



Community Health Needs Assessment

20
25

Town of
Wellesley



TRENDLINE

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Assessment Methodology



In November 2024, the Town of Wellesley engaged with a data analysis company, Trendline, to conduct a comprehensive community health needs assessment with the ultimate goal of making recommendations for the use of the town’s opioid settlement funds. Trendline worked with the Town to gather both qualitative and quantitative data from focus groups, key informant interviews, a community survey, and available data from a variety of publicly available sources.

This report serves as a summary of Trendline’s analysis and findings. Based on those observations, Trendline also uses this report to propose formal recommendations to the Town across several subject areas. Those recommendations and the supporting data will serve as the Town’s guidance for the future use of opioid settlement funds, though all final decisions lie with Town officials.

Executive Summary

Wellesley exemplifies how strong social determinants of health can foster community well-being. However, there are opportunities to address gaps in access to key services and resources through greater coordination and outreach.

Wellesley, Massachusetts is a suburb located about 15 miles west of Boston, with a population of just over 30,000. The town's children attend top-ranked public and private schools, residents have access to institutions of higher learning that draw students and academics from all over the world, and well-maintained homes dot quiet streets and walkable commercial squares. The population as a whole has high levels of educational attainment, stable employment, and safe environments. These elements converge into many

positive social determinants of health - factors closely linked to positive health outcomes, including longer life expectancy, lower rates of chronic disease, and greater access to preventive care. The town also boasts a range of recreational spaces, a strong local economy, and high rates of insurance coverage - all contributing to an infrastructure that supports physical and mental well-being.

