

# Findings on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in West Virginia

## Executive Summary

### *Stumbling Blocks or Stepping Stones*

#### Introduction

In West Virginia, we care about each other, and we want our children to have long, healthy, happy lives. We all want our children to reach their fullest potential.

We know our earliest experiences as children are critical in shaping who we become as adults. Positive experiences in childhood can build a strong foundation for learning, strengthen brain development and help us be healthier.

A growing body of research shows that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma have a profound impact and can be a stumbling block to our health and well-being. When negative experiences outweigh positive experiences, it can lead to a physiological response in our bodies, which increases risks of many health issues.

The good news is that research also confirms that the presence of protective factors can buffer the impact of ACEs, so that adversity in childhood does not need to remain a stumbling block, but can be transformed into a stepping stone for a healthy, successful life.

The WV ACEs Issue Brief highlights the linkages between high ACE scores and common contemporary health problems facing West Virginians, including the ongoing opioid epidemic. More importantly, the Issue Brief also highlights effective strategies and protective factors that help prevent childhood adversity and build resilience for those who have experienced trauma.

We know that opportunity and adversity are not equally distributed across our population. Too many families are facing trauma on a daily basis and have experienced ACEs during their childhood. We must work to enact policies and implement strategies that build protective factors that can counterbalance the effects of adversity and produce better outcomes, as well as preventing ACEs from ever occurring.

#### Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Public Health

ACEs are traumatic events that occur in a child's life prior to the age of 18. These negative experiences can harm a child's brain and development, which can result in long-term health problems. The initial Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study<sup>1</sup> concluded that individuals who experienced a higher number of ACEs were more likely to experience more mental and physical health problems. Individuals with four or more ACEs were found to be substantially more likely to have serious health concerns. **Our analysis of West Virginia data also shows a substantial increased likelihood of poor health outcomes linked with higher numbers of ACEs.**

One of the most urgent reasons to address ACEs is the link between opioid addiction and early childhood adversity. A 2016 study found that individuals who reported 5 or more ACEs were 3x more likely to misuse prescription pain medication and 5x more likely to engage in injection drug use<sup>2</sup>. Another study found that over 80% of the patients seeking treatment for opioid addiction had at least one form of childhood trauma<sup>3</sup>. A 2010 study<sup>4</sup> concluded that a male child with 6 or more ACEs is 46x more likely to become an intravenous drug user as an adult than a boy with zero ACEs.

#### How ACEs were studied in West Virginia

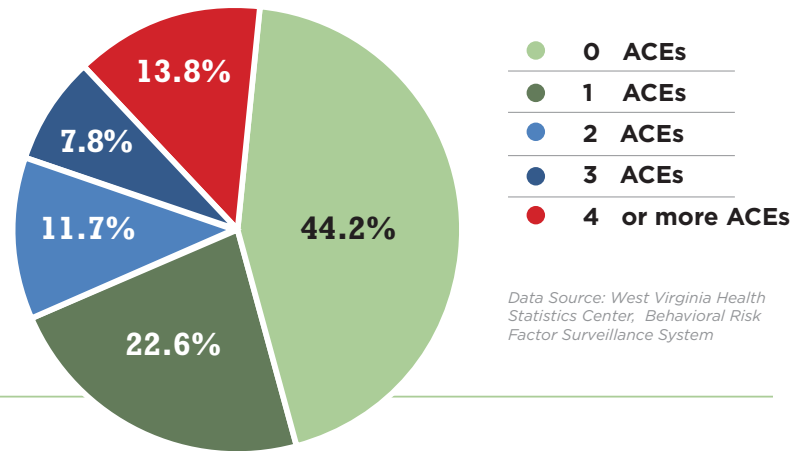
West Virginia included questions about ACEs in the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) questionnaire in 2014. This data was published by the WV Health Statistics Center (HSC) in 2017 in the *West Virginia Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Report 2014*<sup>5</sup>, and in *HSC Statistical Brief #30, Adverse Childhood Experiences*<sup>6</sup>. By including the ACEs Module in the BRFSS, it was possible to correlate ACE scores with health risks and outcomes measured by the survey.

