

October 2025

RISING VOICES:

Youth Insights on SUD Prevention





Acknowledgement

Empowered Southeast Asian and Latinx Youth (ESALY) for Substance Use Disorder program is made possible through the support from Elevate Youth California, a project of The Center at Sierra Health Foundation under contract with the State of California's Department of Health Care Services (DHCS), is funded through the DHCS Proposition 64 California Cannabis Tax Fund, Allocation 3, Youth Education Prevention Early Intervention and Treatment Account.



YOUTH CALIFORNIA

Background



Since 2020, The Cambodian Family (TCF) has led the Empowered Southeast Asian and Latinx Youth (ESALY) program, for the prevention of Substance Use Disorder (SUD). ESALY is possible thanks to the continued support of Elevate Youth California (EYC) through the Sierra Health Foundation and a multi-organizational effort that has included collaboration with Resilience Orange County (ROC), Vital Access Care Foundation (VACF), and the Children's Cause Orange County.

On August 23, 2025, TCF and its partners convened forty youth at the Great Wolf Lodge in Garden Grove, California, for the Orange County Youth Wellness Conference. This gathering served as a day of learning, sharing, and fun for the youth. The agenda included breakfast, opening remarks from TCF's Executive Director, AVP of Programs from Sierra Health Foundation, Matt Cervantes, and local elected officials, followed by a youth graduation ceremony, a youth facilitated panel on Substance Use and the Mental Health Landscape for Orange County's Youth, a Youth Communication Skills Development Workshop, lunch, and the annual ESALY listening session combined with a survey. The youth ended their day with fun in the lodge water park. This report presents youth demographic data and perspectives related to 1) the causes of substance use, 2) resources in their community, as well as 3) ideas for supporting youth wellness. A similar report was produced in 2021.

Methodology and Demographics

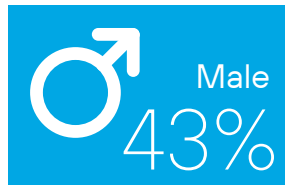
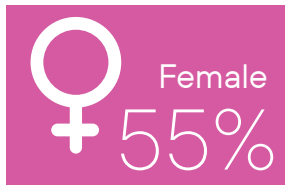


TCF and partner staff recruited 40 Southeast Asian and Latinx youth, ages 12 to 18, from across Orange County, CA, to participate in the Orange County Youth Wellness Conference. Seventeen youth (42.5%) had previously participated in the ESALY program, while 23 (57.5%) were new to the program.

Youth were divided into four small groups to consider questions about substance use, their environment, and to provide feedback and ideas about program improvement. Grouping was based on age similarity, reflecting ESALY program staff's experience that age-based grouping can be helpful to facilitate more comfortable dialogue. Groups were also organized by ESALY experience, with two groups of ESALY-experienced youth, and two groups of youth who had no experience with ESALY. Facilitators used slightly different questions for groups depending on their ESALY experience. The difference was that those with ESALY experience were invited to directly discuss what had worked and what they would like to change about the program, while those new to TCF and ESALY were invited to envision what would work in a program like ESALY. Demographic details for the whole group follow.

All youth also completed a survey related to knowledge, resources, and ideas about SUD prevention. Survey findings are reported in aggregate. Additionally, cross-tabulated analysis by gender and by race/ethnicity was carried out. Notable datapoints for which the sample is greater than or equal to 20, and variation is greater than or equal to 25% are reported upon. For race/ethnicity-specific findings, those groups with sample sizes of one were removed.

Gender



Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	% Respondents
Cambodian (or Cambodian American)	45%
Vietnamese (or Vietnamese American)	28%
Chicano, Mexican, or Mexican-American	25%
Other*	8%
Other Latin American	5%

*1 Thai American, 1 Chinese/Thai, 1 Chinese-American

Grade

Grade	% Respondents
6th	5%
7th	12.5%
8th	22.5%
9th	5%
10th	12.5%
11th	22.5%
12th	12.5%
Other*	7.5%

Three youth indicated "other" and specified that they had either graduated or were in college.