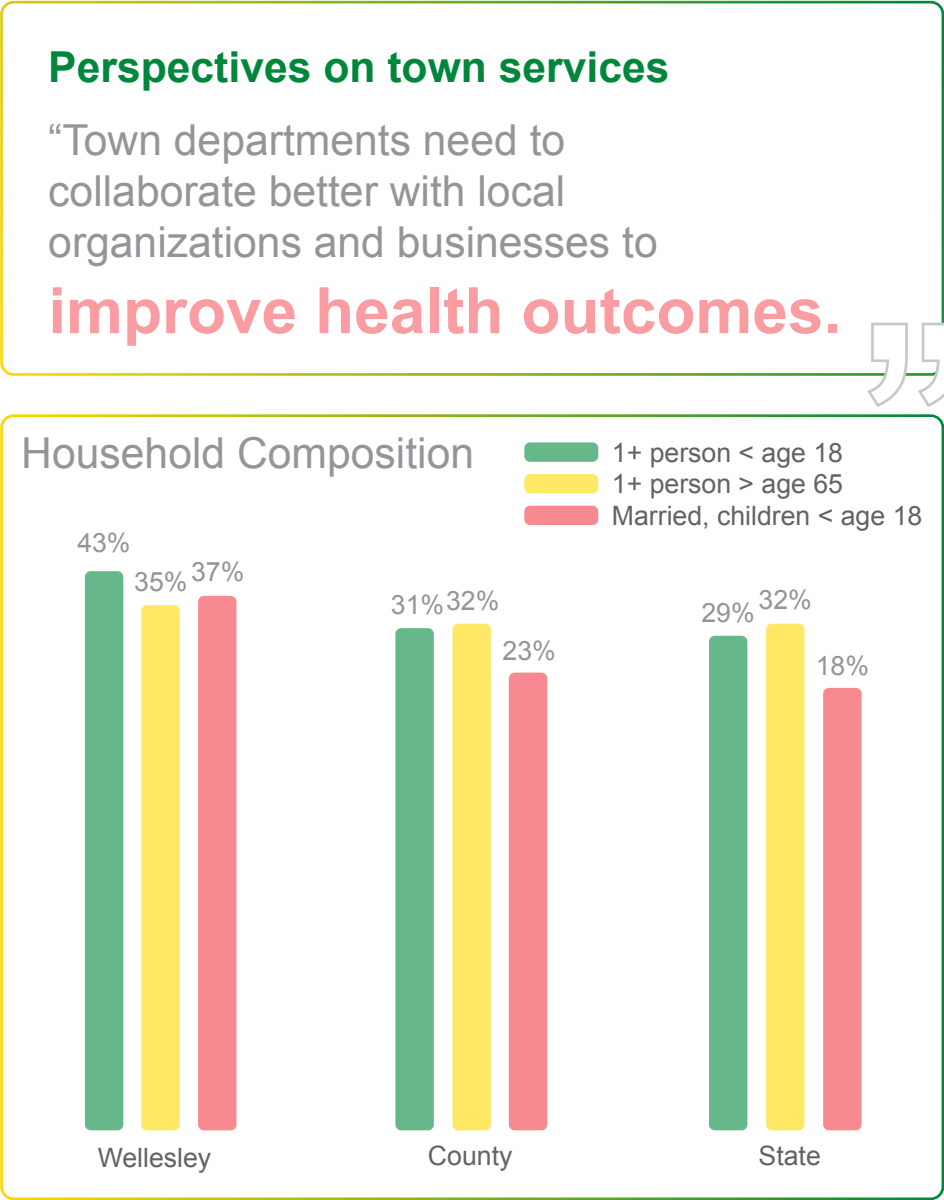
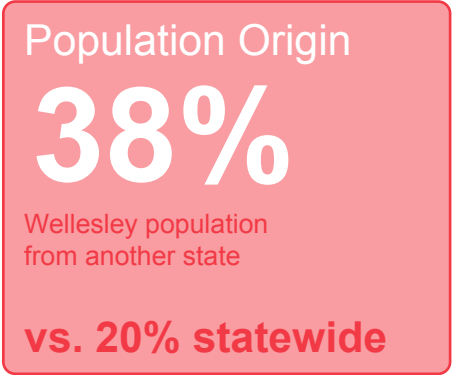
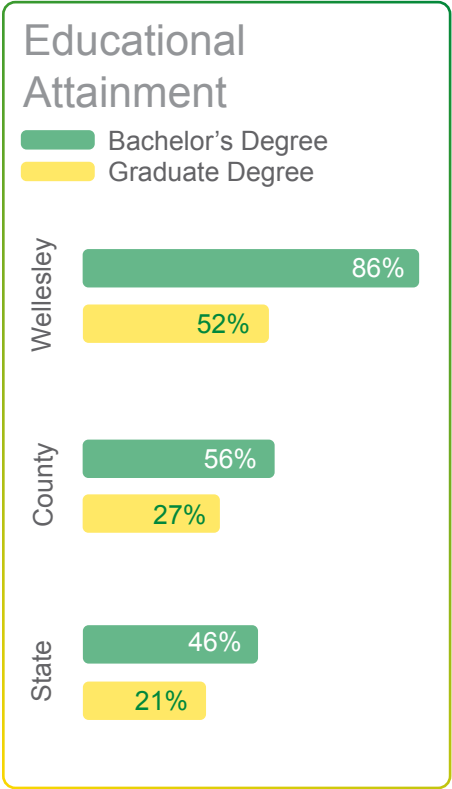
However, when viewed through a public health equity lens, Wellesley's advantages also highlight broader

regional disparities. Often times, higher income communities and higher prices go hand in hand, effecting everything from housing costs to gas prices to groceries. This leaves a small but vulnerable group of households behind. The high cost of living and limited affordable housing options present significant barriers to lower-income families, seniors, service workers, and others who might benefit from the town's high-quality schools and health-promoting resources. Access to transportation can also be a challenge for non-drivers or those without personal

vehicles, particularly for commuting or seeking specialized care outside town limits. When health challenges do arise, Wellesley's relative wealth can work as a veil, allowing residents to address them privately. While Wellesley offers a model of how the social determinants of health can align to promote wellness, it also underscores the need for stigma-breaking messaging, inclusive planning, and policy solutions that ensure access to those benefits across all socioeconomic groups.



Community Profile



Health & Well-being

While Wellesley residents report strong overall health, growing mental health concerns highlight the need for a more coordinated support system.

Wellesley residents overwhelmingly report their overall health and wellbeing as good or excellent, although certain groups are more likely to report closer to average health. Respondents aged 25-44, the youngest group of survey respondents, are the only group who rate their overall health as “below average,” with a plurality. Respondents without a college degree also rate their overall health as worse than their more highly educated neighbors.

