

## The Future of Substance Use Prevention in Georgia: Five Trends Communities Should Be Watching

This article explores five trends that are helping shape the future of substance use prevention in Georgia. They include a changing substance use landscape, a greater focus on upstream prevention, increased use of data to guide decisions, the growing role of policy and advocacy, and stronger partnerships with youth and community members. Each trend offers a different view of where prevention is headed, but together they point toward a common goal: building a prevention system that can grow and adapt along with the communities it serves. Understanding these trends can help Georgia strengthen what is working today while preparing for what comes next.

### Trend 1: The Substance Landscape Is Becoming More Complex

The substance use landscape is changing quickly, creating new challenges for prevention professionals and communities across Georgia. Vaping is a clear example. What began largely as a concern about electronic cigarettes has evolved into a much broader range of devices and products that can deliver nicotine, marijuana, and other substances. At the same time, marijuana continues to present prevention challenges such as laws, products, marketing, and public attitudes change across the country. For young people in particular, changing perceptions of risk can make prevention messaging more complicated. Prevention efforts must go beyond simply telling youth that a substance is harmful. Communities need credible, age-appropriate information that helps young people and families understand risks while also addressing the social norms, access, marketing, and other local conditions that influence use.

Opioids and fentanyl have also fundamentally changed the prevention landscape. The risks associated with the illicit drug supply mean that substance use that may once have been viewed primarily through the lens of addiction can now carry the possibility of severe or fatal consequences. This reality calls for a broader approach that recognizes the important roles of both primary prevention and harm reduction. Preventing or delaying substance use among young people remains essential, but communities must also consider strategies that reduce immediate risks and connect individuals and families with appropriate services. For prevention professionals, this means strengthening partnerships with public health agencies, behavioral health providers, schools, healthcare organizations, first responders, families, and others who see different pieces of the problem.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is preparing for what comes next. Georgia communities must also be ready for new substance use trends before they become larger problems. New drugs and products can appear quickly, and social media can help trends spread even faster. Good prevention **anticipates rather than reacts**. This means looking ahead, watching for changes, and building strong prevention systems before a crisis happens. Communities can use local data to notice changes in substance use, attitudes, and access. They can also listen to young people, parents, teachers, healthcare providers, and other community members. These voices can help identify concerns that may not yet appear in surveys or other data.

Being prepared does not mean creating a new program or campaign every time a new substance appears. Instead, communities can build the skills and partnerships needed to respond to many different challenges. Prevention professionals can regularly review data, strengthen relationships with community partners, learn about new trends, and understand the reasons behind substance use. When a new concern appears, the community is then better prepared to decide whether action is needed and what type of response will work best. By planning ahead instead of waiting for a problem to grow, Georgia communities can make prevention more timely, thoughtful, and effective.

## **Trend 2: Prevention Is Moving Upstream**

Being prepared for new substance use trends also means looking beyond the substances themselves. For many years, prevention efforts focused heavily on specific drugs and the risks of using them. That work is still important, but prevention is increasingly moving “upstream.” Upstream prevention asks communities to look at what is happening before substance use begins. Instead of waiting for a problem to appear and then reacting, communities can identify and address the conditions that make substance use more or less likely. This approach fits with the idea that good prevention anticipates rather than reacts.

One way to move upstream is to understand **risk and protective factors**. Risk factors are conditions that can increase the chance of substance use, while protective factors can lower that risk and help young people thrive. These factors can exist within families, schools, peer groups, and entire communities. They can also be shaped by the non-medical drivers of health or the conditions where people are born, grow, learn, live, work, and play. Poverty, limited access to healthcare, unsafe neighborhoods, and other challenges can affect health and well-being. Adverse childhood experiences, often called ACEs, can also increase risks later in life. Prevention can help by reducing these risks while building stronger protective factors around young people.

This upstream approach also shows why substance use prevention and mental health promotion increasingly overlap. They are not the same field, and each requires its own knowledge, strategies, and services. However, many of the factors that support positive mental health can also protect against substance use. Connection, coping skills, supportive relationships, safe environments, and a sense of belonging can strengthen overall well-being. This creates opportunities for prevention professionals, schools, behavioral health organizations, families, and community groups to work together rather than addressing every concern separately.

The future of prevention in Georgia, then, cannot be measured only by whether young people avoid a particular substance. It should also be reflected in whether young people have the support and opportunities they need to grow and succeed. Moving upstream means asking broader questions: **Do young people feel safe? Do they feel connected? Do they have adults they can trust? Do they believe they matter in their community?** When Georgia communities invest in the conditions that help young people thrive, they are not stepping away from substance use prevention. They are strengthening its foundation.

