



THE WELL-BEING OF YOUNG PEOPLE

IN THE CITY OF SANTA CRUZ

2025

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City of Santa Cruz Children & Youth Bill of Rights

Adopted by the Santa Cruz City Council, December 2021

All children and youth have the right to:

1. Have a healthy mind, body, and spirit that enables them to maximize their potential.
2. Develop a healthy attachment to a parent, guardian, or caregiver and an ongoing relationship with a caring and supporting adult.
3. Have a safe and healthy environment, including homes, schools, neighborhoods, and communities.
4. Have access to quality education that promotes future success in school, career, and life.
5. Have training in life skills that will prepare them to live independently, be self-sufficient, and positively contribute to their community.
6. Have employment opportunities with protections from unfair labor practices.
7. Have freedom from mistreatment, abuse, and neglect.
8. Voice opinions in matters of interest to them, develop their leadership capacity, and engage in their community.
9. Feel supported by the larger community and maintain a sense of hope for the future.
10. Be encouraged to explore and express their innate curiosity and creativity.

“The true measure of a nation’s standing is how well it attends to its children — their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies to which they were born.”

Quick List: Opportunities for Action

This report describes community strengths, challenges or concerns, and opportunities for action by the City of Santa Cruz to promote and protect the rights and well-being of young people from birth to age 24. Key themes are listed below for quick reference.

Strengths & Promising Trends

1. Youth-centered programming
2. Youth Liaison program
3. Children's Fund grants
4. Strong Start "birth assets"
5. Student well-being

Challenges & Concerns

1. Child care costs and availability
2. Mental health and wellness
3. Substance abuse and risky behavior
4. Education and opportunities
5. Safety



Opportunities for Action

- 1 Continue to develop and/or enhance child- and youth-centered City policies and programs. Amplify the voices and role of young people in City decision-making processes.
- 2 Increase and/or enhance recreational facilities or activities for young people of all ages.
- 3 Engage with young people and families regularly and consistently, in places and ways that are natural and convenient for them.
- 4 Continue to expand and deepen partnerships with other organizations serving children, youth, and young adults.
- 5 Explore new revenue sources. Communicate with the public about how the City is using its current funding and resources to support the well-being of young people and their families.

Our Commitment to the Well-being of Young People in Santa Cruz

All young people — children, youth, and young adults — have the right to live happy, healthy, fulfilling lives, no matter who they are, what they look like, where they were born, where they live, what language they speak, or what they believe. No young person should be treated unfairly for any reason.

Yet structural inequities exist in both the public and private sectors and across all systems that touch the lives of young people and their families: education, health, housing, employment, criminal justice, child care, philanthropy, and more. The inequities stem from historical and ongoing patterns of discrimination based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, and other characteristics. They are "structural" because they are deeply embedded in society's institutions, laws, regulations, and norms, making them persistent and difficult to eliminate without systemic change.

This is why the Santa Cruz City Council adopted the **Children & Youth Bill of Rights** (Bill of Rights) in December 2021, becoming the first body of electeds in the county to do so. The Bill of Rights serves as both a compass and an accountability tool to ensure that City leaders keep the needs of young people at the forefront of decisions about budgets and government.

This biannual report on **The Well-Being Of Young People in the City of Santa Cruz (Well-being Report)** highlights strengths, challenges, and opportunities for action related to the well-being of young people, from birth to age 24. The Well-being Report provides data and insights from the community to help inform the City's priorities, policies, programs, and actions. The report was informed by information gathered through:

- **A bilingual online survey** co-developed by the City and Youth Liaisons and administered by the City. Twenty-five adults and one youth responded.
- **A Youth and Family Town Hall**, hosted by the City and co-developed and co-facilitated with Youth Liaisons. Attendees were primarily "youth allies" – staff of youth-serving agencies and other community liaisons.
- **Community-level data**
- **Departmental updates** on actions that the City Council and staff have taken since the 2023 Well-being Report.
- **Planning meetings** with a subcommittee of City Councilmembers, staff, and Youth Liaisons.

