



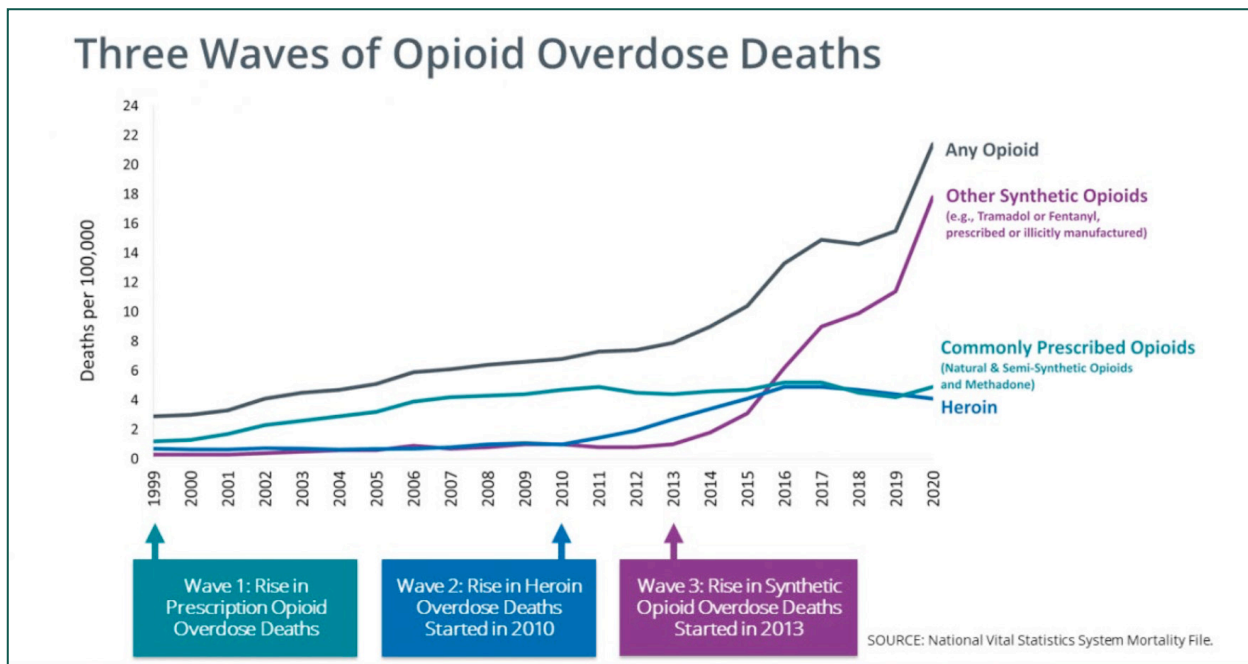
NATIONAL RECREATION  
AND PARK ASSOCIATION



## **Mentorship for Rural Youth Impacted by Opioids in the Appalachian Region**

# Introduction

The opioid epidemic has been an ongoing public health crisis with substantial impacts on communities across the nation. More than 564,000 people died from an opioid overdose between 1999 and 2020.<sup>1</sup> The growth in overdose mortality during this period is often described as an “opioid crisis” without recognizing that this crisis has three distinct waves, each leading to greater risk of overdose. The first wave of the opioid epidemic began in the 1990s, when the over-prescribing of opioids and the illicit trade of prescription opioids led to a rise in overdose deaths. In 2010, as states began to enact policies to limit access to prescription opioids without addressing the underlying issues of addiction, the United States saw a rapid increase in overdose deaths involving heroin. The third wave of dramatic increases in overdose deaths aligned with the rise in synthetic opioids, such as illicitly manufactured fentanyl, which are often added to heroin and other substances. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has further exacerbated the opioid overdose crisis in the United States, likely due to increased isolation, joblessness and difficulties in accessing substance use treatment. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported a rapid acceleration in drug overdose deaths in the early months of the pandemic, with the largest number of drug overdoses ever recorded for a 12-month period occurring between June 2019 and May 2020.<sup>2</sup> Provisional CDC data has shown continued increase in drug overdose deaths, with nearly 15 percent more deaths in 2021 than 2020. It is estimated that more than 100,000 people in the United States died of a drug overdose in 2021.<sup>3</sup>

