

Briefing Paper #2:

The (Nearly) Forgotten Drugs: Tobacco, Alcohol & Cannabis

An Attention Crisis?

The opioid crisis has garnered a lot of attention in our community, and for good reason. Overdose deaths from heroin and prescription painkillers have skyrocketed in recent years,¹ with tragic consequences for families and communities.

But we in Dutchess County can fall into a trap of narrowing our attention to this one group of drugs, without paying similar attention to much more socially acceptable drugs which also cause a great deal of harm. Specifically, there are three drugs which are receiving far too little focus relative to their harm or potential harm. Two of these drugs (tobacco and alcohol) are legal and are among the leading underlying causes of death in NYS – far surpassing drug overdose.² The third, cannabis, is legal for medical use in NYS and is becoming legal for recreational purposes in an increasing number of other states.³

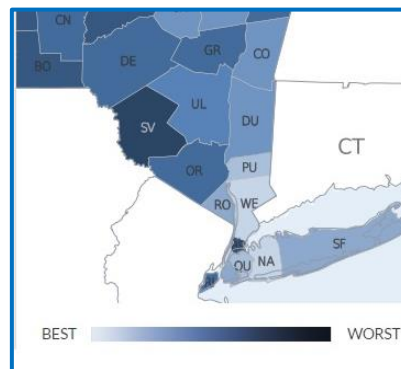
Tobacco

Cigarette smoking is the leading cause of preventable disease and death in the United States, responsible for more than 480,000 deaths every year, or 1 of every 5 deaths.⁴

In NYS, the adult smoking rate fell back down to 14.2% in 2016, after climbing to 15.2% in 2015.⁵ While the long-term trend is positive, progress has slowed considerably.

Moreover, there have actually been last year **increases** in smoking rates in NYS the past year among some racial/ethnic groups (e.g., African Americans) and age groups (e.g., adults 45-54).⁶ Given the aggressive tactics of the tobacco industry –including new product development⁷ and public relations strategies⁸ - we can't afford to be complacent about tobacco control policy.

About 15% of Dutchess County adults smoked cigarettes in 2015, placing it in the lower (healthier) third of NYS counties.⁹



Adult smoking rates among Dutchess and surrounding counties, 2015

Source: County Health Rankings

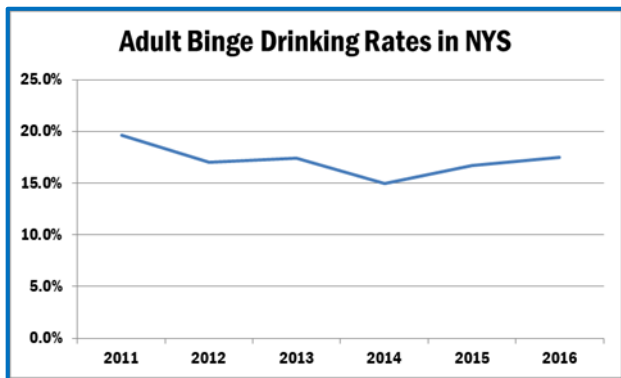
Alcohol

Globally, alcohol consumption is the leading cause of death, disease, and disability for young adults aged 15-49, according to recently released 2016 data from the Global Burden of Disease study.¹⁰ In the U.S, *JAMA Psychiatry* has reported growing rates of heavy alcohol use, with disproportionate impacts among women and people of color.¹¹

The Council on Addiction Prevention & Education of Dutchess County, Inc. (CAPE) delivers community-centered prevention services for the citizens of Dutchess County and neighboring areas

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Recent progress in adult binge drinking in NYS has reversed, with rates increasing again and approaching the high levels of 2011.¹²



Adult binge drinking (1 or more binge drinking episodes in the last month. Binge = 4+ drinks for a women, 5+ drinks for a man)
Source: CDC Behavioral Risk Factor System (BRFSS)