All groups, however, agree that mental health is the top issue facing Wellesley residents. Residents are particularly concerned about the mental health

challenges of children and teens. Focus groups - including those conducted with youth - and key informants indicated academic and social pressures born of high generational expectations may lead to rising anxiety among Wellesley youth.

Social workers across town departments are widely viewed as essential connectors for residents seeking support, though their work can sometimes feel siloed due to the structure of different departments. This dynamic highlights the importance of having consistent communication and referral pathways among town services, as departments can often serve the same households.



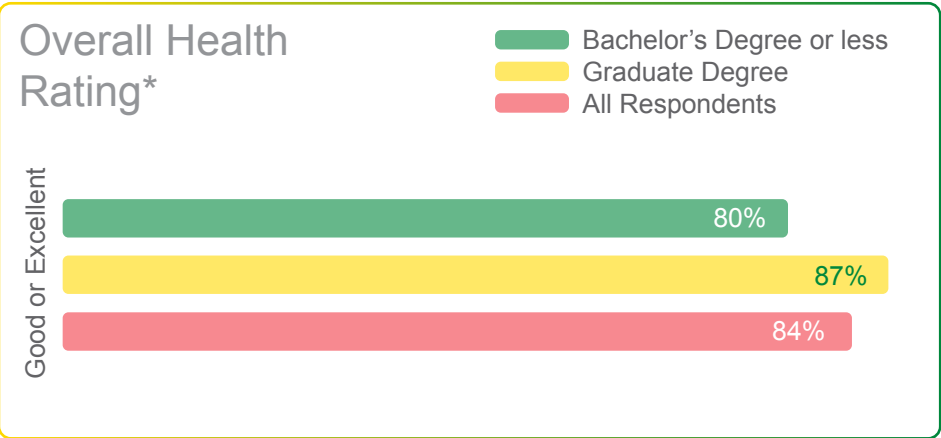
Multiple focus group participants and key informants pointed to an opportunity to strengthen coordination and make it easier for residents to navigate services - though doing so would require additional interdepartmental collaboration.

Finally, Trendline evaluators observed a common theme across focus groups and key informant interviews: The town relies too heavily on this small group of high-performing social work professionals who have a unique and intimate knowledge of town systems. It was clear during these conversations that social workers expertly operated across the aforementioned silos in order to successfully coordinate

services for their clients - but without systems in place to facilitate that important work. In that way, this dedicated group has likely exceeded original expectations and built a strong foundation for future collaboration across town services - but these practices should be documented.

Their institutional knowledge and relationships allow them to navigate a complex network of resources, but such intangible skills should not be relied upon in the future. Should those positions - or individuals - be removed, the town may struggle to seamlessly continue supporting its most vulnerable residents.

Supporting data



“I would say (mental health) is absolutely impacting young people.

I'd say 24 and under, and I'm seeing it increasing in younger children - 10 and under - as well as an increase in adults, primarily women with children in those age ranges.

Wellesley Youth Commission

“There is a huge stigma and a huge misunderstanding. I suspect the support on the road to health is problematic in the community.

Select Board Member

Top Issues Facing Residents

- 1 Mental Health
- 2 Housing
- 3 Substance Use
- 4 Physical Health
- 5 Domestic Violence
- 6 Food Insecurity

*Nearly every group responding to the survey rated **Mental Health** is the #1 concern, with the exception of respondents age 65+, who listed **Housing** as the top priority.

>>> Recommendations

- 1 Promote social connectedness and physical activity through inclusive and intergenerational recreation and enrichment programs.
- 2 Expand access to safe community spaces for teens and young adults to spend time.
- 3 Coordinate public education on chronic disease prevention and active living, focusing on the community’s aging population and their specific intersecting needs.

Substance Use & Risk Factors

While substance use in Wellesley appears relatively low, limited prevention infrastructure, social stigma, and a reliance on informal or private responses risk obscuring deeper issues.

Substance use in Wellesley is viewed through two distinct lenses: Use on college campuses and use among town residents.

