



Building Your Legacy

Addressing Mental Health and Substance Use

As a nation, our **mental health** is on the decline and **substance use disorder** is at an all-time high. This has wide-reaching societal impacts; **one in three Americans** know someone who has died of an overdose, and **one in five** live with a mental illness. People with mental health and/or substance use disorders deserve access to treatment and support. In addition to treating those affected, county officials can also help prevent mental health and substance use disorders in their communities.

Housing

Housing stress – often brought on by insufficient, poor quality, or unaffordable housing – is associated with **poorer mental health** and higher rates of **substance use**. Increasing access to high-quality, affordable housing, therefore, can help prevent mental illness and substance use in a community by reducing housing-related stressors. See NACo's [Advancing Local Housing Affordability: Best Practice and Policy Recommendations for County Leaders](#) for ways that counties can improve housing in their communities.

Education

Higher levels of education are associated with lower rates of **depression and anxiety**. Expanding access to early childhood education is one way that county officials can improve education in their communities. **High quality, accessible pre-K programs** lead to increased high school graduation rates and higher earnings, which ultimately improve mental health and prevent substance use disorders.

Adolescence is also an important time to intervene and prevent substance use disorders. School-based intervention programs that educate adolescents about addiction, dispel misconceptions, help young people develop social-emotional skills, and facilitate the practice of resistance techniques can be effective in reducing rates of substance use disorder in a community. **Botvin LifeSkills Training** is one example of a curriculum that has proven effective at reducing prescription drug misuse by **as much as 79%**.

Making the Case: Housing, Mental Health & Substance Use

In one large, nationally representative study that followed individuals over five years, those who experienced some form of **housing stress** had worse mental health than those who did not experience housing stress.

Similarly, **another study** showed that substance use was highest among participants who were unstably housed.

Complete Streets

Feelings of isolation can lead to poor mental health. Public transportation and better pedestrian infrastructure (e.g., sidewalks, buses, streetcars, light rail, ferries, subways, and private sector services like [paratransit](#) or ride-sharing) can increase social connection among community members, leading to better mental health. Public transportation and sidewalks also promote [physical activity](#) and [time outdoors](#), both of which have proven benefits for mental health.

Increased Green Space

Higher levels of green space in a neighborhood are associated with significantly [lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress](#). County officials can improve mental health outcomes by increasing the amount of green space in their communities. Simple interventions like picking up trash and adding plants can enhance a neighborhood's green space.

Making the Case: Education, Mental Health & Substance Use

An extra year of education can lead to lower likelihood of depression and anxiety [more than two decades later](#). Even among people who do suffer from depression and anxiety, higher levels of education are associated with [less severe symptoms](#).

Making the Case: Green Space & Mental Health

Even weekly exposure to nature is associated with [lower levels of depression](#).



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