City Programs for Young People Ages 0-24

The City of Santa Cruz offers multiple programs for young people that align with and advance the Children and Youth Bill of Rights.



Recreation Activities and Facilities

- Year-round programming, including seasonal classes, summer camps, and enrichment activities
 - 21 playgrounds, 3 skate parks, multiple beaches, athletic fields, a BMX park, and bicycle pump tracks
 - Free or discounted facility use or rental rates for youth sports organizations
-



Support and Safe Spaces

- Teen Center - a safe and welcoming place for youth to have daily support from caring staff, get academic help, participate in group discussions, and experience community outings
 - School-based lessons on online safety and cyberbullying offered by the Santa Cruz Police Department
-



Leadership Development and Work Experience

Opportunities for youth to develop leadership skills, job seeking skills, and work experience through programs such as:

- Teen Job Fair, the paid Teen Intern Program, and the Summer Youth Trails Program
 - Junior Leader program and Junior Guard Captain Corps
 - Youth Liaison program
-



Community Spaces and Partnerships

- The London Nelson Community Center is home to the Santa Cruz Teen Center, the Children's Theatre, and the County Office of Education's London Nelson Community School
- The City also hosts the Museum of Natural History in Tyrell Park for a nominal fee (\$1/year) and partners with the Museum on their Garden Learning Center, school field trips, and service learning opportunities

Actions & Accomplishments

Since the release of the 2023 Well-being Report, the City of Santa Cruz has taken concrete actions to increase access to opportunities and supports for young people who live in Santa Cruz.

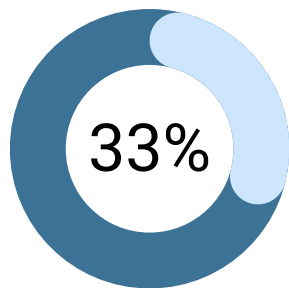
Key accomplishments include:

- Used the Children & Youth Bill of Rights and the 2023 State of Child & Youth Well-being Report to inform development of the Children's Fund grantmaking process and the Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Revenue Measure
- Implemented plans to open Harvey West Pool, with the goal of opening by Memorial Day 2025
- Hired a Recreation Coordinator, which enhanced the Teen Center's capacity to continue providing critical services to youth, often in partnership with Santa Cruz City Schools
- Trained high school students on Student Safety & Wellness Programs (healthy relationships, dating violence, cyberbullying, violence prevention) in partnership with Santa Cruz City Schools
- Resumed the Public Safety Teen Academy in 2023, a collaboration between the Santa Cruz Police and Fire Departments and the District Attorney's Office
- Partnered with United Way's Youth Action Network to create the City's Youth Liaison program, which began in October 2024 with four Youth Liaisons. The Youth Liaisons are a connection between young people and City Councilmembers, ensuring that youth perspectives are considered in decision-making processes. The current Youth Liaisons serve as representatives on four City committees and commissions. This increases youth voice and leadership in the City's decision-making processes. Each Liaison receives a stipend of \$500.
- Shared strategies and collaborated with County staff around efforts to diversify recruitment and representation on City and County committees and commissions. In August 2024, the County provided an update on their Youth Advisory Task Force to the Health in All Policies City Council Committee. The City's Parks and Recreation Department is currently exploring ways to best integrate youth into City decision-making processes.

Actions & Accomplishments

Continued

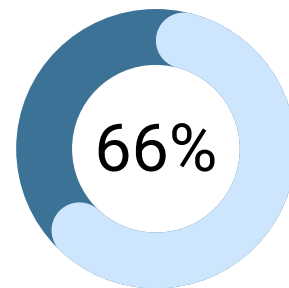
- The Children's Fund Advisory Committee (CFAC) established funding priorities and the application process for the distribution of the Children's Fund. In 2024, the City Council approved the CFAC's funding recommendations, awarding over \$740,000 in 2-year grants. Eighteen programs received Children's Funds to provide services to City of Santa Cruz children and youth ages 24 and younger, with a particular focus on reaching youth impacted by poverty, trauma, or violence.