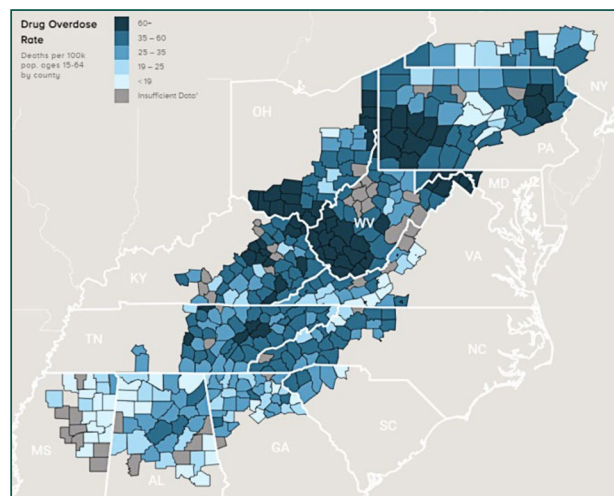


In this brief, we will discuss the impact of opioid misuse in the Appalachian region and explore the ongoing work of the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) Youth Mentoring Initiative to address and mitigate the risks associated with opioid misuse for children and adolescents in Appalachia through the implementation of a youth mentorship program.

# Impacts of Opioid Misuse in the Appalachian Region

The [Appalachian region](#) (geographic region in the Eastern United States that stretches from southern New York to northern Mississippi. States include Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.) has experienced some of the highest rates of drug overdose mortality across the United States. In 2018, the overdose mortality rate in the Appalachian region was 48 percent higher than the non-Appalachian United States.<sup>4</sup> Between 2018 and 2020\*, the overdose mortality rate increased significantly across the country, and the Appalachian region continued to have a mortality rate 50 percent higher than the non-Appalachian United States.<sup>5</sup> For both males and females, the overdose mortality disparity between the Appalachian region and the non-Appalachian United States is the greatest for the population ages 25 to 44.<sup>4</sup> The significant burden of overdose mortality for this age group presents several concerns. First, individuals in this age range are in their prime working years, leading to potential economic impacts for the region. Perhaps of even greater concern, individuals in this age range are also in their childbearing and rearing years, creating significant impacts on children within the Appalachian region.

## Drug Overdose Mortality in Appalachia (2015-2019)<sup>6</sup>



Children and adolescents are impacted significantly by opioid misuse in their household and communities. Potential adverse consequences include increased risk of mental health disorders and substance use, child neglect or impaired parenting and attachment, material deprivation due to money spent on substance, and family dissolution or extended separation from parents due to incarceration, inpatient substance treatment, placement in foster care, or loss of a parent to an overdose.<sup>7,8</sup>

\*Most recently available CDC data at the time of this report.

High levels of opioid misuse in communities can place a significant burden on social service systems, such as the foster care system. Since 2012, increases in home removals due to parental substance use has led to an increase in foster care entries.<sup>9</sup> Research has shown that counties with higher rates of overdose deaths and drug-related hospitalizations also experienced higher rates of entry into the foster care system.<sup>10</sup> Many children are also placed in kinship care, with grandparents often assuming the role of primary caregiver. Recent research in the Appalachian region has shown a direct relationship between county-level overdose mortality and the proportion of grandparents serving as primary caregivers.<sup>11</sup> Grandparents serving in this role often have health and social challenges of their own, and often have limited financial means to serve as primary caregivers.