### **Trend 3: Communities Are Expecting Prevention to Be Data-Driven**

As prevention moves upstream, communities need a structured way to determine where to focus their efforts. The **Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF)** guides this work through five steps: **Assessment, Capacity, Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation**, with cultural competence and sustainability integrated throughout. Using data, communities identify priority problems and contributing factors, build capacity, select and implement appropriate strategies, and evaluate results. This approach helps ensure prevention efforts are data-informed, responsive to local needs, and sustainable.

Numbers are an important part of this process, but they do not tell the whole story. Surveys may show that youth vaping has increased, for example, but they may not explain why. To understand the reasons behind the numbers, prevention professionals need to listen to the community. Focus groups, key informant interviews, community meetings, youth discussions, and conversations with parents, teachers, healthcare providers, and other local leaders can provide valuable information. Young people are especially important partners because they can often explain what they are seeing and experiencing in ways that cannot be captured by a survey. Combining this community knowledge with quantitative data gives prevention professionals a clearer picture of both what is happening and why it is happening.

Georgia communities have many sources of information that can support this work. Student surveys can provide information about youth substance use, perceptions, behaviors, and school experiences. Public health and overdose data can help identify health trends and consequences. Schools, hospitals, law enforcement agencies, healthcare providers, and community organizations may also have useful local information. Community assessments can bring these different sources together and help identify gaps that may not be obvious when looking at one set of numbers. The goal is not to collect as much data as possible. It is to collect and understand the right data so communities can make better prevention decisions.

Being data-driven also changes what it means to use evidence-based prevention. Evidence-based prevention is not simply finding a successful program and bringing it into a community. A strategy may have strong research behind it and still be the wrong response to the problem a community has identified. Communities need evidence that connects the problem, its root causes and local conditions, and the selected strategy. They also need to evaluate their work and be willing to adjust when the results show that something is not working as expected. In this way, data is more than a requirement for reports or grants. It becomes a tool for learning, making better decisions, and investing limited prevention resources where they can have the greatest impact.

### **Trend 4: Policy and Advocacy Are Becoming Essential Prevention Tools**

Some of the most lasting prevention efforts happen when communities change the policies, systems, and environments that influence substance use. Instead of focusing only on individual behavior, these approaches help create conditions that support

healthier choices for everyone. Examples include alcohol and tobacco retailer policies, responsible beverage service practices, smoke- and vape-free environments, prescription drug disposal and safe-storage efforts, school policies, and local enforcement practices. As marijuana products and other emerging substances continue to change, prevention professionals can also help communities consider how new policies may affect youth access, perceptions of harm, and community health.

Advocacy is an important part of this work. Prevention professionals have valuable knowledge that can help decision-makers understand substance use issues and the possible impact of policy decisions. Advocacy can include educating elected officials, sharing local data and community experiences, providing information about evidence-based prevention, and building relationships with policymakers throughout the year. It also means helping community members understand how decisions are made and how they can make their voices heard. When prevention professionals participate in these conversations, they can help move prevention from responding to problems toward creating healthier environments before problems grow.

In Georgia, Voices for Prevention (V4P) helps strengthen the prevention field's ability to participate in advocacy and policy education. With more than 700 members across the state, V4P provides legislative and policy updates, advocacy education and training, networking opportunities, resources, and opportunities for prevention professionals and community members to engage with decision-makers. Annual events such as Substance Use Prevention Day bring prevention advocates together to educate policymakers and raise awareness about issues affecting Georgia communities. This work reinforces an important idea for the future of prevention: policy decisions affect prevention, so prevention voices need to be part of policy conversations.

### **Trend 5: Youth and Community Members Are Becoming Partners, Not Just Audiences**

Just as prevention professionals are finding a stronger voice in policy decisions, communities are also recognizing that the people most affected by prevention efforts should have a voice in shaping them. Traditional prevention is often focused on delivering information to a community. The future of prevention is increasingly about working with the community. Community listening sessions, focus groups, youth advisory councils, parent and caregiver engagement, and input from people with lived and living experience can help communities better understand what is happening and what solutions may work. This is especially important in rural and historically underserved communities, where local experiences and needs may not always be reflected in state or national data.

Young people can be some of the most valuable partners in this work. Youth-led prevention, peer-to-peer strategies, youth advisory councils, and advocacy opportunities allow young people to bring their ideas and experiences directly into prevention planning. They can help adults understand how young people communicate, what they are seeing among their peers, which messages feel believable, and how social media and other influences shape attitudes about substance use. Rather than viewing youth

only as the audience for prevention messages, communities can recognize them as partners who can help identify problems and develop solutions.

