

Substance Use & Help-Seeking Behaviors Among Missouri College Students

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance misuse consortium dedicated to creating healthy and safe college campuses. The coalition is comprised of 27 public and private colleges and universities in the state working to prevent high-risk behaviors by implementing evidence-based strategies, including education, social norming campaigns, policy review and enforcement, and more. This brief includes data for the 23 4-year institutions in the coalition; 2-year campuses participate in a separate version of the survey, and their data is not included in this statewide aggregate. To measure progress and obtain data needed for the implementation of programs, PIP created the Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (MACHB) Survey. The MACHB is an annual online survey that has been implemented each spring since 2007. The survey assesses the roles that alcohol, drugs (illegal and prescription), tobacco/nicotine, interpersonal violence, and mental health have on student health and wellness. This brief will focus on data related to substance use and help seeking behaviors from the 2025 Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (sample size, N = 5,634).

Background

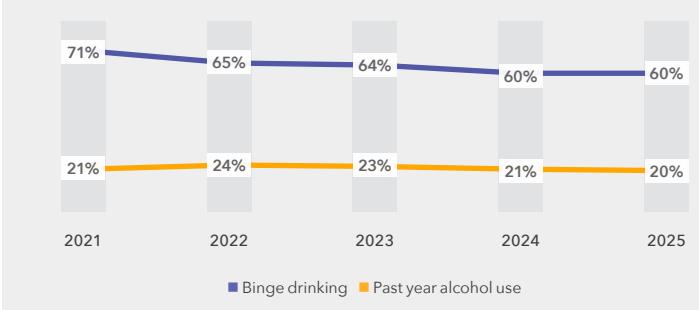
Substance use remains a significant public health concern among college students. Young adults entering college often experience new social environments, academic pressures, and personal stressors that can increase vulnerability to alcohol, cannabis, prescription drug misuse, and other substances. These behaviors can impact academic performance, mental and physical health, safety, and post-college outcomes (Welsh, 2019). National data from the Monitoring the Future survey show that substance use among young adults remains high, with historically elevated levels of cannabis use, cannabis vaping, nicotine vaping, and hallucinogen use reported in 2023 (Patrick et al., 2025).

Alcohol Use

The 2025 MACHB data shows that alcohol remains the most used substance among Missouri college students with 60% reporting past-year alcohol use,

and 20% engaged in high-risk (binge) drinking defined as ≥ 5 drinks for men or ≥ 4 for women within two hours within the past two weeks. Although lower than the national average of 33%, this level of risky drinking places students at heightened risk for injury, academic impairment, and co-use with other substances. Most drinking occurs in social settings, with 73% drinking at friends' homes or gatherings, 52% at bars or restaurants, and 12% in fraternity or sorority houses. Additionally, 24% of underage students reported having a friend over 21 purchase alcohol for them.

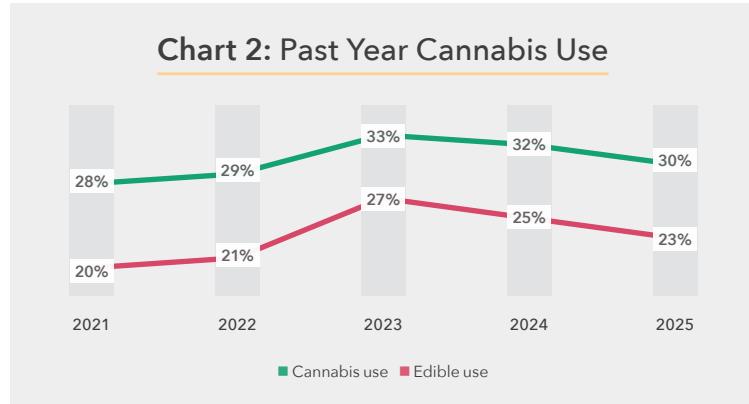
Chart 1: Alcohol Use Trend



Cannabis Use

Cannabis use moderately decreased from 32% in 2024 to 30% in 2025 among Missouri college students. About 13% report frequent use (≥ 1 time per week). Reported motivation for cannabis use included relaxation (71%), social enjoyment with friends (58%), and coping with anxiety or mental health concerns (40%). Despite this, 59% of cannabis users report no intention to change their use, while 12% are considering reducing their use and 22% are actively trying to cut back/quit.