Children living in households with opioid misuse are likely to have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). CDC describes adverse childhood experiences as “potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (from birth to 17 years) such as experiencing violence, abuse or neglect; witnessing violence in the home; and having a family member attempt or die by suicide. Also included are aspects of the child’s environment that can undermine their sense of safety, stability and bonding such as growing up in a household with substance misuse, mental health problems or instability due to parental separation or incarceration of a parent, sibling or other member of the household.”<sup>12,13,14</sup> There are many documented effects of exposure to ACEs, including increased risk of substance misuse and other unhealthy coping behaviors<sup>12,15,16</sup> and negative impacts on education, employment and income outcomes as adults.<sup>17</sup>

There are several strategies that can prevent and mitigate the consequences of ACEs. Understanding these strategies is critical, particularly in the Appalachian region, where opioid misuse and other economic hardships are common. Examples of these strategies include strengthening economic supports for families, ensuring a strong start for children, and connecting youth to caring adults and activities.<sup>12</sup> CDC identifies mentoring programs as one of the effective interventions to connect youth to caring adults and activities. These programs can improve behavioral, social, emotional, and academic outcomes for children and adolescents who participate.<sup>18,19</sup> Due to lack of youth development opportunities and the significant risks associated with high levels of opioid misuse in Appalachian region communities,, NRPA implemented a program focused on mentorship for rural youth impacted by opioids in Central Appalachia.



*Photo courtesy of freepik.com*



# Youth Mentoring Through Parks and Recreation

## Background

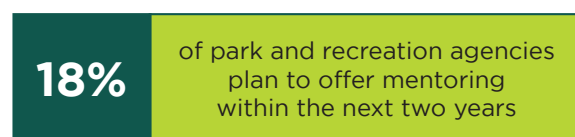
NRPA recognizes the impact that substance/opioid use disorder has on youth and their communities. Substance use can negatively impact academic performance, physical and mental health and well-being, while placing stress on relationships with peers and family members. Early substance use may also contribute to lifelong challenges such as dependence, chronic health issues and social and financial consequences.<sup>20</sup> To address this, **NRPA has been supporting local agencies in their efforts to pilot a mentorship program for youth impacted by the opioid epidemic in rural, central Appalachia.** From 2018 to 2022, NRPA worked with five communities to develop and implement a sustainable mentoring program targeting at-risk youth living in rural, underserved communities. Funding for this program (Grant # 2018-JU-FX-0036) is provided by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), a component of the Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.

## Benefits of Mentoring

Park and recreation agencies bring a unique set of assets and strengths to youth mentoring. They serve as community-based providers of essential health, recreation, nature-based and educational services proven to have a positive impact on well-being. In times of elevated public health and social challenges including trauma, adverse childhood experiences, mental health conditions, substance misuse, community violence and attacks on civil rights, parks and recreation are well-suited to build protective factors around youth and families that counter these challenges and create positive experiences and opportunities.

Youth who have a mentor are **55 percent less likely to skip a day of school than their peers and maintain better attitudes** towards school. They are **78 percent more likely to volunteer regularly, 81 percent more likely to participate in sports, and 130 percent more likely to hold leadership positions in future careers.** Mentoring also plays a role in preventing young people from engaging in harmful behaviors. Youth with mentors are **46 percent less likely than their peers to engage in substance use.**<sup>21</sup>

**Yet, one in three young people in the United States reaches the age of 19 without having a mentor of any kind.** NRPA is working with local park and recreation agencies to close that gap by developing both formal and informal youth mentoring opportunities through parks and recreation.



## Grantee Profiles

NRPA has been supporting five rural communities in the central Appalachian region as they develop and implement formal one-on-one and group youth mentoring services in areas impacted by the opioid epidemic. An evaluation of these agencies determined that the mentoring programs were impactful for both youth mentees and adult mentors. Over the course of the grant, more than 100 youth were provided with direct mentoring services. **Of these mentees:**

<b>50%+</b>	increased their involvement in the community	<b>38%</b>	percent increased their pro-social behavior
<b>47%</b>	percent increased their social competency	<b>31%</b>	improved their attendance at school
<b>40%</b>	percent reported improved social support	<b>26%</b>	reported improved family relationships

**More than 100 adults** also participated in the youth mentoring program. Of these mentors, **48 percent reported an increase in overall mentoring knowledge.** They gained the highest levels of knowledge in providing direction regarding substance use disorder (41 percent).