One-third of the funds (\$240,000) was awarded to agencies that provide **early care and education for children under age 6**.

Grantees are using the funds in various ways, including:

- Expanding infant/toddler care
- Providing scholarships and sliding-scale tuition for families with low incomes
- Providing nutritious meals
- Providing trauma-informed mental health support that includes play therapy and home visits



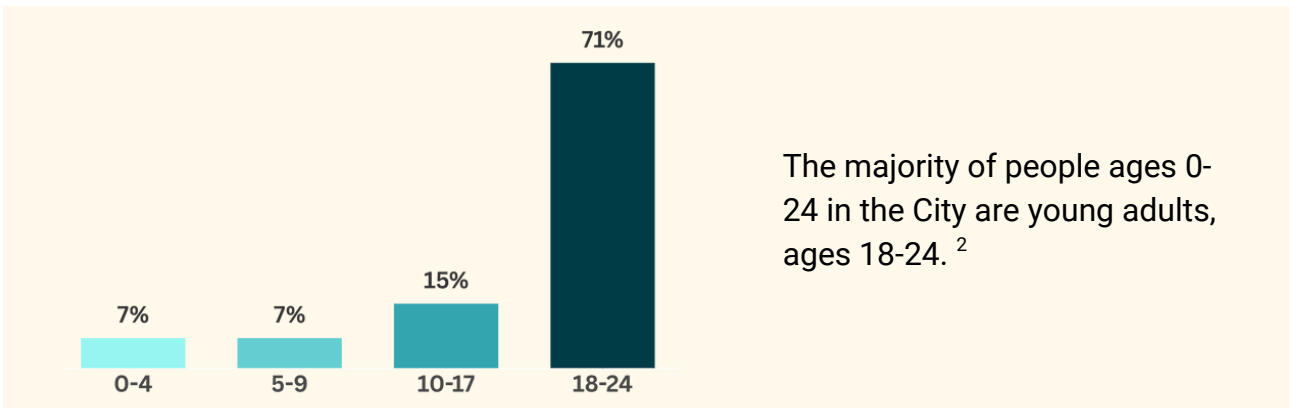
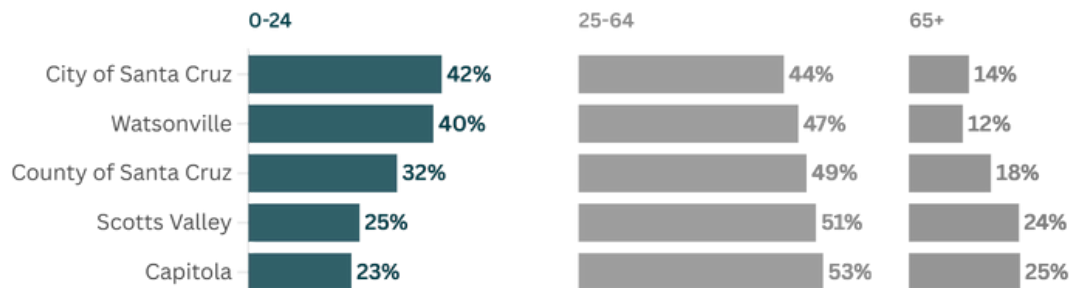
The remaining two-thirds of the funds (\$501,009) was awarded to agencies to provide **a range of services for youth and young adults ages 6 to 24**, including:

- Culturally responsive mental health education and services;
- Food justice and empowerment;
- Free or reduced-cost afterschool and recreation activities;
- Inclusive recreational activities;
- Grief counseling; and
- Youth leadership and engagement in local government