*Note, WV BRFSS data may underestimate the Kaiser-Permanente ACE scores since it measures 8 categories instead of the 10 ACEs measured by the original ACE Study.*

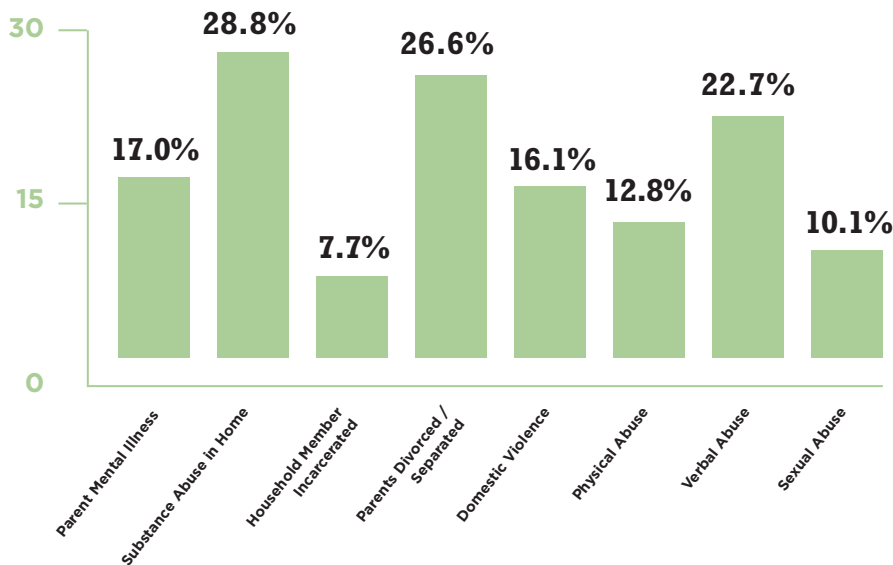
## Prevalence of Number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Among WV Adults, 2014

### Prevalence of ACEs Among WV Adults

According to the analysis, ACEs are common among West Virginia adults. About 55.8% of West Virginia adults report experiencing at least one of eight categories of child abuse and household dysfunction growing up. Approximately 1 in 7 adults (13.8 %) experienced four or more ACEs, indicating a significant level of childhood trauma that greatly increases the risk of poor outcomes.



### Prevalence of Type of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Among WV Adults, 2014



### Prevalence by Type of ACE in West Virginia

The most common ACE was substance abuse in the household, reported by 28.8 %, followed by parental separation / divorce (26.6 %) and verbal abuse (22.7 %).

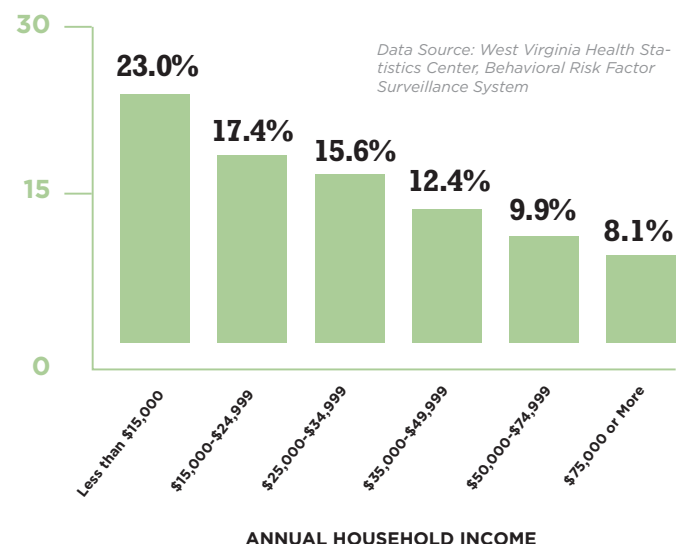
This analysis indicates 1 in 10 West Virginia adults (10.1%) experienced a form of child sexual abuse prior to their 18th birthday.

