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Release of United Way report highlights county trends

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SANTA CRUZ — Teen tobacco and substance use saw an uptick last year in Santa Cruz County following a decade of steady decline.

That was one of the trends spotlighted in the 11th annual Community Assessment Project, released Friday, which tracks data on public safety, the area economy, health, education as well as the natural and social environments.

The increases in teen drug and alcohol use were fairly slight but still discouraging in an area where rates of substance use among teens have long outpaced the state average, which continues to decline.

"It's concerning in light of the fact that statewide the numbers are trending downward," said Bill Manov, director of the county's Alcohol and Drug Program. "By comparison, we have some work to do."

Various community groups have placed a heavy emphasis on driving down substance abuse, and it has dropped since the first year of the report in 1994.

"I think the message for us is you can't rest on our laurels when you're discussing teen issues," said Mary Lou Goeke, executive director of the United Way of Santa Cruz County.

The Community Assessment Project is sponsored by the United Way and funded by area businesses and governments. The information is compiled and reported by Applied Survey Research of Watsonville.

Among the findings from the 2005 report:

- In 2004, 33 percent of ninth-grade students in the county and 47 percent of high school juniors reported drinking alcohol during the previous 30 days, compared with 25 percent of ninth-graders and 37 percent of eleventh-graders statewide.
- The 33 percent of ninth-graders drinking alcohol during the previous 30 days was up from 31 percent in 2002, the lowest rate during the history of the report, but lower than the 51 percent reported in 1994. For 11th-graders, the 47 percent was up just one percentage point from 2002, and lower than the 55 percent reported in 1994.
- Tobacco use locally among teens increased from 2002 from 11 percent among 11th-graders to 18 percent in 2004.

Part of the effort to decrease teen alcohol and substance abuse has been to establish a countywide program called Friday Night Live, which offers alternatives to drugs and alcohol and seeks to build teen skills and confidence.

"Current research suggests education is only part of it," Manov said. "You also have to give teens something better to do in their lives."

The program in Santa Cruz County has about 20 chapters at area middle schools and high schools as well as at juvenile hall and the probation center in Watsonville.

The county has also begun an effort to address binge drinking among 16- to 24-year-olds.

The survey on adult binge drinking shows that 16 percent of respondents in a survey said they had five or more alcoholic drinks within the previous month compared to a statewide figure of 14 percent.

Binge drinking is a growing problem, said Brenda Armstrong, who was recognized as a "Community Hero" during Friday's program for her work with the group Community United to Reduce Binging, or CURB.

"Our goal is to reduce binge drinking by 50 percent over the next five years," Armstrong said.

Despite the slight increase in teen drug and alcohol use among teens, felony juvenile arrests for drugs have plummeted from 87 in 1995 to 51 in 2004. Misdemeanor juvenile drug arrests are about the same as 10 years ago, but down from 213 in 2003 to 173 in 2004.