

Introduction

In the mid-1990s the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs (ADP) began work on improving the state's prevention information systems. A primary goal of this effort was to develop a management information system for consistently and uniformly documenting a) levels of needs for state substance abuse prevention programming b) the nature and extent of program efforts in prevention implemented throughout the state, and c) the effectiveness of these prevention efforts in obtaining intended outcomes.

A key component of this information system was the continuous collection, monitoring, and reporting of selected community-level indicators that would serve as direct and indirect measures of alcohol and other drug use prevalence and related problems. This information system was designed to assist with statewide prevention planning and policy-making by providing useful, systematic data about prevention needs and related conditions throughout the state.

The present report is a product of this ongoing effort. It has been prepared by the Center for Applied Research Solutions (CARS)—formerly the EMT Group, Inc.—through ADP's Community Prevention Institute (CPI) training and technical assistance contract. The purpose is to provide timely, relevant information on the status of alcohol and other drug use problems in California in order to facilitate planning and monitoring of prevention outcomes at the county level. Specifically, the report may serve as a tool for planners, policy-makers, and practitioners in the field in their efforts to:

- Determine the prevalence of a problem in the community;
- Identify patterns of need for services;
- Forecast service needs;
- Establish appropriate program resource levels;
- Understand environmental influences in the community; and
- Determine whether intended social change is occurring

The report compiles data on 26 community indicators, including measures of risk factors associated with alcohol and other drug use, measures of overall substance use prevalence, and measures of the consequences associated with problem use. Each indicator and its population-based rate is reported in six-year trends with state and county-level comparisons to allow for monitoring of changes in problem status over time and across geographic area.

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How is the information collected?

The information contained in the report was gathered from public records that are maintained and disseminated by eight major state agencies (“archival data”). This reliance on state level data sources ensures that the information reported is uniform across counties and over time (i.e., all counties use the same data collection procedures), and allows for reliable comparisons between counties and the state, and among counties with similar demographic characteristics (“like-counties”). Each agency source contributing to the report is listed in Table I.1.

Table I.1
<i>California Alcohol Beverage Control</i>
<i>California Department of Alcohol & Drug Programs</i>
<i>California Department of Education</i>
<i>California Department of Health Services</i>
<i>California Highway Patrol</i>
<i>California Department of Finance</i>
<i>California Department of Justice</i>
<i>California Department of Social Services</i>

How were the indicators selected?

The twenty-six indicators contained in the report were selected based on several key criteria, including:

- Validity: How well does the information measure what it is supposed to measure?
- Reliability: Is the data collected in a consistent manner from year-to-year?
- Availability: Is the information accessible in a timely and useable format?
- Appropriateness and relevance: Does the indicator measure risks or outcomes that have an established theoretical or empirical relationship to substance use and related problems?

As the risk and outcome information system continues to evolve and as new and more sophisticated measures become available, the set of indicators may be expanded or modified, and new selection criteria may be added.

How are the indicators organized?

The organization of the report is based on a framework of alcohol and drug abuse risk and protective factors developed by Hawkins and Catalano through their ongoing work in the prevention research field. This framework identifies four major domains of risk for substance abuse and related problems, including:

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- **Community factors**, such as the availability of substances, community laws and norms favorable to use, extreme economic deprivation, high rates of transition and mobility and social disorganization;
 - **Family factors**, such as family history of substance abuse, poor family management practices, parental drug use and favorable attitudes towards drug use, and family conflict;
 - **School factors**, such as academic failure, low commitment to school , school-related problem behaviors;
 - **Individual and peer factors**, such as peer rejection, early and persistent problem behavior, alienation and rebelliousness, friends who use drugs, favorable attitudes toward drug use, and early initiation of drug use.

In addition to the four broad domains, indicators are further classified into subdomains, which group measures that are conceptually linked within the same broad domain area. Together, these domains and subdomains provide a logical basis for organizing indicators as they relate to differing prevention strategies and outcomes.

How is the information presented?

The report is designed to serve as a simple, easy-to-use resource for understanding and interpreting community-level data on substance use in California. To facilitate its use, the document contains several basic analytic techniques to assist with data interpretation.

First, in order to make meaningful comparisons between geographic areas that differ in population size, or comparisons between differing time points, each raw indicator has been converted into a population-based rate that describes the event in relation to a standard population size, such as the number of occurrences for every 1,000 people residing in the state or in a given county. Rates are calculated as the number of events divided by the total population size, then multiplied by the population standard (e.g., 1,000). Although rates are intended to facilitate interpretation, it should be noted that in cases where an indicator measures a relatively rare event (e.g., deaths due to alcohol and drug use) rates may be unstable, or prone to wide fluctuations from year to year, particularly when applied to relatively small populations. For this reason, rates measuring rare events or rates for counties with very small population size should be interpreted with caution.

Also for comparative purposes, data is presented at both the county and state level to allow county rates to be evaluated against a relative average. Each indicator is also compared to a three-year average rate for a subset of counties that are considered to be similar in demographic characteristics to the county under consideration (see Appendix A for groupings of “like-counties”). Characteristics that contribute to the classification of “like-counties” include the relative size of the youth population, race/ethnic distribution, poverty status, and proportion of the population living in urban or rural settings.

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For each indicator, counties are also ranked in ascending order based on an average of their three most current years of data. A low rank (e.g., 4th of 58) indicates that the county rate is low relative to other counties in the state and thus, that the population has a low relative level of substance use risk for that indicator.

Throughout the report, information is presented for three to six years of data depending on the availability of the indicator. The trend in rates over time has been analyzed using a simple correlation to determine both the direction of the trend and whether the trend is statistically meaningful (i.e., whether a true relationship exists between time in years and the value of the rate). Trends found to be significant are labeled as increasing or declining, while those that show no statistical importance are considered “undetermined”.

Collectively, these analytic tools will help translate statistical observations and data into a “real world” profile of community conditions related to alcohol and other drug use.

How is the report organized?

The body of the report is organized into two major sections. The first section presents county-level data for each of the twenty-six indicators, organized according to the four major domain areas. The second section presents state and county level comparative data, including geographic depictions of three-year average rates for all counties in California. An Appendix to the document has also been included, which provides descriptions of the eight groupings of “like-counties” derived from cluster analysis and documents the sources of archival data used in the indicator profiles, including information for web access.