Challenging Experiences

Challenges experienced	% Yes
None of the above	58%
Mental health/emotional health challenge	38%
Food Insecurity	13%
Housing Insecurity	5%
Foster Care	3%
Contact with the justice system	3%
Other	3%

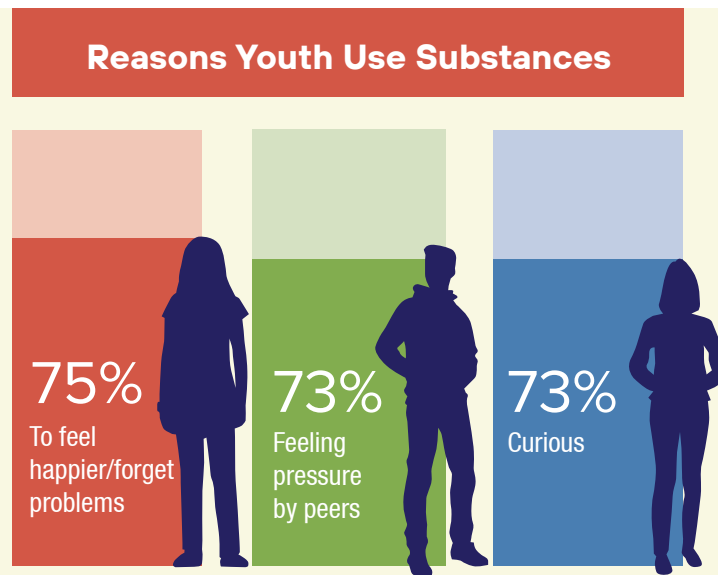
Over half of the group were high-school students, and the group skewed slightly female with 55% female participants.

Findings

The subsequent sections present anonymous findings from the listening sessions and the youth survey.

Exposure to and Reasons for Substance Use

To best approach the issue of substance use, it is important to understand the why behind what causes it, according to impacted youth. Among the youth surveyed, the top three reasons that people at their age use substances are 1) to feel happier/forget problems, 2) feeling pressured by peers, and 3) because they are curious.



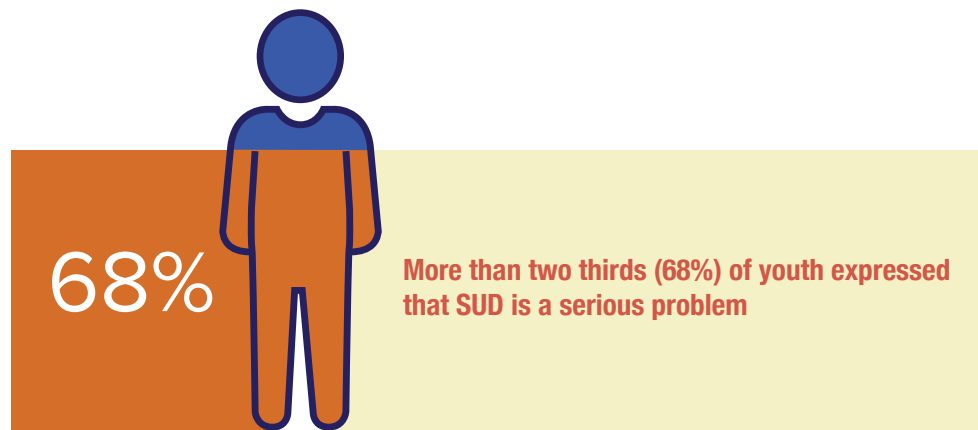
Reasons Youth Use Substances	% Respondents
To feel happier/forget problems	75%
Feeling pressured by peers	73%
Curious	73%
To relax/de-stress	70%
Friends use them	68%
To have fun	65%
Media/social media influence	63%
To feel grown	53%
Seen family using them	48%
Because they are bored	35%
Other (please specify):	5%
Not Sure	3%

Females were more likely than males to say that youth use substances to relax/de-stress and out of curiosity. Additionally, a little more than two times as many females as males said youth use to feel happier/forget their problems. This is an interesting variation in perspective across genders. This raises the question whether male youth are less likely to identify or acknowledge the correlation between mental health and substance use than female youth.

Youth's comments during listening session groups were in line with the survey findings. Youth shared anecdotes about break-ups or bullying, leading youth to experiment and use substances. They also reiterated the impact of social settings such as parties or use among family members, which can normalize substance use and make it difficult to avoid. Finally, they noted that mental health struggles can also lead to substance use.

How Big of a Problem is Substance Use?