Key informants contacted as a part of this project expressed that the vast majority of substance-related emergency calls were from college campuses. While this is not unexpected, it is also difficult to confirm. Wellesley College, for example, only reported two liquor law violations and no drug abuse violations on campus in 2023. Babson College reported no arrests for liquor law or drug abuse violations, but did

make 87 disciplinary referrals for alcohol-related infractions (1 in 33 undergraduate students). By comparison, nearby Boston College made 783 disciplinary referrals for alcohol-related infractions (1 in 12.5 undergraduate students) and 112 for drug-related infractions in 2022. Furthermore, both Wellesley-based institutions often handle substance use situations internally, with safety and educational intervention prioritized over criminal escalation. Programs like Babson's "I Call Because I Care" offer students amnesty for reporting a substance-related medical emergency.

Finally, a scan of social sentiment regarding the issue revealed a consensus across both campuses that students often visit other schools to engage in larger social gatherings.

Among town residents, substance use issues are also nuanced. Survey respondents associated substance use most closely with unresolved mental health challenges, as well as peer pressure and stress. When asked about barriers to substance use treatment, "stigma" and "fear of judgment" were considered the biggest obstacles. Some residents pointed to Wellesley's relative wealth and work culture as a factor in how people perceive substance use issues or seek treatment. Residents may choose to seek treatment privately - even in their own homes - to avoid using a public resource or taking time from work. There is ample incentive and ability for such individuals to mask substance use challenges.

Among youth, data regarding substance use is gleaned primarily from the biannual MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey. The most recent data, collected in 2023, shows promising trends across most top of mind categories, such as vaping, alcohol, and marijuana use. After rising

vapor product use in the late 2010s, rates began to fall during and after the pandemic, with just 16% of high school students reporting ever vaping in their lifetime, and only 8% reporting use in the last 30 days. While still the most frequently used substance, alcohol use has followed a similar trend, with use in the last 30 days and binge drinking reportedly decreasing significantly since 2021 - particularly among male students. There is concern among some residents that youth belonging to more affluent households have easier access to substances, particularly alcohol. Finally, marijuana use has also decreased significantly across the last several surveys, and those decreases were consistent across male and female students.

While youth substance use rates are trending lower, the town seems to lack formal prevention infrastructure to help keep rates down, particularly when compared to some neighboring towns. State or federal prevention programs, like MassCALL3 (Bureau of Substance Addiction Services) or Drug Free Communities (CDC), use evidence-based strategies to reduce substance use among youth and educate communities.

Supporting data

“There should be more **non-punitive options** for students struggling with substance use.

