

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are negative life events or experiences that occur during childhood (before age 18) and have the potential to impede healthy child development. ACEs can have long-term, damaging consequences and are associated with risk behaviors and poor general health.

Data show that 57% of Wisconsin residents have at least one ACE, and as the number of ACEs increases (higher ACE score), a person is increasingly likely to experience negative health outcomes.¹ (An ACE score does not capture the severity or frequency of an adverse experience; instead, it describes the number of ACE categories experienced.)

Research shows ACEs may be passed down within families, which can cause a cycle of ACE transmission. Wisconsin adults with high ACE scores may be more likely to struggle with substance use disorder (such as misuse of alcohol or drugs), mental health diagnoses, depression, or suicidality. In turn, these risk behaviors and mental health outcomes expose any children living in the household to those specific ACEs.

To assess the occurrence of ACEs among Wisconsin adults, the Wisconsin Behavioral Risk Factor Survey (BRFS)¹ asks people if they experienced any of the following events or circumstances prior to the age of 18:

- Physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Sexual abuse
- An alcohol and/or drug abuser in the household
- An incarcerated household member
- A household member who was chronically depressed, mentally ill, institutionalized, or suicidal
- Violence between adults in the home
- Parental separation or divorce

Wisconsin 2011–2016 BRFS prevalence rates by individual ACE¹

Household Dysfunction	Prevalence	Abuse	Prevalence
Substance abuse in household	26%	Emotional abuse	28%
Divorce or parental separation	23%	Physical abuse	17%
Violence between adults in household	16%	Sexual abuse	10%
Mental illness in household	16%		
Incarcerated member of household	7%		



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ACEs, Trauma, and Resilience

While research shows that ACEs impact all populations regardless of identity, there are some populations that have higher ACE prevalence rates than others. Wisconsin BRFs data (as well as national data) show that black and Native American populations are more likely to have ACEs than their white, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino peers. People who have lower incomes and have completed less education are also more likely to have ACEs than those with higher income and higher education. There are many reasons certain populations are disproportionately impacted by adversity in childhood, and there is still a need for more in-depth research to better understand those correlations. What is known is ACEs are connected to risk behaviors; in other words, people with higher ACE scores are more likely to engage in risky behaviors. This is why ACEs and trauma information have been woven into all of the *Healthy Wisconsin* priorities, as data show there is a connection between each of the priorities and trauma in childhood.¹

Having ACEs in Your Past Doesn't Have to Define Your Future

While ACEs are clearly related to health and behaviors later in life, ACEs do not guarantee negative outcomes. The negative health effects of ACEs can be softened when people have a strong support system and the skills to successfully cope with life's many challenges. This is called resilience. Children learn resilience best when they are given the following positive supports:

- Caring relationships with parents, teachers, counselors, or other adults actively involved in the child's life
- Good peer relationships
- Positive coping style
- Good social skills

Building resilience is a lifelong process. For adults, learning how to adapt to change and recover from setbacks can mean thoughtfully considering behavior and attitudes, learning from the past, and finding healthy ways to cope with daily stress. Some ways to improve resilience at any stage in life include:

- Building strong relationships with family and friends
- Setting realistic personal goals
- Giving oneself credit for positive choices
- Eating well, getting plenty of sleep, and staying active
- Taking proactive action when faced with a challenge

Healthy Wisconsin is working to understand ACEs and other factors that put the health of our citizens at risk. Many programs in Wisconsin are incorporating ACEs awareness and trauma-informed care into their policies and practices, including but not limited to: Wisconsin First Lady Tonette Walker's Fostering Futures initiative (<http://www.fosteringfutureswisconsin.org/>), the Waupaca County Department of Health and Human Services, Milwaukee's juvenile court system, and the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health.

References

¹ Wisconsin Department of Health Services, Division of Public Health. "Wisconsin Behavioral Risk Factor Survey." www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/stats/brfs.htm.