More than two thirds (68%) of youth expressed that SUD is a serious problem. There is variance among youth regarding the gravity of the problem. Thirty-eight percent of youth expressed SUD is a very serious problem.



Access to Trusted Confidants

ESALY operates with the assumption that community, trusted relationships, mentorship, and the like are helpful in reducing the risk of developing SUD. Therefore, it is interesting and important to understand what sorts of relationships youth in the ESALY community have access to and how comfortable they feel discussing drugs and alcohol with certain people in their lives.

The majority, or 80%, of youth reported having an adult or young adult mentor with whom they could discuss SUD. Youth that had participated in ESALY had been paired with a Transitional Age Youth (TAY) mentor, which accounted for some of this high percentage.

Only about one in five youth (20%) reported feeling very comfortable talking with grandparents about substances, and this masks a notable gender gap. Females generally reported higher comfort than males talking about substances with almost everyone else (parents, siblings, young adults, teachers, and program staff). The pattern reverses with grandparents: 36% of males, compared to just 9% of females, said they were very comfortable talking with grandparents. This gap may reflect different roles and expectations for boys and girls in their relationships with elders. Grandsons may experience more relaxed, casual interactions with grandparents, while granddaughters may anticipate more judgment or concern about sensitive topics such as friends, social activities, and substance use, making them less likely to describe these conversations as "very comfortable."

At the same time, local data show that multigenerational living arrangements are especially common in immigrant communities.¹ These patterns align with what youth and community partners note that many Southeast Asian and Latinx youth in Orange County live in multigenerational households where grandparents are at home more often while parents are working. In this context, grandparents represent a potentially important, and often underutilized, prevention partner—particularly for boys, who already report higher comfort talking to grandparents about substances. Tailored strategies may be needed to help grandmothers and grandfathers connect more comfortably with girls on sensitive topics, so that grandparent engagement supports youth of all genders.

Comfort levels also vary by race and ethnicity and by relationship. Latinx youth report the highest comfort talking with parents, other adult family members (such as aunts and uncles), and older siblings about substances. Vietnamese youth feel most comfortable with young adult family members (such as cousins), followed by young adult non-family members and other adults like teachers, counselors, and youth program staff. Cambodian youth report their highest comfort with parents, followed by young adult peers and other trusted adults. Together with the multigenerational living patterns described above, these findings suggest that effective prevention strategies should engage both youth-preferred messengers (older siblings, young adults, and parents) and, where possible, grandparents, with attention to gender and cultural dynamics within each community.



	Very Uncomfortable	Uncomfortable	Somewhat uncomfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Comfortable	Very comfortable
Older siblings	3%	3%	16%	16%	32%	30%
Young adults (family members e.g. cousins)	3%	10%	18%	13%	40%	18%
Young adults (non-family members i.e. peers, friends)	3%	13%	18%	13%	30%	25%
Your parents	8%	8%	13%	20%	28%	25%
Other adults (family members, uncles, aunts)	3%	13%	15%	25%	35%	10%
Other adults (teachers, counselors, youth staff program staff)	10%	13%	10%	18%	33%	18%
Grandparents	18%	13%	13%	18%	20%	20%

¹ KidsData.org, Children in the Care of Grandparents, Orange County, 5-year estimates from the American Community Survey (Lucile Packard Foundation for Children’s Health, using data from the U.S. Census Bureau)



Orange County Second District Supervisor Vicente Sarmiento encourages youth to stay substance-free while sharing about his experience growing up in Santa Ana.

Access to Support Services and Safe Spaces

Access to support services and safe spaces is critical to youths' well-being and serves as a protective factor against SUD. Youth were asked whether they had access to extracurricular activities, safe spaces, youth friendly spaces, a sense of community, youth-friendly mental health services, leadership opportunities, and community advocacy. They could respond, yes, no, somewhat, or not sure. The most accessible services (reported by 74% or more youth) were: 1) leadership opportunities, 2) extracurricular activities, and 3) youth-friendly mental health. The services or opportunities that youth felt were least accessible were 1) a sense of community, 2) safe spaces, and 3) community advocacy.