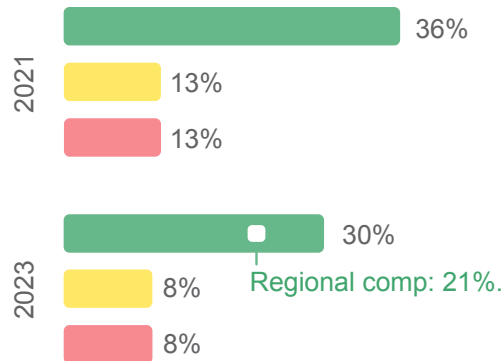
Wellesley Public Schools Administration

1 ⁱⁿ 10

survey respondents reported a household member was affected by substance use

High School Substance Use

Alcohol
Vapor Products
Marijuana

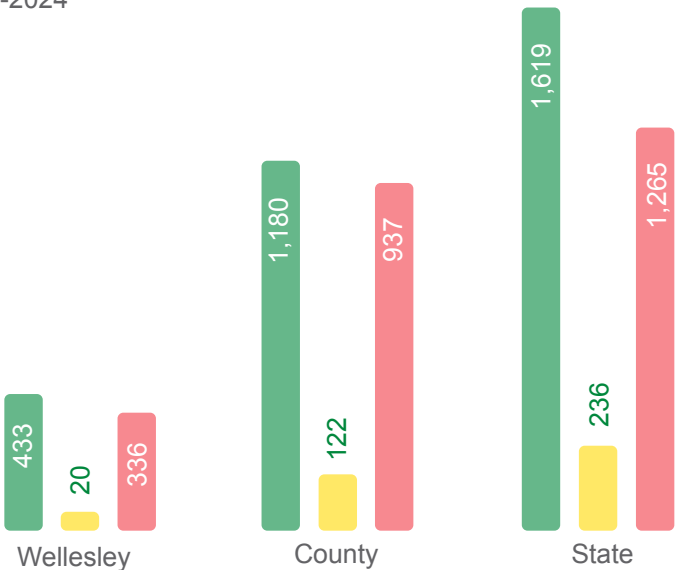


2023 MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey, last 30 day use

ER Visits by Cause Per 100,000 residents

All substances
Opioid
Alcohol

Bureau of Substance Addiction Services, 2023-2024



➤ ➤ ➤ Recommendations

- 1 Expand prevention education in schools and through pediatric/primary care.
- 2 Provide discreet, non-punitive options for recovery and support.
- 3 Develop an alcohol use campaign targeted to middle and high school students using positive social norms.

We must find ways to approach access to care with **cultural humility and competency** to lower the barrier for people to get help

Babson College Administrator

Mental Health & Support

Despite growing awareness and recent improvements in youth mental health indicators, Wellesley continues to face gaps in access, particularly for children and teens.

Mental health was repeatedly listed as the top community health concern among focus group participants, key informants, and community survey participants. Among those same survey participants, nearly half said they were “unsure” or completely unaware of how to access mental health support and services, compounding the issue. When asked what types of mental health services were needed in Wellesley, most respondents cited support for children and youth. Respondents with children and key informants in the mental health field reinforced this finding, reporting that support for children and youth

were among the most difficult services to find, citing a lack of providers and long waitlists. Human Relations Service (HRS), a nonprofit mental health agency in Wellesley, was frequently cited as a bright spot for its accessibility and focus on children and families.

Among youth, data regarding mental health is gleaned primarily from the biannual MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey. The most recent data, collected in 2023, shows promising trends despite figures that are likely still considered too high by parents and guardians. From 2021 to 2023, student-reported depressive

symptoms, self-injury, and suicidal ideation all declined 4-5 percentage points among all high school students. Female students reported more frequent mental health challenges than their male peers across all categories, a trend consistent with regional data. LGBTQ+ students reported the highest rate of mental health challenges compared to any other group, typically reporting rates three to four times higher than the overall student body.

Focus group participants, key informants, and survey respondents also linked mental health challenges with substance use, an idea supported by student surveys. Students who report mental health challenges are far more likely to use nicotine, electronic vapor products, alcohol, and marijuana.

Youth focus groups pointed to the stigma of seeking or using mental health resources as a major barrier to care, adding that many students would not know where to find services even if they sought to. Students suggested creating more accessible, informal, and discreet “drop-in” spaces for wellness or counseling, and the desire to learn healthy coping skills and relationship-building techniques.



Supporting data

“Getting **resources outside of school hours** can be really challenging.

Wellesley Public Schools Administration



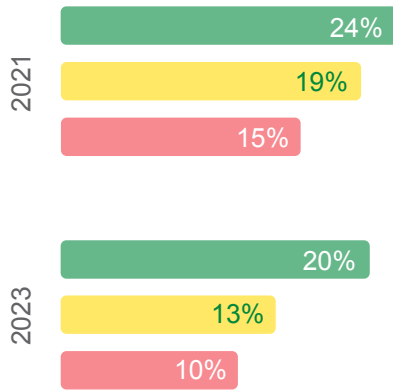
Finding Support

48%

of survey respondents were unsure of how or where to access mental health support if they needed it

High School Mental Health

- Depression
- Self-Harm
- Suicidal Ideation



2023 MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey

Wait Times

According to the Association for Behavioral Health, children waiting for mental health services increased by

41%

from 2022 to 2023

48%

of residents could not access mental health services due to long wait times, according to a MetroWest Community Health Assessment completed in 2023

“We want a program where **kids can access support on their own**, without needing to go through bureaucratic processes.

Wellesley Public Schools Administration



>>> Recommendations

- 1 Increase school-based and community mental health staffing, and equip teachers with the knowledge and tools they need to identify challenges early.
- 2 Launch public education efforts to reduce stigma, promote help-seeking, and teach healthy coping strategies - particularly for youth.
- 3 Improve access to intermediate care options for youth and young adults by offering flexible scheduling, transportation and/or convenient locations.