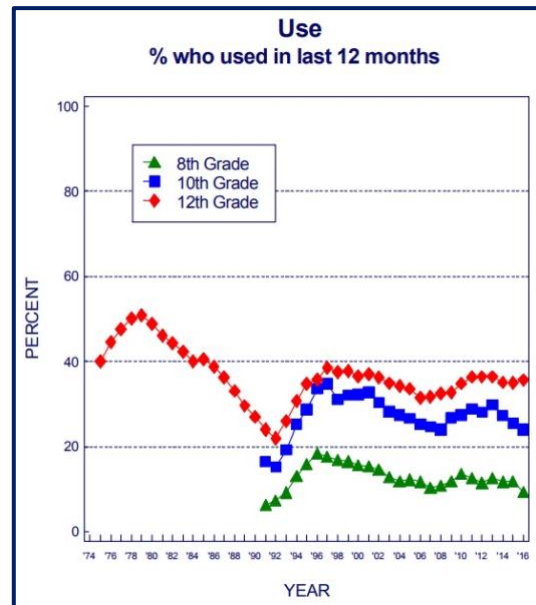
In addition, research continues to build regarding the causal link between alcohol consumption and several forms of cancer, including those of the head and neck, liver, female breast, stomach, and colorectum.¹³ The risks for some of these cancers are elevated even at otherwise light to moderate levels of alcohol consumption.¹⁴ According to the American Institute for Cancer Research, risk for alcohol-related breast cancer increases with just one drink a day.¹⁵

The Dutchess County rate for adult excessive drinking (a measure combining binge and heavy drinking) was 19% in in 2015, slightly above the NYS overall rate of 18%.¹⁶

Cannabis

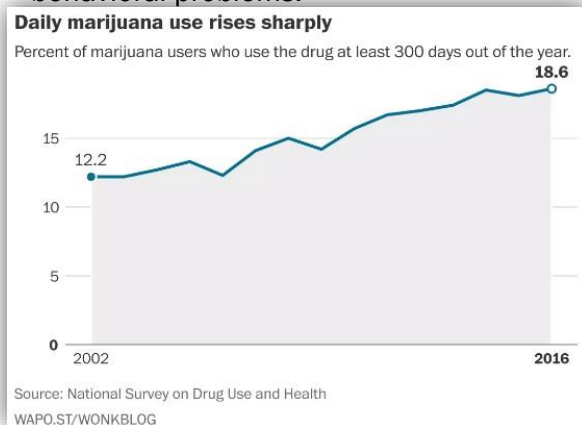
While cannabis is undoubtedly less harmful than alcohol or so-called “hard” drugs,¹⁷ it is not completely harmless – as many young people now believe.¹⁸ The best research suggests that cannabis use – and especially heavy use - can lead to a variety of harms, including injuries from motor vehicle crashes,¹⁹ pulmonary problems,²⁰ and increased risk of serious mental illness.²¹

Nationally, underage cannabis use has fallen somewhat in the last few years among 8th and 10th graders, while remaining about the same among 12th graders, per Monitoring the Future survey data.²² All grades are currently experiencing higher rates of usage than the lows of the early 1990s, but lower than the peaks of 1996-1997.



Past year cannabis use among youth.
Source: The Monitoring the Future study, the University of Michigan

A troubling trend among adults is the rise of daily marijuana use, which has risen by about 50% since 2002.²³ Such use may be linked to psychological dependence and related behavioral problems.²⁴



Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health
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Toward a More Coherent Approach

A more coherent and comprehensive approach to public health and addiction in Dutchess County would:

1. **Acknowledge** that any product or service with high addictive potential (including opioids, tobacco, alcohol, cannabis, other drugs, and gambling) needs to be treated specially, and shouldn't be lumped in with less harmful, non-addictive products and services. Public policies need to reflect these distinctions.
 2. **Recognize** that tobacco and alcohol - along with poor diet and lack of physical activity - are the prime drivers of chronic diseases like heart disease, stroke, lung disease, cancer, and diabetes. Defeating the scourge of chronic disease requires that we embrace **prevention** strategies as well as clinical interventions.
 3. **Mobilize** our community to embrace **prevention** as the best strategy to protect public health and cut costs for public agencies. Comprehensive prevention strategies - which combine public policies, education, and targeted interventions - are the most effective and efficient way to save lives and resources.
- Toward that end, CAPE offers volunteer opportunities for community coalitions working to prevent tobacco use, underage drinking, and other drug use.

Northern Dutchess Community Coalition
<https://www.facebook.com/NorthernDutchessCommunityCoalition/>

Southern Dutchess Community Coalition
<http://capedc.org/southern-dutchess-coalition/>

Eastern Dutchess Community Coalition
<https://www.endoverdose.com/>

Together, we can make Dutchess County the healthiest place in New York State.

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- 6 *ibid.*
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