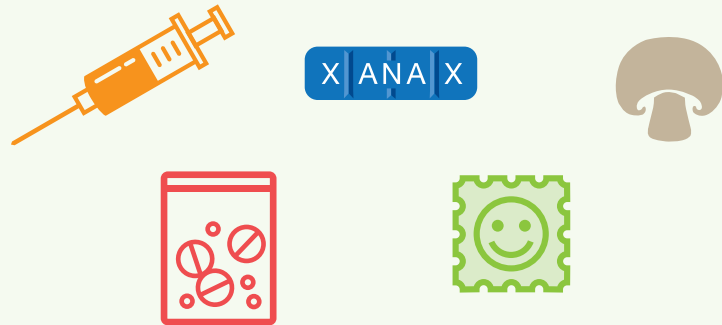
### Commonly used drugs

alcohol  
e-cigarettes  
marijuana  
vaping (particularly  
flavored juuls)  
cocaine



### Other substances reported by youth

LSD (acid)	PCP (angel dust)
meth	speed
whites	puff bars
Xanax	cannabis candy
heroin	molly ranchers
shrooms	ecstasy
downers	



## Substance Access

58% say marketing substances to youth is a serious to very serious problem

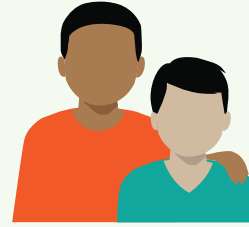


A majority of participants reported that marketing substances to youth is a serious problem with 26% reporting it a very serious problem and 32% a serious problem (58% total). Some participants shared that they felt e-cigarettes targeted youth. Many shared that alcohol and drug use is a noted problem in Santa Ana schools. A few shared that they were aware that adults request that their children attend other schools, outside of Santa Ana Unified, due to the reputation of alcohol and drug use in schools.

### Access to Trusted Confidants

A majority of participants, 79% stated that they have an adult or young adult mentor, friend or family member with whom they can discuss topics around substance use. Participants reported, on average, that they were most comfortable speaking to older siblings, older adults (e.g. contacts through youth programs, teachers, etc.) and then parents.

### Participants Reported:



**79%**

have access to a trusted confidant to discuss substance use

### Access to Support Services and Safe Spaces

When asked about having access to community services, 28%-36% of participants reported access to services to address anxiety, depression, developmental differences, family differences, other mental/behavioral health concerns and youth SUDs. Additionally, students reported having access to extracurricular activities (74%), and youth friendly spaces (53%). Fewer participants reported having access to safe physical spaces (45%) and having a sense of community (40%). The chart below, notes the specific response rates provided by participants.

**28%-36%**

have access to support services



### Policing and Discrimination

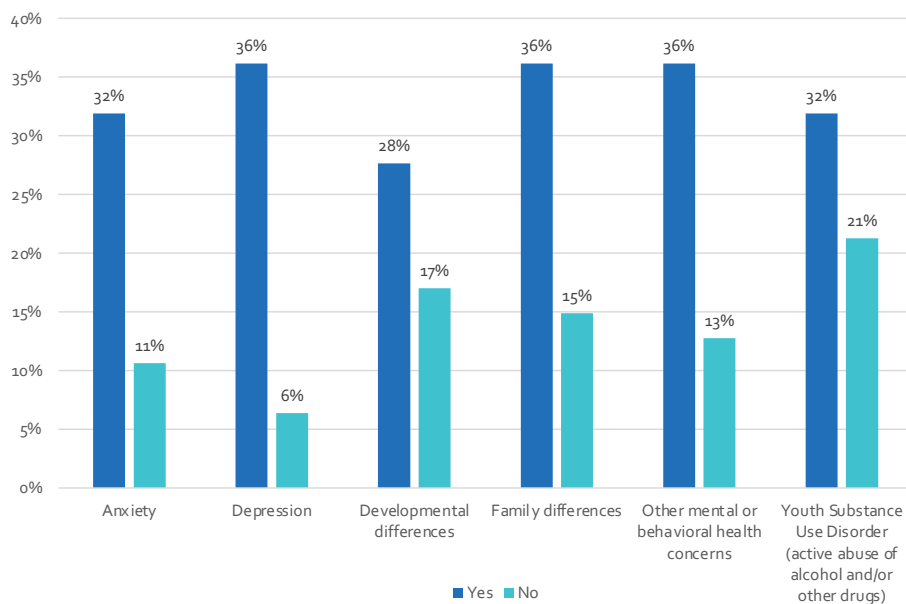
Most participants shared that they often felt stereotyped by authorities and that some associate youth with vaping and others with being affiliated with or in a gang. When asked about discriminatory policing, 66% of youth reported feeling that their community are targets of discriminatory policing for substance abuse, while 28% stated that they were not sure.

**66%**

of youth reported feeling that their community are targets of discriminatory policing for substance abuse



Do Youth Have Access to Services to Address Below Issues?  
(n=47)



## Youth Empowerment and Youth Ideas for Change

Mixed responses were shared about whether or not youth felt that they could make change around SUD prevention. Some shared that they think it's possible, but felt they could only make change at the individual level, such as talking with others and discouraging use. They felt that they were most effective by being there for their friends and family and reaching out to counselors and others for support. Participants didn't feel that adults would "listen to kids." On a larger scale, some participants felt that law enforcement and city council would not take them seriously.

Many youth felt that the local government can do more in Santa Ana to address SUD prevention. However, they shared that the city continues to cut the budget, especially programs and services that can support youth.

### Participant responses for the best ways to support youth



51%

More youth after-school programs and extracurricular activities

53%

Better advertising to youth about existing services



56%

More youth mental wellness activities

58%

Restorative justice activities – helping youth and police to reconcile and relate more positively



60%

Provide opportunities for support from individuals like you

73%

More safe spaces for youth socialization and free time

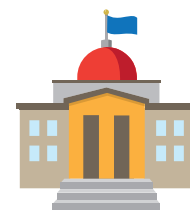


82%

More services for youth struggling with mental health, developmental, or home-life differences and difficulties

83%

Local government should invest in youth programs



### Next steps

The ESALY team will initiate trainings with youth, utilizing the Project ALERT curriculum, a weekly school-based curriculum designed to reduce substance use among students. The curriculum is skills based and is intended to reduce the experimental and continued use of drugs. Two cohorts will be administered in 2021 from March to August (10-week sessions), followed by training on policy, systems and environmental change. Youth will learn about community organizing as a means to identifying and addressing policy, systems and environmental change and consider possible local campaigns. Youth will also be recruited to a Youth Advisory Council. In late 2021, all youth will be convened and a listening session will be held to help assess their attitudes around substance use and stigma and to identify any possible changes in empowerment amongst those having participated in the Project ALERT Training. ESALY intends to grow the network of youth engaged in reducing and preventing substance use disorder.



# **ESALY Participating Partners:**

**Mental Health Equity Collaborative**

**Santa Ana Building Health Communities**

**Charitable Ventures**

**The Cambodian Family**

**The Cambodian Family - Youth Advisory Council Members**

This project is supported by Elevate Youth California, which is managed by The Center at Sierra Health Foundation under contract with the State of California's Department of Health Care Services through Proposition 64, California Cannabis Tax Fund, Allocation 3, Youth Education Prevention Early Intervention and Treatment Account.

