



Piedmont Triad Regional Council and Surry County Office of Substance Abuse Recovery: Focus Group Report

SUMMARY

Piedmont Triad Regional Council (PTRC), Surry County Office of Substance Abuse Recovery (SCOSAR) and its partners conducted seven focus groups with 56 youth during October 2022. Youth shared their perspectives on mental and physical health needs in their communities, as well as what might be done to improve these moving forward. The focus groups occurred at seven schools in Surry County, NC: three middle schools, three high schools, and one community college.

The following report, compiled by C.A.R.E Consulting Group, provides a demographic breakdown of participants followed by a summary of themes and quotes from each of the topic areas the youth were asked about.

DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN

Age

The 56 focus group participants ranged in age from 11 years old to “19 years or older.” The majority (61%) were 12-15 years old, as displayed in the following table:

11	12-13	14-15	16-17	18+
7.1%	26.8%	33.9%	16.1%	16.1%

Race & Ethnicity

Race: A majority (75%) of respondents identified as White/Caucasian, followed by “more than one race” (5.4%), Black/African American (1.8%), and Asian/Asian American (1.8%). 16.1% declined to answer.

Ethnicity: 23.2% of respondents identified as Hispanic or Latino/a/x. 53.6% said they were Non-Hispanic/Latino/a/x, 12.5% said “I don’t know.” 10.7% declined to answer.

Gender

50% of respondents identified as female, while 46.4% said male, 1.8% said transgender, and 1.8% declined to answer.

REPORT

Status of Youth Mental Health in the Community

1. When you think about your community, how would you describe its general mental health?

Themes:

- Many students described basically positive mental health in their communities, at least among what's "visible" and "public"
 - some acknowledged there could be more going on in private
- Many said they just don't hear much about mental health in their community
- Older participants described higher levels of community mental health problems (especially depression and anxiety)
 - identified contributors to those problems: the pandemic, family history of mental health issues, school-related stress, and stigma

Quotes:

- "I feel like mostly people here are happy, but then again people try to hide it and you don't always know ...what they're feeling like outside of public spaces."
- "I feel like most of my peers feel pretty good, but I know that they all struggle sometimes with their own problems and can feel sad at times."
- "...the older you get, the more you understand; the more you understand, the more stress."
- "When you're in elementary school, basically you have good mental health, but when you get into middle school...it just feels like it's going all downhill. But like when you get older it'll get better. So technically it's kind of like a bumpy road."
- "I definitely think something about this generation wants people to hide their emotions more and not express how they're feeling. I feel like they haven't had the time to understand how they feel yet."
- "I think it's been going downhill in the recent years just because of what's all going on in the world and you know, the pandemic and everything is putting everybody down."
- "I think mental health is really just like, it's not what it needs to be here...It's not talked about...it's just not put into the right perspective cuz... like if you try to talk about your mental health, it's like they just set you aside."

2. Do you see youth engaging in risky behaviors?

Themes:

- Younger respondents most commonly mentioned witnessing vaping, followed by driving too fast, drinking, smoking weed, "cussing"
 - sometimes mentioned "other drugs" but said they didn't know what type
- Reasons for vaping: stress, peer pressure, wanting to look "cool," and to cope with trauma/difficulties
- Places people vape: on the bus, in bathrooms, out in the community (less at school)
- Older respondents more often mentioned witnessing drinking alcohol, smoking weed, and drug use, though vaping also still prevalent

Quotes:

- "When you get older, ... you try to be more cool...and you make more bad decisions and start vaping. Some people might start drinking, some are partying, taking pills or drugs."

- “[Risk behaviors] could be used to cope or to try and drown it out...alcohol, if it's available to them, they're not gonna stop themselves from using it in some situations.”
- “I think vaping and drugs and all that [are common] just because kids wanna meet society's expectations.”
- “I don't think at our school there's a lot of substance abuse because where we're provided with freedom, people don't really want to break rules...So I don't see it as an issue here.”

Mental Health Needs of Community

3. What do you feel are the mental health needs of youth in your community?

Themes:

- Struggles with parents, between parents, stress at school, and “feeling left out”/ loneliness mentioned as contributors to mental health issues among youth
 - things that can help mental health: family, encouragement, pets, making friends
 - ways to ameliorate school stress: more time to complete assignments, lower adults’ expectations/emphasis on good grades, teachers should “listen more” and improve relationships with students, reduce turnover among teachers, limit the # of college classes students can take per semester
- Respondents focused on the need for more recreational activities, organized hobbies
 - positive distractions (even social media, if used in the right way)
 - improved safety/upkeep in recreational areas that already exist
- Many youth have an unmet need for “someone to talk to” (could be a therapist, peer support, group counseling, or hotline) and more education re: drugs and mental health
 - should have virtual options for those who face barriers
 - parents can be an impediment to getting mental health services
- suggested “mental health days,” where everyone gets time to focus on their mental health instead of just certain individuals who might then feel stigma

Quotes:

- “A lot of people don't really like talking to people about their problems. They'd rather do something to get it off their mind or something...If I'm upset, I go outside. Play sports cuz I'm an athlete, but not just sports. Like different activities all around.”
- “Most kids need extra emotional support because everybody's got something going on that most people don't know about so that extra support can really help them.”
- “I think everybody has some type of struggle with their mental health to some degree, ...some worse than others but, I think they do have a hard time finding somebody to talk to about it...sometimes part of the problem would be their parents. Their parents are like oh there's nothing wrong with you, you don't need to like talk to anybody.”