### Prevalence of ACE by Household Income

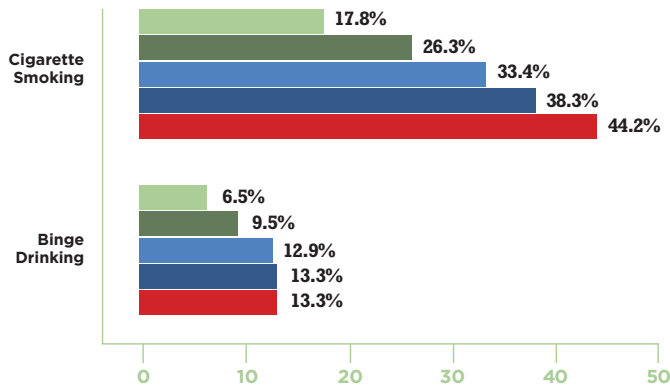
The WV BRFSS indicated a strong correlation between higher levels of adversity in childhood and lower household income levels as adults. A WV adult with an annual household income of less than \$15,000 is nearly three times as likely to have experienced 4 or more ACEs compared to an adult with annual household income of \$75,000 or more.

Nearly 1 in 4 West Virginia adults (23%) with a current household income of less than \$15,000 per year have 4 or more ACEs. One in six (17.4%) of WV adults earning \$15,000 to \$24,999 per year have 4 or more ACEs. On the other end of the spectrum, only 1 in 12 (8.1%) of WV adults earning \$75,000 or more report having 4 or more ACEs.

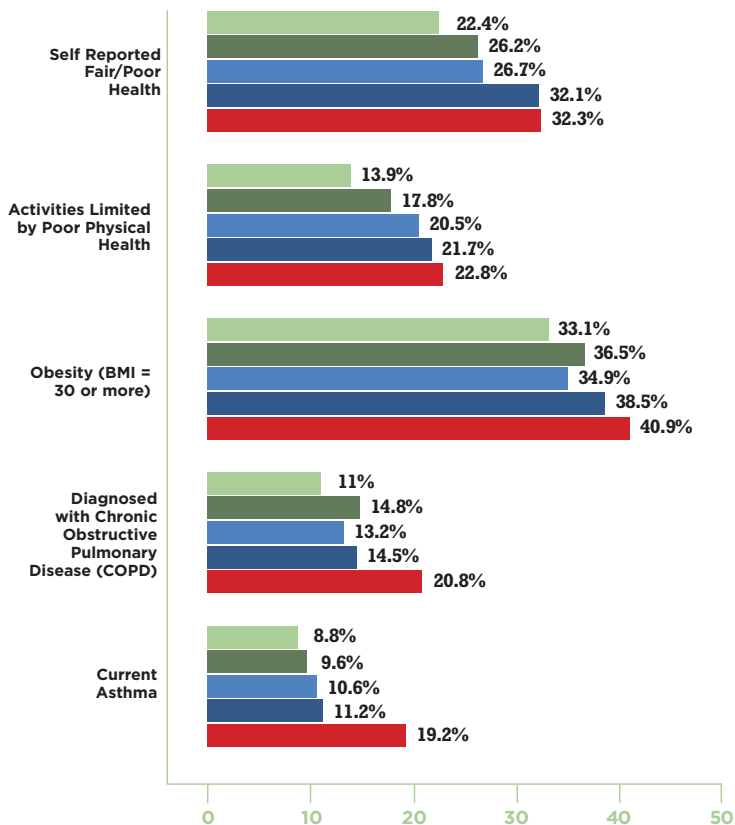
### Prevalence of 4 or more ACEs Among WV Adults by Annual Household Income, 2014