Chart 2: Past Year Cannabis Use



Illicit Drugs and Other Drugs of Concern

Illicit drug use decreased slightly, with 11% reporting past-year use of at least one illegal drug or drug of concern from 13% in 2024. Specific substances reported include:

Table 1: Used at Least Once in the Past Year

Cocaine	1.4%
Heroin	0.2%
MDMA	0.7%
Hallucinogens	4.2%
Delta 8 THC	8.3%
Any illicit drug use	11%

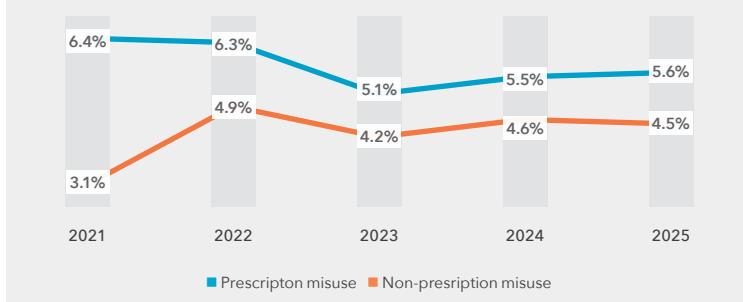
Note: Delta-8 THC is a less potent cannabinoid derived from hemp or cannabis, unlike the more common delta-9 THC.

Prescription Drug Misuse and Nicotine Use

Prescription drug use slightly decreased from 4.6% to 4.5%, and non-prescribed prescription drug

misuse increased from 5.5% to 6.2% within the past year. Among these users, 18% co-use prescription drugs with alcohol, a combination associated with heightened overdose and injury risk. Nicotine/tobacco use also increased, from 26% in 2024 to 28% in 2025. Many students cite health concerns as their primary motivation for quitting 45% report fear of long-term illness as the main reason for attempting cessation.

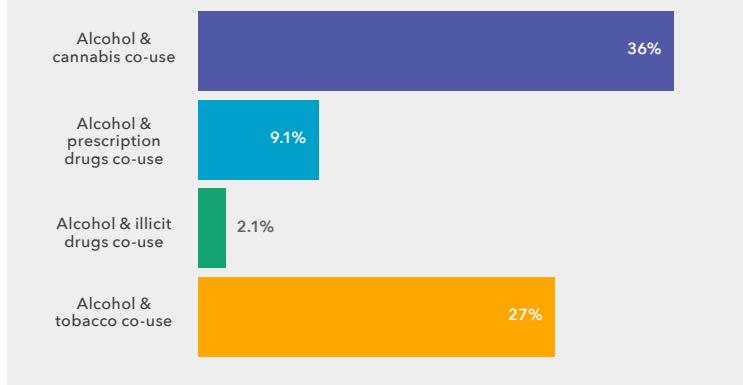
Chart 3: Past Year Prescription Drug Misuse



Polysubstance Use

Polysubstance use continues to be a critical concern. The 2025 MACHB data reports 36% of Missouri college students alcohol users co-used cannabis, 9.1% co-used prescription drugs with alcohol, 2.1% co-used alcohol with illicit drugs, 27% of nicotine/tobacco users also co-used with alcohol.

Chart 4: Polusubstance Use



Consequences of Substance Use

Substance use contributes to multiple academic, physical, and safety-related harms (Welsh, 2019). Missouri students reported experiencing one or more consequences after substance use. Approximately

12% of students reported driving more than five times in the past year after using cannabis, and 27% drove at least once within two hours of consuming alcohol. Cannabis users also reported increased tolerance, with 14% using more than five times due to diminished effects. Alcohol-related harms experienced at least once included injuries (8.8%), non-consensual sexual contact (2.4%), blackouts (15.6%), and academically, 5.6% reported performing poorly on an assignment due to alcohol use, and 11.2% missed class.