## Mentoring Best Practices

NRPA staff identified best practices in a variety of ways. Primarily, NRPA spoke directly with park and recreation staff from the five agencies participating in the OJJDP-funded grant. These focus groups centered on topics such as establishing mentoring programs, developing partnerships, recruiting, matching mentors/mentees and providing advice for fellow park and recreation agencies involved in youth mentoring. Staff also drew on input provided during technical assistance sessions and success stories shared by grantees. In-person and virtual site-visits with grantees and other evaluation data collected throughout the duration of the grant also were considered. NRPA determined what was (and wasn't) a best practice based on the impact of the practice, its alignment with other published materials on mentoring, and how widespread its implementation was across the different grantees. **A number of best practices were discovered and grouped into the following key themes:**

- 1** Establishing the program
- 2** Partnerships
- 3** Staffing
- 4** Recruitment
- 5** Matching

[> Click here to read the full guide.<sup>22</sup>](#)



## Resources and Future Efforts

NRPA supports efforts to expand additional mentoring opportunities by providing training, guidance, resources and professional development opportunities (including in-person and virtual learning events) to the field of parks and recreation to advance an agency and community-wide “mentoring mindset.” Park and recreation professionals are regularly interacting with youth in a variety of roles — youth sports coaches, afterschool and summer program leaders, employers of youth, environmental educators, etc. Applying a mentoring mindset and equipping park and recreation professionals with additional skills, competencies and confidence to serve as mentors in these roles provides another opportunity to advance social-emotional learning and positive youth development.

NRPA has also developed several resources to support professionals as they advance mentoring programs including NRPA’s *Youth Mentoring Framework*<sup>23</sup> and *Mentor Training Resource*,<sup>24</sup> as well as a set of supplemental resources focused on family engagement, career pathways, community services and closure in the mentoring relationship.

Resource	Description
<a href="#">MENTOR’s <i>Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring</i></a> <sup>25</sup>	<p>Details research-informed and practitioner-approved Standards for creating and sustaining quality youth mentoring programs and consequently impactful mentoring relationships.</p>
<a href="#">Search Institute’s <i>Developmental Assets Framework</i></a> <sup>26</sup>	<p>Search Institute has identified 40 positive supports and strengths that young people need to succeed. Half of the assets focus on the relationships and opportunities they need in their families, schools and communities (external assets). The remaining assets focus on the social-emotional strengths, values and commitments that are nurtured within young people (internal assets).</p>
<a href="#">NRPA’s <i>Connect Forum</i></a> <sup>27</sup>	<p>NRPA Connect is an online professional networking tool that allows you to connect with like-minded park and recreation professionals from across the country.</p>
<a href="#">NRPA’s <i>Community Needs Assessment Tool</i></a> <sup>28</sup>	<p>Guides you through the entire community needs assessment lifecycle — from deciding on clear goals to eliciting a high response rate from your community.</p>
<a href="#">Opioid Misuse <i>Community Assessment Tool</i></a> <sup>29</sup>	<p>Provides county-level maps for substance and opioid overdose mortality, with overlays for other socio-demographic and economic indicators.</p>
<a href="#">Recovery Ecosystem <i>Index Mapping Tool</i></a> <sup>30</sup>	<p>Provides county-level maps of the Recovery Ecosystem Index, which describes community-level factors that are in place to support individuals in recovery from substance use disorder.</p>
<a href="#">Rural Health <i>Information Hub</i></a> <sup>31</sup>	<p>The Rural Health Information Hub (RHIfhub) is a national clearinghouse on rural health issues. The RHIfhub is a guide to improving health for rural residents, providing access to current and reliable resources and tools about rural health needs and work to address them</p>

NRPA and partners are committed to expanding youth mentoring services through parks and recreation by providing capacity building assistance, training and technical assistance, professional development opportunities, best practices and guidance, and peer networking.





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