Specific Programs/Resources Needed in Community

4. Programs/resources currently in your community that support youth mental health?

Themes:

- Younger students mentioned specific classes re: drugs and alcohol

- Sports, exercise, and recreation were commonly endorsed, regardless of age group
 - pools, skating rinks, gyms (i.e., “ProHealth,” “Starlight,” “Northern Wellness”)
 - parks (i.e., Dobson Park and “The Greenway”)
 - community centers (i.e., “Reaves”) and 4-H club
- Occasionally mentioned:
 - places that provide therapy (i.e., “Daymark,” “the Shepherd’s House”)
 - volunteering opportunities and non-judgmental places (i.e., “Pride Time”)
 - after-school homework help (i.e., “Twilight School”)

Quotes:

- “I think anything that you can get for a cheap price that’s not hard to get to...Like Starlight Skate Center. It’s a good place...it’s a fun time. You can go and meet new friends.”
- “You can go to the park, meet new friends and just hang out and get stress off your mind.”
- “I know for me personally volunteering is a big way to just help with my mental health because...I volunteer at certain medical ministries...as a pharmacy technician and just knowing that like I have it so much better than so many other individuals just helps me realize like I’m okay... and just helping others just gives you a positive feeling.”
- “4- H...was really nice because it was outside the school system. It allowed me to make friends outside and it had all the recreational activities you could ask for. Kids could really have an outlet... a place where they could make friends without worrying about bullying or try new activities that you don’t get to try in school as much...just having more diverse activities.”

5. Any programs or resources missing in your community that would support youth mental health?

Themes:

- Most commonly mentioned:
 - increase availability of therapists/counselors in the local area and schools
 - have “teachers that care” instead of just providing referrals to therapists
 - an after-school program kids could sign up for without parental permission
 - behavioral experts to come teach kids to have better behavior, stop bullying, improve mental health, etc.
 - emotional support groups, therapy groups, youth/peer groups, coping groups, “mental health club”
 - suggestions for these to be online, anonymous, free
- More limited endorsement of:
 - “mental health days,” animal companions
 - education about medication, especially anxiety medication
 - programs provided in elementary school that are no longer provided (e.g. DARE)
 - a time management/organization/stress-reduction class
 - tutoring that helps with concentration/motivation instead of schoolwork itself
 - art schools/groups, more age-appropriate/fun recreational opportunities
 - including places near schools – like libraries, gyms – that could be open and available after school, even to kids not enrolled in organized sports
 - summer camps that have mental health counselors
 - holding inclusive focus groups on ways students can improve the school

Quotes:

- "...just having someone listen to you cuz it really takes some stress off of you, you can relax better and focus a little more when you open up yourself to other people."
- "I think a lot of students don't take advantage of all the opportunities...in the community because they may see they don't fit in or they just don't wanna put in the effort."
- "I think there needs to be more resources for kids our age. Like there's all kinds of ...everything for little kids. But then...our age is just left to be at home all day or to do nothing. And I think that's a big problem on mental health; you're just stuck at home not doing anything. Especially if you have social awkwardness or a lot of siblings..."

How Adults in the Community can Better Support Youth Mental Health

6. How can adults in your community (parents, teachers, coaches) support youth mental health?

Themes:

- Adults should "listen more" to youth, check in more, recognize when youth are struggling, be more understanding, less critical/judgmental, have more realistic expectations, make more attempts to talk to youth, and express "that they're there if you need someone."
 - some parents dismiss when their kids bring up mental health issues or minimize the stress their kids raise by comparing it with their own (adult) stressors
 - adults should acknowledge when youth are having mental health issues and help them seek services (i.e., therapy)
- Adults should increase attention to behavior problems, including parents providing more discipline and explanations (why a discipline is happening) but also provide "second chances" before handing out severe consequences (like expulsion or suspension)
- Adults should handle bullying in more appropriate (and private) ways
- School administrators should listen to students' reasons for wanting certain changes

Quotes:

- "Some people...might seem fine, but they're going through something. So I feel like if they were...to check up on them every now and then, I feel like it would help."
- "I feel like most parents and adults now they're...just kind of watching it all happen. If they actually like step up for the youth then it'll really help."
- "I feel like it's good to...push people to get better but to a certain extent like you can't expect perfection ... whenever someone makes a mistake people just put 'em down instead of saying like they can get better from it."
- "...the support isn't there and I feel like I can't trust a lot of people around here and the teachers just aren't involved. So it's hard to talk to somebody that you don't trust."
- "I think a lot of parents, ... I've noticed a trend in mainly millennials that they don't discipline their kids the right way and...they just brush it under the rug...if I'm doing something that's wrong, I need to be helped to show that it's wrong."
- "[Parents] should just check up on you a lot more and see how you're doing. Kids won't really... go up to their parents say, 'Hey, I have this problem.' I feel like it's for the parent to ask them first."
- "Parents can be very strict...they don't realize how stressful school can really be. So I would recommend for them to start listening to their kids more instead of...brushing it off all the time"
- "...the emotional support part, the teachers, I feel like they're not as involved and it...feels like they don't really care to listen and it's kind of hard if you feel like you don't have support around you."

- “A lot of parents just look at it as like, ‘oh, you’re not depressed. Why would you be depressed? You have everything you need,’ ... there’s a lot of things that affect your mental health like bullying or just stress in general. And that could be dealt with more.”
- “A lot of parents were raised very traditionally so all of this mental health stuff doesn’t really phase them because... in their time they cope differently than we do. You’re just telling us suck it up and it’s kind of difficult, you know...Some parents are like, ‘no they’re fine...They’re just being a little baby’.”

Youth Physical Health in the Community

7. How would you describe most youth’s physical health in your community?

Themes:

- Younger students described community physical health as good, average, “pretty healthy”
- Older students described it somewhat worse overall
 - described a “split” between people who have been educated on health and fitness principles (either at home or at school) and those who haven’t
- Exercise/fitness levels tend to be higher than “eating right” since many students are involved in physical activities but food options at schools and in neighborhoods are poor/unhealthy.
- Technology/smartphones and the pandemic have caused a decline in physical activity
 - the internet is “addicting” and can give misinformation about health
- Contributors to many students’ poor health: P.E. no longer required so most kids don’t take it, some kids can’t or don’t avail themselves of the free/reduced lunch program

Quotes:

- “I don’t think the eating’s great, but the activity is pretty good to make up for it.”
- “technology really affects our way because back maybe like 30 years ago people were outside playing, they had things to do, they make things to do and they had a lot of fun. But now people just scroll on their phones all day, they don’t really...have the option to go outside and do things.”
- “I think after the pandemic there’s been a huge decline in uh, physical health. I feel like everybody kind of got lazy and started eating wrong and got in bad habits and really right now the only ones who are trying to stay in shape [are] athletes and our school lunches don’t provide enough options.”

Physical Health Needs of Community

8. What do you feel are the physical health needs of youth in your community?

Themes:

- Most common response: health/nutrition education or current health class offerings are few and far between, optional, not very informative; information is often out of date/out of touch
 - not enough information about processed foods/damage it causes
 - parents also don’t know/don’t teach youth about nutrition
- Increase available, affordable healthy food (fast/junk food is easily accessible and cheap)
- More availability/advertising/promotion of fitness/activity opportunities
 - bring back “power lunch” or “smart lunch,” where students had one full hour for activities including physical activities (basketball, intramurals, etc.)
 - life coaching, including “what to eat and how to be active”

- an “organized athletic program that’s free for everybody”
- Negative self-image; kids who struggle w/ sports too “embarrassed” to try harder
 - some people just focus on body image, not underlying health status

Quotes:

- “You can’t expect somebody to know when they’re not taught.”
- “Not everybody wants to spend a bunch of money on healthy food. They start buying the...lower quality or processed food and that's where health problems come into play.”
- “I feel like recently it's been going downhill cause I feel like physical education...isn't really stressed enough...having that knowledge when you're young, it'll stick with you the rest of your life. So eventually, if you get older and something happens, you always have that knowledge to better yourself.”
- “I feel like most people are pretty good about exercising and stuff but even the best athletes don't eat good at all. Like they skip meals and then when they eat it's all junk food and stuff like that. And I feel like we need more like education on how to eat healthy and also better choices to eat.”
- “Just having more programs in the school that could teach kids the basics. You know, ... hand eye coordination and things like that so people aren't being left behind...maybe making P.E. a little more diverse. Having different activities that kids can learn through that activity versus just doing P.E. cause I did not like P.E.”