Youth access to services	% Yes	Somewhat
Leadership Opportunities	78%	10%
Extracurricular activities	75%	13%
Youth-friendly Mental Health	74%	15%
Youth friendly spaces	73%	13%
A sense of community	65%	28%
Safe Spaces	63%	25%
Community Advocacy	48%	23%

Significant gender disparities emerged in awareness of available services. Male youth consistently reported higher uncertainty about service availability across all categories, with the biggest gender variance concerning community advocacy. Forty-seven percent of males said they were unsure about advocacy compared with only 14% of females — a 33 percentage point gap.²

Ethnic disparities also emerged in some areas of service access. Cambodian youth were 40% less likely than Latinx and Vietnamese youth to say community has access to extracurricular activities. Only 45% of Vietnamese youth expressed feeling that youth have access to safe spaces (30% lower than what was expressed by Latinx youth). However, across all race/ethnic groups, expanding access to community advocacy is an opportunity given that only 48% expressed having access currently.

² Gender and race/ethnicity analysis is not displayed in table form. The table above is in aggregate.



Policing and Discrimination

Given the historical context of the “War on Drugs”, ESALY engages youth in conversations about relationships between youth and law enforcement. The majority (58%) of youth expressed feeling that youth, in general, are at least somewhat targets of discriminatory policing: 33% said that yes, youth are targets, and 25% expressed they are somewhat targets. One-quarter expressed uncertainty about the relationship between youth in their community and law enforcement, while only 8% stated youth are not targets of discriminatory policing.

The proportion of Latinx youth who expressed that youth in their community were targets of discriminatory policing was highest out of the three race/ethnic groups represented; Fifty percent of Latinx youth said “yes” youth are targets of discriminatory policing, 28% of Cambodian youth said yes, and 18% of Vietnamese youth said yes.





High school youth leader shares advocacy experience with new youth participants.

Youth Empowerment and Youth Ideas for Change

Program Strengths and Recommendations

During the listening sessions, facilitators asked youth who had experienced ESALY what they liked most about the program, what they learned, and inquired about the effectiveness of ESALY, as well as what could be done differently to make the program more effective. Similarly, facilitators asked youth who had not yet experienced ESALY about their experience with other substance use prevention programs (e.g. school programs). They asked them what worked and what they liked, and what didn't work as well. Facilitators also asked the youth to envision a program they believe would be helpful, with the context that ESALY is a youth-driven program available to them. Below is a summary of the most common feedback from youth.

Group	What has worked	What could change	What have you learned
Previous ESALY experience New to ESALY	• Ice-breakers, interactive activities, role-playing, competitive games • Staff are supportive, funny, and open (youth feel safe and not judged) • Sense of friendship in the group • Presentations and speakers are good	• More interactive activities and discussion • More about the war on drugs, government's impact on community, mental health, and the scientific effects of drugs	• Causes of substance abuse • SUD effects, especially for those under 25 • Substance refusal skills • Harm reduction and supportive prevention strategies (open minded, listening, knowing we are not alone) • How to advocate
	• Content that is inspiring and shows stories of people overcoming addiction	• One group called for programs focused on supportive prevention and harm reduction. The other group called for discipline and restricting access (e.g., remove liquor stores). The latter group seemed to have been directly impacted by history of family SUD, which likely makes the issue more complex. • Guided meditation and stress reduction classes • Preference for zoom as it is easier with time constraints and travel	



The most resounding finding is that youth prefer interactive learning with games, quizzes, and discussion. They prefer harm reduction strategies to fear arousal strategies, and are open to learning more about complex topics.

In the survey, youth were asked what services and programs would best help them avoid substance use. The things they named most often were: 1) more mental health services, 2) more safe spaces for youth, and 3) more after-school programs. Although 74% of youth said youth-friendly mental health services are available to them, many still want more of this support. Fewer youth (63%) said they have access to safe spaces, and 73% said there is a need for more safe spaces for youth.