Data Snapshot: The Well-being of Young People in the City of Santa Cruz

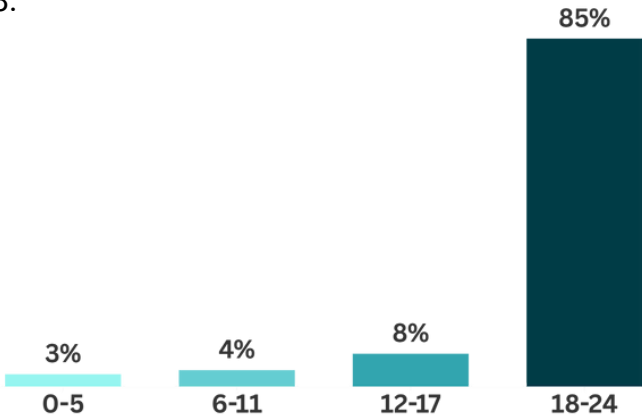
Age

Children, youth, and young adults (young people), ages 0-24, make up nearly half (42%) of the City of Santa Cruz's population of 60,953 people. This percentage is higher than in other cities and the overall county. ¹



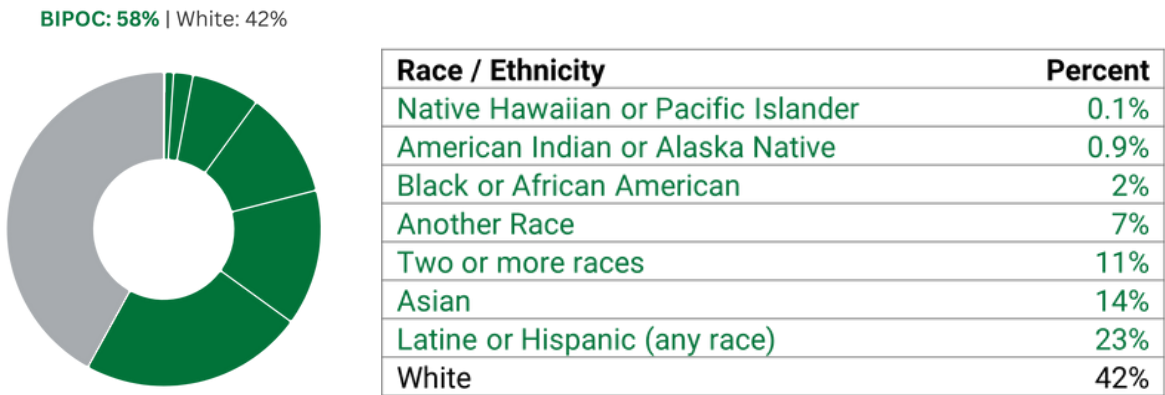
Income Level

Young adults ages 18-24 years make up the largest share (85%) of people ages 0-24 in the City with incomes below the poverty level. The remaining 15% are children or teens under age 18. ³



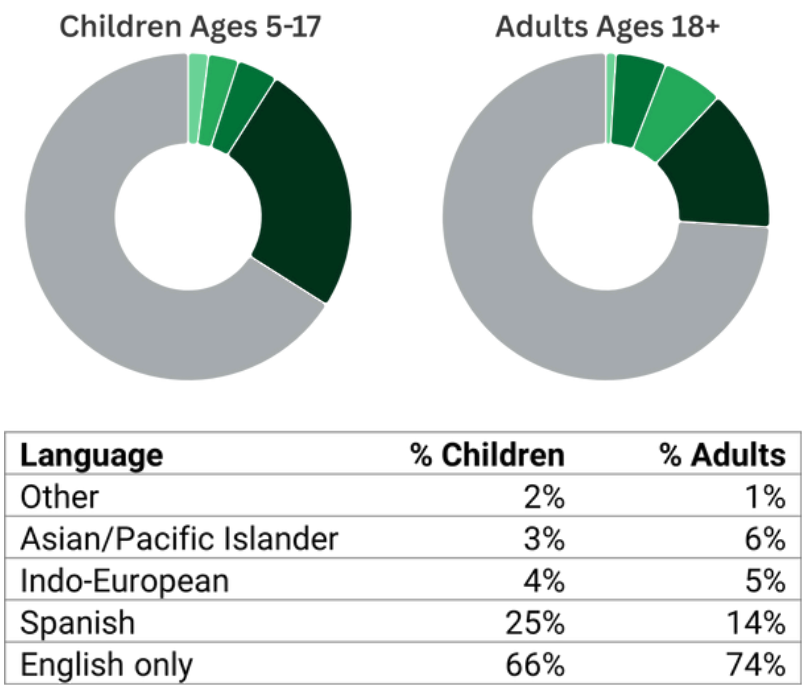
Race and Ethnicity

Fifty-eight percent of young people under age 25 in the City of Santa Cruz identify as Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color (BIPOC). ⁴