There’s a certain pressure to **hide any of the mental health challenges** folks are feeling, and that takes on its own weight.

Wellesley Public Schools Administration



Health Access & Social Issues

Wellesley residents face real challenges accessing care and balancing responsibilities, especially as high dependency ratios, long wait times, and social isolation strain families, caregivers, and underserved populations.

About one quarter of community survey respondents reported healthcare services in Wellesley to be somewhat or very difficult to access. Wait times was the most cited barrier to health services, doubling the next closest barrier - limited provider options.

When asked about primary sources of stress, work/life balance, caring for seniors, and parenting rose to the top. Wellesley's demographic makeup offers some insight into why caring for seniors

and parenting have become oft-cited stressors. Wellesley's age dependency ratio - the ratio of dependents (children and seniors) to the working-age population - is eight points higher than the county and ten points higher than the statewide average. Wellesley's child dependency ratio - the number of children aged 0-14 per 100 working-age individuals - is also significantly higher than county and state averages.

Focus groups and key informants also pointed to social isolation and a lack

of programming for many small - yet underserved and overlooked populations. Seniors living alone, marginalized youth, and low-income households are often unsure of where to turn to meet their basic needs like food, housing, or emergency services. In fact, social isolation is one of the few community health issues reported more frequently in Wellesley than the rest of the region (30% vs. 28%).



Supporting data

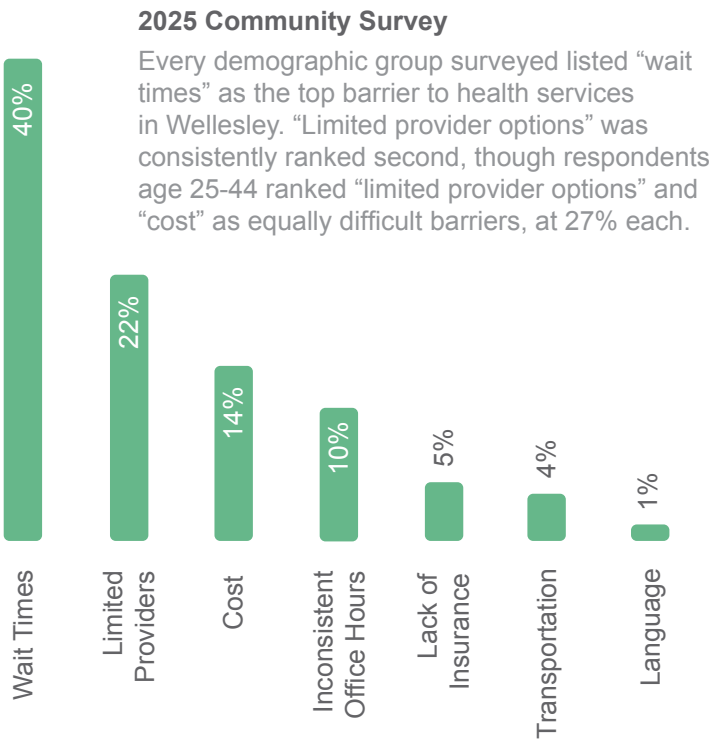
“Accessing state resources requires travel, which means missing work, arranging childcare...so it’s not just a simple errand.

It’s a full-day effort.

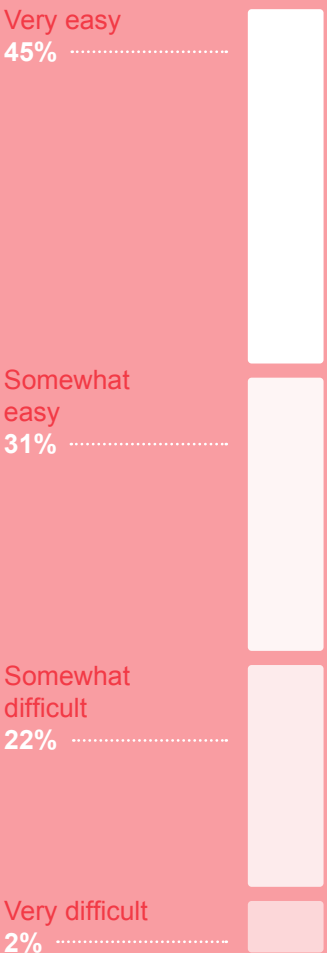
Wellesley Youth Commission



Top Barriers to Health Services



Ease or difficulty accessing healthcare services in Wellesley



Older populations face more logistical and financial barriers, while younger populations may resist seeking help.