Substance Use and Help-Seeking Behaviors

Despite the well-documented consequences of alcohol use among college students and the availability of effective, low-cost interventions, only a small percentage of students seek help for problematic drinking. One study found that just 3% of college drinkers reported seeking assistance for alcohol-related concerns (Cellucci, Krogh, & Vik, 2006). Research further suggests that patterns of substance use significantly influence help-seeking behavior (Qeadan & Egbert, 2025). Specifically, use of substances perceived as more severe such as prescription opioids, heroin, and cocaine is associated with lower rates of help-seeking, whereas use of more socially accepted substances, including tobacco, alcohol, and cannabis, is linked to higher rates of help-seeking (Qeadan & Egbert, 2025).

The 2025 MACHB data asked students which campus offices/people they feel comfortable receiving alcohol/substance related prevention, screening and

treatment from, 79% reported being comfortable seeking help from Health center staffs (i.e., doctors, nurses), 55% from wellness departments/offices, 25% from peer/peer educators, 19% from resident life staff and 13% from student life offices. An analysis of the 2025 MACHB data on substance use and help-seeking behavior is presented in Table 2.

Missouri college students report a strong reliance on informal support networks for mental health concerns. Most students indicate turning to peers (77%), parents (65%), and other family members (43%), while substantially fewer report comfort seeking help from campus counseling centers (18%) or off-campus mental health providers (15%). This pattern aligns with prior research. Cellucci, Krogh, and Vik (2006) found that college students with heavy alcohol use were unlikely to seek formal treatment, instead favoring low-threshold, informal options such as friends and family. Their findings identified stigma, limited problem recognition, and concerns about formal services as key barriers to professional help-seeking. Similarly, Qeadan and Egbert (2025) reported that higher substance use risk and co-occurring mental health conditions do not consistently increase formal help-seeking. In some cases, greater severity was associated with reduced engagement with services, particularly for stigmatized substances, highlighting a gap between perceived need and service utilization.

Within this context, substance use norms and recovery prevalence further inform help-seeking dynamics. Following statewide legalization, 7.6% of non-users reported curiosity about trying cannabis. In contrast,

Table 2: Substance Use and Help-Seeking Behavior

Substance Use	Peer/peer educators	Resident life	Student life	Wellness office	Health center staff	Academic advisor
Binge drinking	30%	17%	14%	55%	79%	10%
Cannabis	27%	18%	14%	60%	82%	10%
Illicit drug	29%	18%	13%	59%	79%	11%
Prescription misuse	27%	20%	13%	45%	71%	14%
Non-prescription misuse	26%	15%	8%	50%	77%	14%
Tobacco/Nicotine	27%	25%	27%	58%	80%	10%

only 1.3% of respondents reported being in recovery from cannabis or other drugs, while 10% reported being in recovery from alcohol or other substances, suggesting relatively limited engagement with recovery-identifying pathways.

Findings from Table 2 further clarify help-seeking patterns for substance use. Across all substance categories, students were most likely to seek assistance from health center staff (71-82%) and the wellness office (45-60%). In contrast, academic advisors (10-14%), residential life staff, and student life staff were consistently among the least utilized resources. Peer support remained a moderate but consistent option across substances (26-30%), suggesting its role as an initial point of contact rather than a primary source of formal intervention.

Key Implications

- Informal support (peers and family) play a central role in help-seeking and may function as critical conduits to formal services.
- Health and wellness offices are preferred over academic or residential staff for substance-related concerns.
- Students lacking informal support represent a priority population for proactive outreach.
- Reducing stigma and strengthening referral pathways from informal to formal supports may improve service utilization.

Barriers to Seeking Help

Among Missouri college students experiencing substance use/mental health concerns, common barriers to accessing support include the belief that help is unnecessary (53%), financial concerns (24%), fear of stigma or judgment (20%), perceptions that support is not helpful (20%), lack of knowledge about where to seek help (13%), and lack of health insurance (5.8%).

