

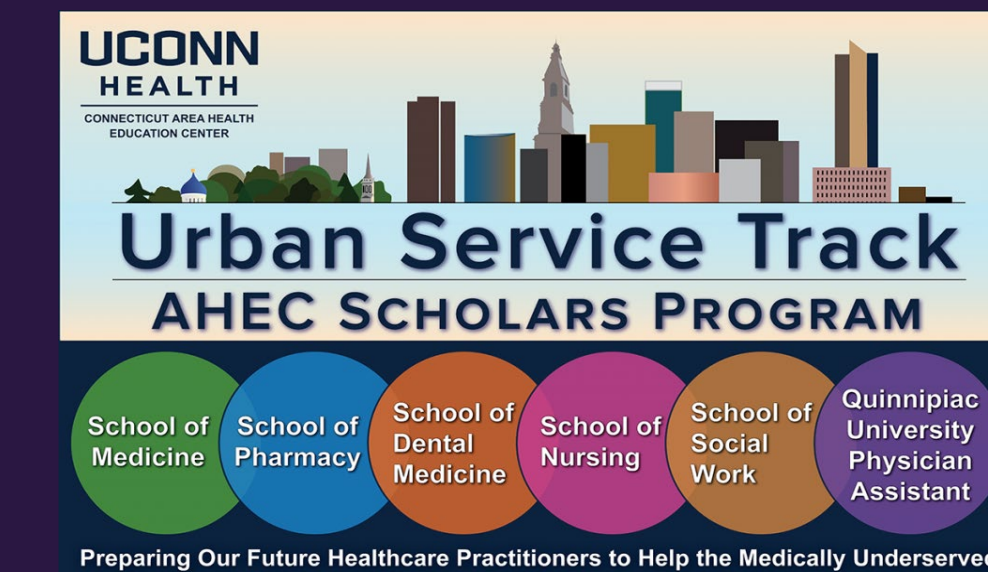
Adolescent Substance Use: Prevention and Harm Reduction



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Background

- 10 million U.S. adolescents and young adults meet the criteria for substance use disorder (SUD), and the majority are untreated.¹
- There was a 30% increase in drug use nationally among 8th graders between 2016 and 2020, and 36.8% of high school seniors have misused a drug at least once in their life.²
- White, Latinx, and Black adolescents show similar rates of substance use with variations in the types of substances more commonly used.¹
- Historically, adolescent males are at an increased risk of SUD compared to females. However, the gender gap has narrowed in recent years.³
- Teenagers in Connecticut are 17.2% more likely to have used drugs in the last month than the average American teen.²

Objectives

- Build knowledge of adolescent substance use harm reduction to understand morbidity and mortality.
- Increase awareness of short- and long-term impacts of vaping, marijuana, and other substances.
- Promote prevention strategies and community resources for at-risk adolescents.
- Learn how to use nonjudgmental communication when discussing substance use with adolescents.

Methods

MEETING 1	MEETING 2	MEETING 3	MEETING 4	MEETING 5	MEETING 6
Project Foundations	Understanding Teen Substance Use	Guest Speaker: Audrey Jean-Guillaume	Guest Speaker: Woodrow Tinsley	Guest Speakers: Pam Win & Jasmine Decossard	Naloxone/Stop the Bleeding Training
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assigned group roles Established expectations Brainstormed project topics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Watched TEDx talks Discussed harm-reduction strategies Trauma-informed communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UConn Substance Use Prevention Program Rising cannabis use among students Overdose concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> East Hartford HS police officer perspective Trends in vaping & cannabis Communication strategies with teens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overdose identification Harm-reduction strategies Peer health education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In-person naloxone training Overdose recognition Learned techniques to stop bleeding

Results



Figure 1: Brief Guide to Navigating Harm Reduction with Teens Pamphlet

- Self-reflections and surveys were sent out after IG meetings. Participant surveys showed an increase in confidence after Naloxone and Stop the Bleeding Training (Figure 2).

- Guest speakers sparked meaningful reflection on caring for adolescents, emphasizing nonjudgmental messaging like “Your safety is the priority” (Figure 3).
- Harm-reduction training increased confidence in both emergency interventions (e.g., naloxone, bleeding response) and communicating with high-risk teens.
- Key communication strategies were summarized in a pamphlet (Figure 1) to support safer, more effective conversations with adolescents.