Language

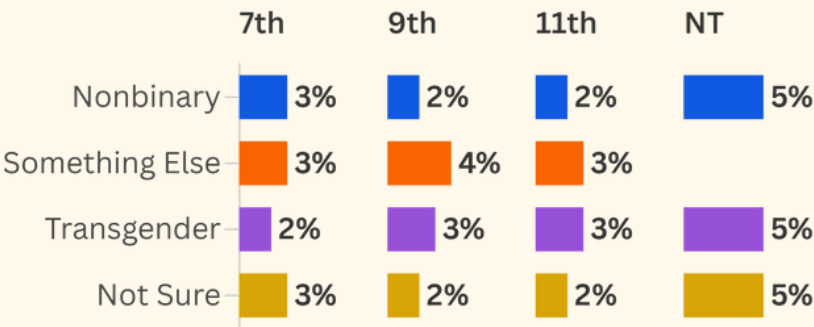
About 34% of children and youth and 25% of adults in the City of Santa Cruz speak a language other than English at home. Spanish is spoken most often, followed by Indo-European, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Other languages. ⁵



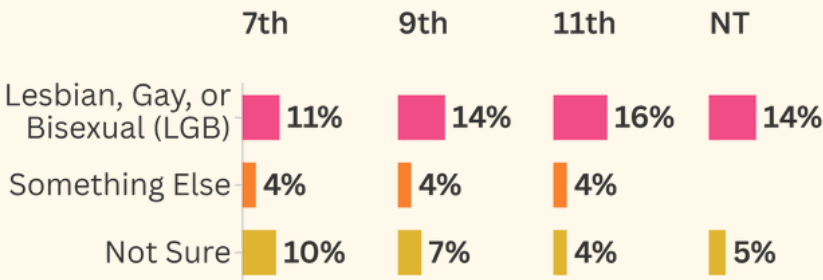
Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Fifty-one percent of young people in the City of Santa Cruz are female, and 49% are male.⁶ The California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), completed by a sample of students in grades 7, 9, 11 and Non-Traditional (NT) schools, provides a more nuanced understanding of how students in the Santa Cruz City Schools (SCCS) District define their gender and sexual orientation. Data from the 2022-23 CHKS are the most recent data available.

Between 2–5% of students in grades 7-9 and Non-Traditional schools who completed the CHKS identified their gender as Nonbinary or Something Else. Another 2–5% said they are Transgender or are Not Sure. The remaining students either did not answer this question (3–5%) or said they are not transgender (86–92%).⁷



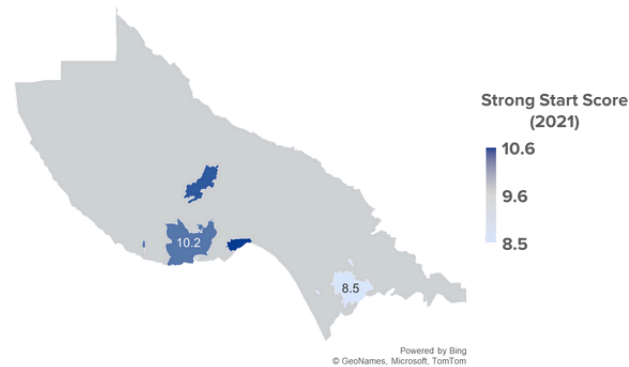
In the same survey, 15–20% of student respondents identified their sexual orientation as either Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual (LGB) or Something Else, while 4–10% were Not Sure.⁸