### ACEs Impact Health Risk Behaviors

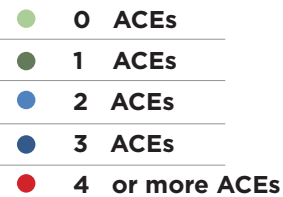


### ACEs Impact Physical Health



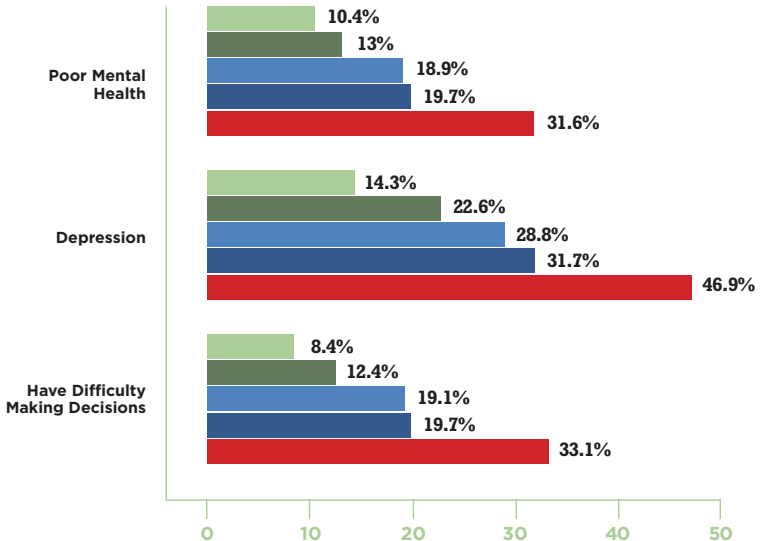
### ACEs Impact Health Outcomes in West Virginia

The WV data shows as the number of ACEs increases, the prevalence of poor health conditions increases substantially. For example, an adult with 4 or more ACEs is more than 2x as likely to have asthma, more than 3x as likely to have poor mental health, and 2.5x as likely to be a smoker when compared to an adult with zero ACEs.



Data Source: West Virginia Health Statistics Center, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2014

### ACEs Impact Mental Health



## Breaking the Cycle: Protective Factors that Prevent ACEs

While ACEs can have a profound impact on health and well-being, research also shows the presence of protective factors can help mitigate the impact of early adversity. Many child and family-serving programs throughout the state are using the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP).

Strengthening Families distills extensive research in child and family development into a core set of five protective factors that act to mitigate risks and promote positive well-being and healthy development.

The five protective factors are:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting & child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Social and emotional competence of children

## Promising Approaches and Initiatives

There are a number of community strategies, programs and initiatives underway, which build these protective factors, help children and families thrive, as well as prevent ACEs from occurring. Please visit our website at <http://www.wvaces.org> to learn more about these programs and other initiatives.

### TIES - Trauma Informed Elementary Schools

TIES is a program led by Crittenton Services, Inc. to bring trauma-informed services to early elementary school classes, grades Pre-K through grade 1. The goal is to bring early intervention to children who exhibit symptoms of chronic stress, or trauma, in the classroom—symptoms that interfere with the child’s ability to learn, such as disruptive, defensive, or withdrawn behavior. Participating schools receive training, have a resource liaison available for consultation and parent education, and receive a therapeutic toolbox for the classroom.

### The Martinsburg Initiative (TMI)

Spearheaded by the Martinsburg Police Department and the Berkeley County Schools, TMI includes an array of community, faith-based, health, law enforcement leaders and organizations working to build strong families and empower communities and apply the recognized science of the ACE Study through a neighborhood school-based strategy that has never been done before.

### Early Childhood Home Visitation / In-Home Family Education

Early Childhood Home Visiting Programs provide a trained home visitor who partners with families so that children grow up healthy, strong and ready to learn. Early childhood home visiting programs have proven effective at reducing child abuse, neglect, and domestic violence and improving health outcomes for children and parents.

### Handle With Care

Handle With Care is a statewide trauma-informed response to child maltreatment and children’s exposure to violence. If a law enforcement officer encounters a child during a call, that child’s information is forwarded to the school before the school bell rings the next day. The school implements individual, class and whole school trauma-sensitive curricula so that traumatized children are “Handled With Care.” If a child needs more intervention, on-site trauma-focused mental healthcare is available at the school.

## In Conclusion

The ACEs Coalition of West Virginia presents this Executive Summary and our ACEs Issue Brief in an effort to highlight the impact of ACEs on health outcomes, and also as a Call to Action for efforts focused on preventing ACEs from occurring and offering healing and support to build resilience in those who have experienced childhood trauma.

## About the ACEs Coalition of West Virginia

The ACEs Coalition of West Virginia includes over 70 different organizations and individuals working together to improve the health and well-being of all West Virginians by reducing the impact of ACEs and preventing their occurrence.

### We would love to partner with you. Join our Coalition today!

If you would like to learn more about the ACEs Coalition of West Virginia, please visit our website at <http://www.wvaces.org> and follow us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/wvacescoalition/>.

*Funded with support from the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation and the Sisters Health Foundation.  
Thank you very much for your ongoing support of the ACEs Coalition of West Virginia.*

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