There is also an important difference between youth participation and youth leadership. Inviting young people to attend an event, complete a survey, or appear in a prevention campaign is participation. Leadership goes further. It means giving young people meaningful opportunities to help set priorities, develop strategies, create messages, speak with decision-makers, and evaluate prevention efforts. Adults still provide guidance and support, but they also create space for young people to influence decisions. The same principle applies to parents, caregivers, people with lived experience, and other community members: meaningful engagement requires more than simply asking for input after decisions have already been made.

This shift toward partnership strengthens many of the ideas at the heart of the future of prevention. It builds community connectedness, improves the information used to make decisions, and can lead to strategies that better reflect local needs and experiences. Most importantly, it builds community ownership. People are more likely to understand, support, and sustain prevention efforts when they have helped shape them. The strongest prevention strategies are not simply delivered to a community—they are built alongside the people who live there.

### **What These Trends Mean for Georgia**

Georgia does not have to build its prevention system from the ground up. Across the state, prevention professionals, community coalitions, schools, public health agencies, behavioral health organizations, youth groups, and other partners are already working to prevent substance use and strengthen communities. The opportunity now is to build on that foundation. This means strengthening the prevention workforce, improving access to timely local data, investing in prevention infrastructure in rural communities, and building stronger partnerships across sectors. It also means protecting prevention funding while finding new and diverse resources that can help communities continue their work overtime.

The next chapter of prevention in Georgia should also give communities a stronger role in shaping solutions. Youth leadership should be supported and expanded, and prevention professionals need the knowledge and confidence to participate in advocacy and policy conversations that affect their communities. At the same time, Georgia can continue moving resources upstream—investing not only in preventing individual substances, but also in the protective factors, relationships, opportunities, and healthy environments that help people thrive. These approaches allow prevention to become part of the larger work of building strong and healthy communities.

The substances and challenges facing Georgia will continue to change, which is why the future of prevention cannot depend on simply reacting to the next crisis. Good prevention anticipates rather than reacts. It uses data to recognize change, listens to communities, builds partnerships before they are needed, and creates policies and environments that support healthy choices. Georgia already has many of the people,

partnerships, and systems needed to do this work. Strengthening those resources today can help ensure that communities are ready not only for the prevention challenges they face now, but also for whatever comes next.

## **Sources & Resources**

1. Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) - Substance Abuse Prevention  
A strong primary source for Georgia's prevention system, statewide initiatives, youth leadership efforts, prescription drug prevention, and the Georgia Strategic Prevention System.
2. Georgia Strategic Prevention System (GASPS) Data Warehouse  
Provides Georgia prevention professionals with state- and county-level information, including student health surveys, substance-related indicators, vital records, treatment information, and other data useful for community assessment and planning.
3. Georgia Department of Public Health - Drug Surveillance Unit  
An important Georgia-specific resource for opioid and overdose surveillance. DPH reports that fentanyl has played a major role in Georgia's overdose landscape and uses surveillance to identify trends and overdose clusters.
4. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) - Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF)  
Supports the article's emphasis on data-driven prevention. The SPF guides communities through assessment, capacity building, planning, implementation, and evaluation while emphasizing community participation and evidence-informed decision-making.
5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) - Substance Use Among Youth  
Useful for the discussion of risk and protective factors. CDC identifies factors such as family engagement, family support, parental monitoring, and school connectedness as protective against youth substance use.
6. CDC - School Connectedness Helps Students Thrive  
Supports the upstream-prevention section. CDC identifies school connectedness as an important protective factor associated with lower levels of substance use and poor mental health as well as stronger educational outcomes.
7. CDC - Adverse Childhood Experiences: Risk and Protective Factors  
Provides background for understanding how family, community, economic, and environmental conditions can increase or decrease risks for young people.

8. CDC - Drug-Free Communities Support Program  
Particularly useful for the sections on community-level prevention and youth leadership. The program emphasizes changing community conditions and engaging youth meaningfully in prevention planning and activities.
9. CDC - Preventing Alcohol-Related Harms  
Supports the policy and environmental prevention section by explaining how community and state policies can influence alcohol availability, access, price, and related harms.
10. Voices for Prevention (V4P)  
A Georgia-specific resource for the article's advocacy discussion. V4P provides policy education, prevention education, advocacy resources, networking, and opportunities for youth and prevention professionals to participate in statewide prevention efforts.