Summary

Partners in Prevention continues to monitor the critical health behaviors of college students. To reiterate, data

consistently shows that academic achievement and retention are impacted by the health, safety, and well-being of students. Substance misuse and mental health concerns are intersectional issues that impact students' ability to succeed and thrive while attending institutions of higher education. Comprehensive and evidence informed prevention and health promotion practices are an investment in the lives of students and the overall campus environment. For more information about Partners in Prevention and to explore our research, visit mopip.org/pip/research.

Resources

CHEERS

CHEERS is a statewide program that works with bars, restaurants, and nightclubs to provide free non-alcoholic drinks to designated drivers. CHEERS also promotes messages on social media and on campuses to promote using sober designated drivers. Learn more at mopip.org/CHEERS.

Drive Safe Drive Smart

Drive Safe Drive Smart (DSDS) is an educational program working to promote safe driving behaviors and reduce impaired driving among college students in Missouri. Drive Safe Drive Smart provides resources and materials to campuses including brochures and handouts, social media, and more to assist in messaging and education. DSDS also promotes billboards in communities throughout the state. Learn more at mopip.org/DSDS.

SMART

The State of Missouri Alcohol Responsibility Training (SMART) program is a free, online training for people who sell or serve alcohol in the state of Missouri. The training focuses on recognition of fake ID's, acceptable forms of identification, preventing service to minors and intoxicated individuals, and more. Learn more at mopip.org/SMART or take the [SMART training here](#).

For more information about Partners in Prevention and to explore our research, visit mopip.org/pip/research.

Time to Change? Assess your Substance Use

Time to Change? Assess Your Substance Use' is

a resource for Missouri college students who are considering quitting or cutting back on tobacco/nicotine or marijuana/cannabis use. This website can help students assess their use, learn about benefits of quitting, and find resources to help them quit. Campus prevention or health promotion professionals in Missouri can also access training and resources to help students quit. Learn more at mopip.org/change

Missouri Alliance of Collegiate Recovery (MACRO)

MACRO, the Missouri Alliance of Collegiate Recovery Organizations, is the first organization of its kind in the state of Missouri to create a statewide network for growing and enhancing collegiate recovery support services. Our mission is to unite collegiate recovery efforts across the state and to be a top resource for Missouri schools as they build their own recovery support organizations. In doing so, we hope to increase the capacity of colleges and universities in Missouri to address recovery on their campuses, and in their communities. MACRO is currently housed at the University of Missouri - Columbia. It is operated by Missouri Partners in Prevention (PIP), with support from the Missouri Department of Mental Health. Visit mopip.org/MACRO to learn more.

RESPOND Program

RESPOND is a training program designed to educate the campus community (staff, faculty, and students) on how to identify and address mental health concerns. Developed by Dr. Christy Hutton at the University of Missouri-Columbia, the content of this program includes an overview of mental health issues on college campuses and signs associated with mental health issues, as well as discussions on stigma and culture. Additionally, the course focuses on how to effectively respond with basic listening and empathy, risk assessment at the lay level, support, referral, and taking care of oneself (including appropriate boundaries based on role or personal preference). To learn more about RESPOND, contact Partners in Prevention at pip@missouri.edu or visit mopiptraining.org/respond.

Ask. Listen. Refer (ALR)

Free online suicide prevention program designed to

help faculty, staff, and students prevent suicide by teaching them to:

- Identify people at risk for suicide
- Recognize the risk factors, protective factors, and warning signs of suicide among college students
- Respond to and get help for people at risk

ALR currently serves 50 campuses across the state of Missouri and 15 out of state schools. Visit asklistenrefer.org and click on your campus to take the training! For questions email muwrcasklistenrefer@missouri.edu.

MoSafeRx

The MoSafeRx initiative hopes to educate students on the dangers of prescription drug misuse and promote safe and healthy alternatives. Visit mopip.org/RX to learn more!

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

Administration (SAMHSA) to find mental health treatment services in your area, call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357), visit the SAMHSA online treatment locator, or text your ZIP code to 435748.

Contact Partners in Prevention at (573) 884-7551.

Report Prepared by Angel Benjamin, Research Assistant. Published February 2026.

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