Specific Programs/Resources Needed in Community

9. Any programs/resources in your community that support youth physical health?

Themes:

- Most commonly mentioned: the gym, the park, school, the doctor, pharmacies
 - BUT: some parks/public gyms feel “creepy” and unsafe for youth
- Identified specific places: Reeves Community Center, Star White Skate Center; Planet Fitness, Fisher River, Armfield Center, softball training places, Pro-Health
 - BUT: too expensive, transportation can be an issue, not age-appropriate, wide open (not private enough for those who are self-conscious)
- School sports teams are helpful for some
 - BUT: don’t fit everyone’s schedules (especially students taking some college classes) and many want to avoid the stress coaches might put on them
- The county has seasonal sports (i.e., soccer in fall) BUT it’s only for younger kids
- P.E. exists BUT is often only available to certain students (e.g., just freshmen)
- Some schools have open gym and facilities available to students outside organized sports
 - BUT they should advertise it because most students aren’t aware they have access

Quotes:

- “You can barely go anywhere by yourself anymore. Especially Riverside Park is notoriously known for being just really dangerous for women and creepy.”
- “I play softball here and travel ball and everything, so I know a lot of the resources of places. I could name off a bunch of 'em, but they are so expensive. I've been to some of 'em, but you can only go once because it's like ...half your paycheck just to go.”

10. Any programs/resources missing in your community that would support physical health?

Themes:

- Most common request was for fitness center/facilities (free or sliding scale)
 - more physical activity opportunities available during school hours
 - field trips that incorporate physical activity, P.E. more widely available
 - try to get a sponsor since local community doesn't have enough money
 - open weight room/gym, "walk & talk" groups for after school and during summer
- Expanded parks, with basketball courts and other activities for older youth
 - more equipment for smaller children who get hurt on the bigger playgrounds
 - more art/installations to attract people and make them engage
- New community health promotion activities:
 - community transportation to access available places
 - education and "advertisement" for healthy opportunities
 - life skills class to teach about nutrition, how to cope with stress, fitness, etc.
 - more access to hiking trails and pools for competitive swim
 - better accessibility for people in wheelchairs (sidewalks, pathways, activities)
- To improve nutrition:
 - community garden to grow vegetables
 - grocery stores for affordable vegetables, high-protein, and healthy foods
 - nutrition support program: schools give healthy food to parents who can't afford it

Quotes:

- "A lot of kids after school, they want to like play either soccer or basketball but they're not allowed cuz either the goals are locked and they're not in the sport and it messes with a lot of kids. Cuz [for] some, sport is their passion, but they may not be part of the team."
- "You gotta have advertisement for it. Cause a lot of the people around here only hear stuff from word of mouth. They don't ever read it or see it on TV or hear it on the radio."

How Adults in the Community can Better Support Youth Physical Health

11. What can adults in your community do to help support youth physical health?

Themes:

- Adults should provide more encouragement for physical activity, help kids sign up for activities, and provide more transportation to places where they can be active
 - have teachers/other staff supervise open gym/basketball/volleyball after school
 - they could get driver's license that allows them to drive kids home after
 - focus more on health instead of standardized tests and getting into college
 - do fundraisers to expand parks & opportunities for activity, healthier school food
 - create health centers and trainings for kids (and adults) to learn about nutrition
 - health content should be provided more often than just one unit in P.E.
 - create "motivational partner" system (personal trainer/mentorship program)
- Parents should:
 - increase awareness about what their kids are eating, set a good example to follow
 - ask kids what healthy foods they'd like to eat

- make a schedule for going to the gym together, work out, or walk together
- School admins should:
 - limit the number of college classes high schoolers can take, to free their schedule up for physical activity
 - provide better food options at lunch; involve parents & students in those decisions
- Coaches/PE teachers should:
 - give more individualized attention to students' interests and needs (not force everyone to learn and get tested on the same thing), make activities more diverse
 - have to meet basic qualifications, have knowledge of the sports they teach as well as nutrition and fitness and how to motivate youth without insulting them
- Doctors should do more thorough checkups and education with youth; not "just talk."

Quotes:

- "Just engage the whole family in activities so that way it can be a good bonding experience and you'll be getting healthy at the same time."
- "High school coaches couldn't care less about what you eat, what you do, as long as you win...I think it needs to be... as long as you're healthy and you're mentally healthy, then we'll focus on winning after that."

Wrap up

Does anyone have any other thoughts that they'd like to share before we wrap up?

Quotes:

- "I don't get how parents don't teach their kids not to smoke and stuff...why kids feel the need to bully other kids, why kids vape. Why do people drink?"
- "I think... if your friends are doing it, you don't have to feel like you have to do it.... It's okay to say no and you can...still have fun without doing that stuff."
- "Right around eighth grade is when kids should be really made aware of these things [i.e., risk-taking] so they don't do 'em when they get in high school."
- "Some people don't...wanna share their feelings because they feel like the person they're sharing their feelings will like, laugh at them or stigma."
- "They feel like they need to be the same as everyone else. Be just a copy when you could just be yourself cuz I think everybody else needs to realize that we're all different."
- "I feel like a lot of people use school as an escape to get away from what's going on at home."