Positive Trends in Young People’s Well-being

Strong Start Score⁹

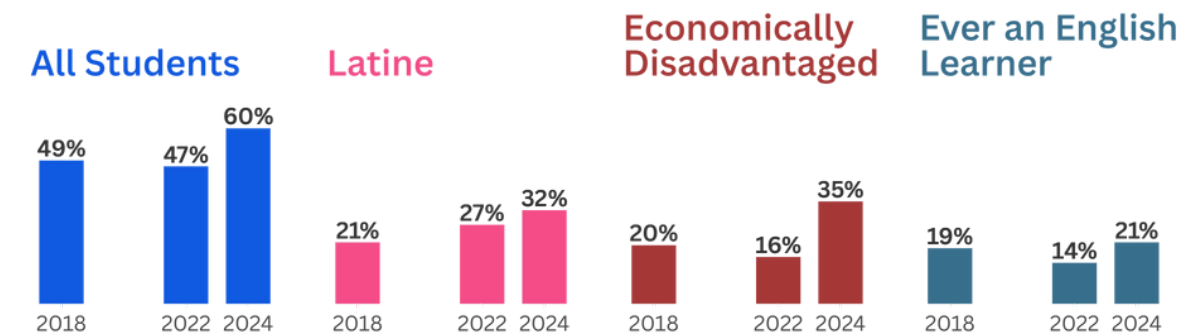
In 2021, the City of Santa Cruz had a Strong Start Score of 10.2. This means that babies were born with an average of 10.2 out of 12 “birth assets” that promote resilience. The Strong Start Score is a measure of the conditions into which children are born. It is calculated by counting the number of birth assets in four domains:



FAMILY	HEALTH	SERVICE	FINANCIAL
1) Legal parentage established at birth	4) Healthy birthweight	7) Access to / timely prenatal care	10) Ability to afford and access healthcare
2) Born to non-teen parents	5) Absence of disabilities, health issues, or complications at birth	8) Receipt of nutritional services if eligible	11) Born to a parent with a college degree
3) Born to parents with at least a high school diploma	6) Absence of transmissible infections	9) Hospital with high percentage of births with timely prenatal care	12) Born to parents with employment history

3rd Grade English Language Arts/Literacy¹⁰

In Santa Cruz City Elementary Schools, the percentage of all 3rd grade students meeting or exceeding grade-level standards for English Language Arts/Literacy has been improving since the pandemic. However, the percentage is significantly lower among students who are Latine, Economically Disadvantaged (families have low incomes), and have ever been classified as an English Learner.



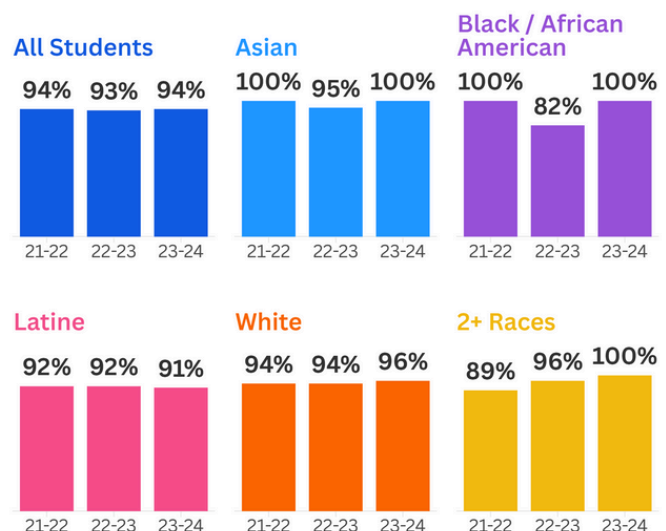
Student Well-being ¹¹

Santa Cruz City School students in grades 6-12 are self-reporting improved levels of social-emotional wellbeing, satisfaction with their families and themselves, and feelings of belonging and purpose. These upward trends are good news, particularly after the concerning declines during the pandemic.