Make the next choice
a safer choice

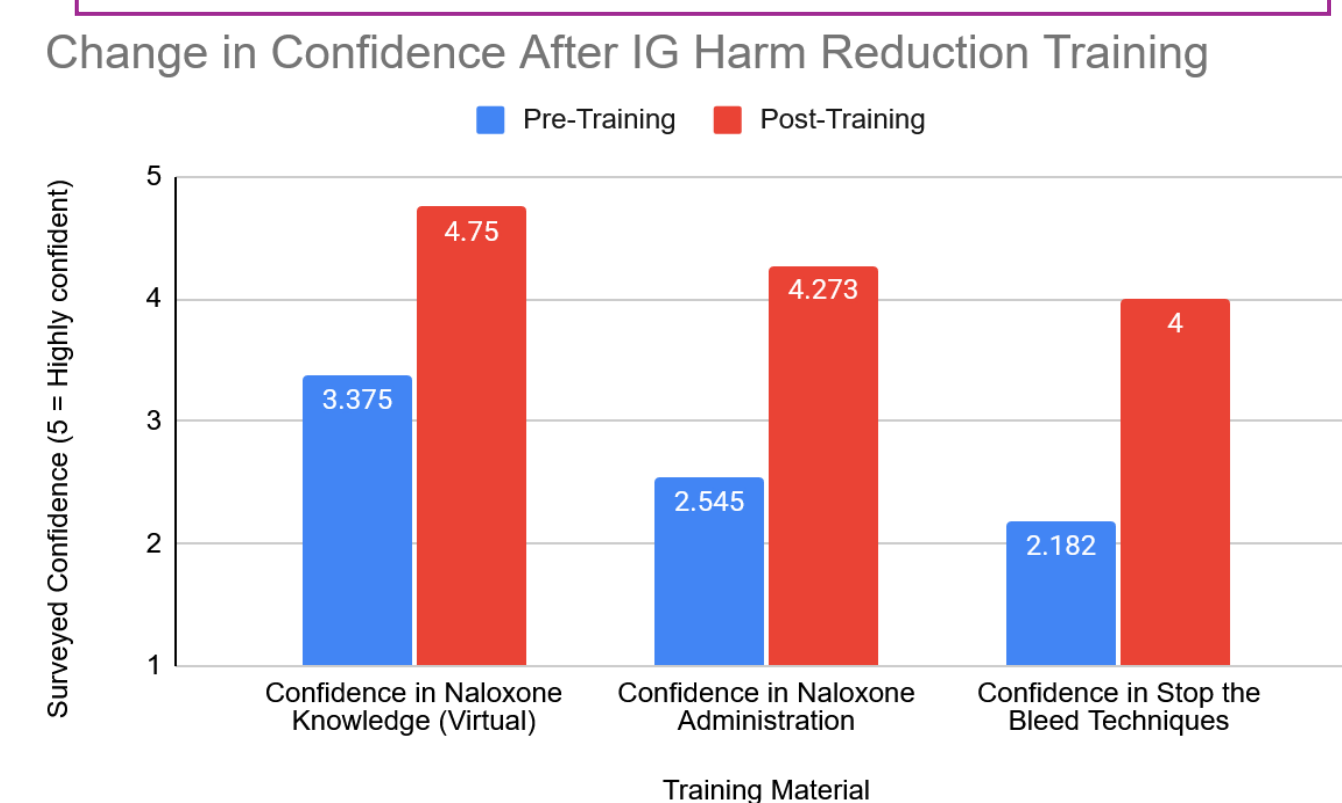


Figure 2: Self-Assessed Change by Adolescent IG Participants

Meeting Topic	Key Takeaways:
TEDx Videos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fear-based and “just say no” approaches are ineffective; interactive, skill-based education is more effective Vaping surge driven by perceived low harm, social media, and misinformation; adolescence is a vulnerable neurodevelopmental period Substance use is closely linked to mental health and stigma
Guest speaker from UConn Substance Use Prevention Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> College transition periods shows an increase in alcohol-related emergency transports and unintentional teen overdoses Peer health education uses motivational interviewing, nonjudgmental support, and resource linkage to promote safer choices Campus harm reduction includes naloxone training, fentanyl test strips, BAC cards, and targeted outreach to reduce overdose risk
School Resource Officer (SRO) guest speaker on adolescent safety, substance trends, and trauma-informed policing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship-based, trauma-informed approaches (trust, rapport, dignity, reduced power distance) improves youth engagement and prevention Vaping and marijuana (esp. edibles) are most common; early, interactive education needed SROs support through mentorship, education, and resource connection—not punishment
Naloxone and Substance Use Emergency Training with SHAW Peer Health Educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trained to recognize/respond to overdoses (alcohol, cannabis, stimulants, opioids) using bystander intervention and recovery position Naloxone basics: mechanism, dosing, timing, and “Lay–Spray–Stay” Harm reduction: fentanyl awareness, don’t use alone, test substances, access naloxone/resources
In-person UConn Simulation Center event on Naloxone Administration and Official Stop the Bleed Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In a medical crisis, assign roles, communicate clearly, prioritize patient-centered care, and ensure scene safety to improve outcomes When children are present: move them to safety, communicate age-appropriately, monitor them, and involve outside support

Figure 3: Key takeaways for each of the monthly IG meetings based on survey responses from group members

Discussion

- **Impact:** This monthly interdisciplinary group strengthened collaboration and understanding of adolescent substance use. Community partners enriched harm-reduction discussions, while guest speakers highlighted key legal, educational, and social barriers, informing a patient-centered infographic.
- **Reflection/Implementation:** Insights were compiled into a pamphlet (Figure 1) with Connecticut resources and guidance for adolescent conversations: stay open-minded, build rapport, prioritize risk reduction, and encourage preparedness.
- **Limitations:** Scheduling across six disciplines was challenging, and resource variability reflected ongoing organizational and funding changes.

Conclusion

1. **Standardize screening and early intervention.**
 - Implement routine screenings in all adolescents encountered in a healthcare setting.
2. **Provide education about substance use and its effects to adolescents.**
 - Provide consistent, nonjudgmental education on overdose prevention, safer use, and naloxone access.
3. **Replicate this project in changing funding environments.**
 - Use low-cost, sustainable strategies such as peer-led education and flexible community partnerships.
4. **Strengthen community partnerships.**
 - Learn helpful resources to support at-risk youths.
 - Build upon foundational projects and existing networks, particularly in the face of evolving funding/political landscapes.

References

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