The disconnect between perceived accessibility and demand for more services suggests that:

- Services may be technically available but inaccessible in practice (wait times, location, cost)
- Quality or cultural responsiveness may not be adequate
- Stigma may prevent full utilization
- Youth may be aware services exist but not know how to access them

What Services Support Against Youth SUD	Percent Respondents
More mental health services	83%
More safe spaces for youth	73%
More after-school programs	65%
Provide opportunities for advocacy	60%
More services for youth	58%
Provide opportunities for leadership	58%
Better advertising of existing services	53%
Provide opportunities for mentorship	53%
Restorative justice activities	33%
Don't know	5%

Recruitment Ideas

Youth were invited to share ideas for increasing participation in ESALY. Those who had taken part in ESALY were enthusiastic and offered many outreach suggestions, including advertising at schools, libraries, parks and other open spaces, local shops, and online. Many youth were forthcoming that they initially attended for the incentives (gift cards) or because a family member required them to go. However, they chose to keep coming back for the relationships with staff and peers, the learning, and the sense of empowerment they gained. They are ready to support social media outreach as well. On the other hand, those who had not yet experienced ESALY were divided: 50% eager to participate and 50% uncertain due to time constraints. However, if they attend, their experience will likely be similar to those who have experienced ESALY — coming for the incentives but staying because it is a safe space for learning, community, and empowerment.



ESALY's Policy Systems and Environmental Change (PSE) Goals

Given that ESALY is a program with a goal of advancing youth wellness not only through education and mentorship, but also through youth-led PSE, TCF asked youth what actions they believe government should take to prevent SUD. The top three actions they identified were to 1) invest in youth programs (75%), 2) make therapy and support groups more available (70%), and 3) include youth voices in government decision making through specific and meaningful youth engagement sessions (68%).

Actions Government Should Take	Percent Respondents
Invest in youth programs	75%
Make therapy and support groups more available	70%
Include youth voices in government decision making through specific and meaningful youth engagement sessions	68%
Establish youth-led advisory commissions	43%
Eliminate/reduce dispensaries	43%
Work with police to respect youth more	30%
Other (please specify):	5%

According to the survey, 90% of youth indicated that they are at least slightly interested in advocacy, while 30% said they are very or extremely interested. That thirty percent will likely lead the way, and it may take more effort and exposure to activate the other 60%.

The listening sessions revealed even more details about youth's take on advocacy. Youth who had already experienced ESALY shared that ESALY has taught them to advocate. One group, which is also involved in Resilience Orange County's CHAMOY group, indicated that ESALY is an important program among others that teach youth to advocate. Youth from this group indicated a desire to advocate at the school district level. They specifically had many ideas to take advocacy efforts to social media, to tell their advocacy stories, and to invite others to participate. Several expressed readiness to speak at a public meeting (i.e., County's Board of Supervisors, City Council). For those youth who had not yet experienced ESALY, they felt that advocacy — particularly for communities of color, whose voices are often less heard and who face racial discrimination — is worthwhile. Youth in this group expressed greater willingness to advocate for others than for themselves.

Going Forward

These listening sessions and survey provide the TCF team, their partners, and the sector with a deeper understanding of key factors related to the future of ESALY, youth perspectives, and youth advocacy. Youth come to ESALY with valuable life experience and an understanding of what leads to substance use and what can prevent it. Through ESALY, they learn more about the effects of substance use and how to prevent addiction and related harm. They also learn how to advocate for systems that better support them and their communities.

In the next year of ESALY, the TCF team and their partners have the opportunity to use this information to make strategic adjustments to their teaching and mentoring approach as well as their advocacy efforts, in direct response to needs, preferences, and trends that emerged from this listening session and survey process. Some such adjustments are below.



1. Enhance Interactive Learning

- Integrate more activities and discussions as requested by youth
- Develop game-based learning modules for complex topics



2. Expand Content Areas (Q1-Q2 2025)

- Add curriculum on the war on drugs and policy impacts
- Include more mental health and scientific content
- Invite expert speakers on requested topics



3. Strengthen Youth Advocacy

- Support youth presentations at school board meetings
- Create social media advocacy training



4. Improve Accessibility

- Offer hybrid participation options (in-person and Zoom)
- Expand outreach through schools, libraries, and social media



5. Address Cultural and Community Need

- Develop culturally-specific support strategies for different ethnic groups
- Address discriminatory policing concerns in program content

With calls for more activities and discussions, new approaches might be integrated. Similarly, with a desire to learn more about the war on drugs, the impact of policy on community, and mental health, it may be possible to incorporate new speakers or learning experiences. With youth expressing interest in advocating at the school board level, staff should consider facilitating these opportunities. Finally, as youth have expressed concrete ideas for in-person and virtual outreach and education, ESALY's reach may soon be greater than ever.