Wellesley Town Selectman



➤ ➤ ➤ Recommendations

- 1** Develop centralized, easy-to-navigate resource directories and trackable referral pathways.
- 2** Assess housing options for aging adults to mitigate the high costs of aging in place and reduce social isolation for a population often unsupported by the current health infrastructure.
- 3** Develop a regular, formal, interdepartmental social worker meeting to discuss common challenges, share best practices, and coordinate services more efficiently and effectively.

Summary of recommendations

>>> General health and wellbeing

Themes

High rates of chronic health conditions and stress-related concerns among residents.

Most residents report good to excellent overall health.

Youth face growing concerns around sedentary lifestyles, overscheduling, and lack of unstructured time.

Supporting Data

Over half of respondents experienced a chronic health condition in the past year.

More than 80% rate their health as “Good” or “Excellent.”

Parents, educators, and youth note limited free play and rising anxiety from academic and social pressures.

Recommendations

Promote social connectedness and physical activity through inclusive and intergenerational recreation and enrichment programs.

Expand access to safe community spaces for teens and young adults to spend time.

Coordinate public education on chronic disease prevention and active living, focusing on the community’s aging population and their specific intersecting needs.

>>> Substance use and risk factors

Themes

Alcohol, marijuana, and vaping are key concerns, especially among youth and working adults.

Substance use is often linked to unmanaged mental health issues.

Barriers to seeking help include stigma, lack of awareness, and fear of judgment.

Supporting Data

Substance use ranked as a top public concern by residents.

1 in 10 respondents reported a household member affected by substance misuse.

Stigma and fear of judgment were the most commonly cited barriers to accessing support.

Recommendations

Expand prevention education in schools and through pediatric/primary care.

Provide discreet, non-punitive options for recovery and support.

Develop an alcohol use campaign targeted to middle and high school students using positive social norms.

Summary of recommendations

>>> Mental health and support

Themes

Mental health is the top-rated community health concern.

Youth, caregivers, and older adults face persistent mental health challenges.

Shortage of mental health providers, especially those serving children and teens.

Supporting Data

Nearly half of respondents reported experiencing mental health concerns in the past year.

A significant majority believe more youth-focused mental health services are needed.

Residents report difficulty finding timely, affordable care.

Recommendations

Increase school-based and community mental health staffing, and equip teachers with the knowledge and tools they need to identify challenges early.

Launch public education efforts to reduce stigma, promote help-seeking, and teach healthy coping strategies - particularly for youth.

Improve access to intermediate care options for youth and young adults by offering flexible scheduling, transportation and/or convenient locations.

>>> Health access and social issues

Themes

Challenges accessing care include long waitlists, limited provider options, and cost.

Social isolation and lack of inclusive programming affect many groups, especially seniors and marginalized youth.

Many residents are unsure where to turn for basic needs like food, housing, or emergency help.

Supporting Data

The most common access barriers are long wait times and limited local providers.

Only a third of residents said they know where to go for basic needs assistance.

Groups such as newcomers, low-income residents, students of color, and seniors face compounded challenges.

Recommendations

Develop centralized, easy-to-navigate resource directories and trackable referral pathways.

Assess housing options for aging adults to mitigate the high costs of aging in place and reduce social isolation for a population often unsupported by the current health infrastructure.

Develop a regular, formal, interdepartmental social worker meeting to discuss common challenges, share best practices, and coordinate services more efficiently and effectively.

Data sources

American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables, 2022

Babson College Annual Security & Fire Safety Report, 2025

Boston College Annual Security & Fire Safety Report, 2025

Bureau of Substance Addiction Services, Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Wellesley Community Profile Dashboard, 2024

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