Dimensions of Well-being	2018	2020	2022	2024	Net Change (2022-2024)	
Felt sad or down in the past month (Pretty Much True / Very Much True)	24%	28%	21%	21%	↔	2%
It was hard to cope in the past month, thought I would panic (Pretty Much True / Very Much True)	17%	18%	18%	15%	↓	3%
Satisfaction with family (Satisfied / Very Satisfied)	77%	78%	73%	79%	↑	6%
Satisfaction with self (Satisfied / Very Satisfied)	65%	58%	56%	62%	↑	6%
Had warm and trusting relationships with others (Almost Every Day / Every Day)	63%	no data	58%	66%	↑	8%
Belonged to a community (social group, school, neighborhood, etc.) (Almost Every Day / Every Day)	56%	47%	55%	64%	↑	9%
Had something important to contribute to society (Almost Every Day / Every Day)	42%	23%	32%	41%	↑	9%
Felt life has a sense of direction or meaning to it (Almost Every Day / Every Day)	58%	no data	47%	55%	↑	8%

High School Graduation Rates ¹²

The percentage of Santa Cruz City High students who graduate high school within four years remains high. This is true among all students, with no or minimal differences between student groups based on racial or ethnic identities.



Access to Parks and Open Spaces ¹³

Residents in the City of Santa Cruz have access to parks and open spaces. This reflects the strengths of the City’s policies and programs.



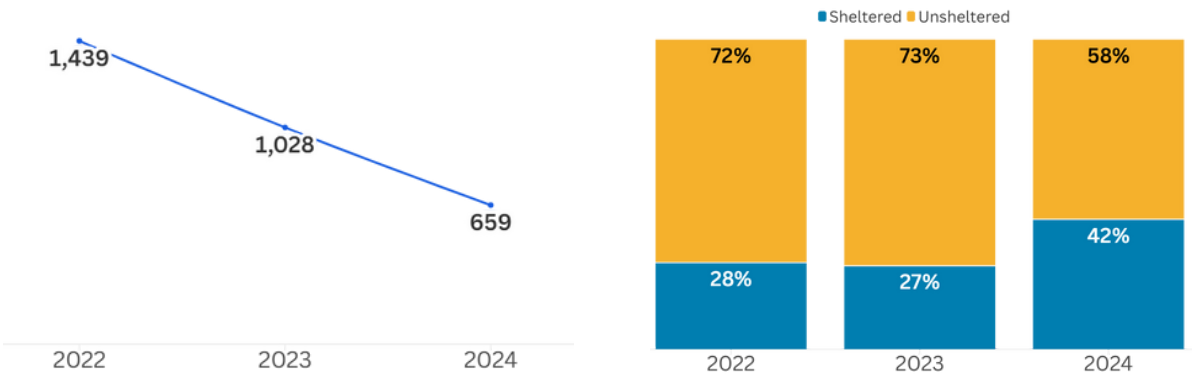
100% of City residents live within a half mile of a park.



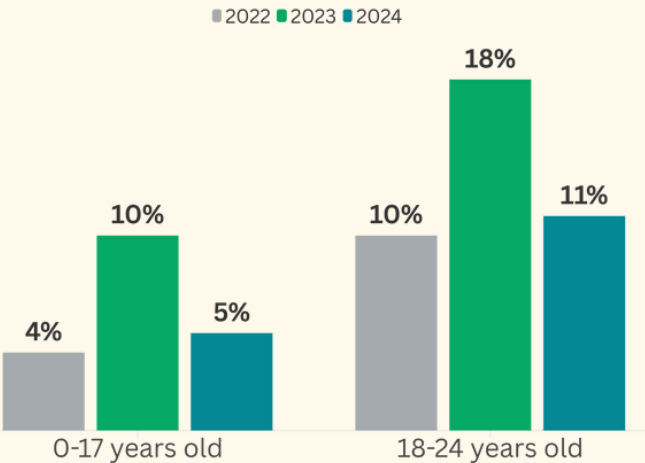
74% of City residents live in areas with 3 or more acres of parks or open space per 1,000 residents

People Who are Unhoused ¹⁴

The number of persons experiencing homelessness in the City of Santa Cruz decreased significantly between 2022 and 2024. The percentage of persons experiencing homelessness who were unsheltered decreased to 58% in 2024.



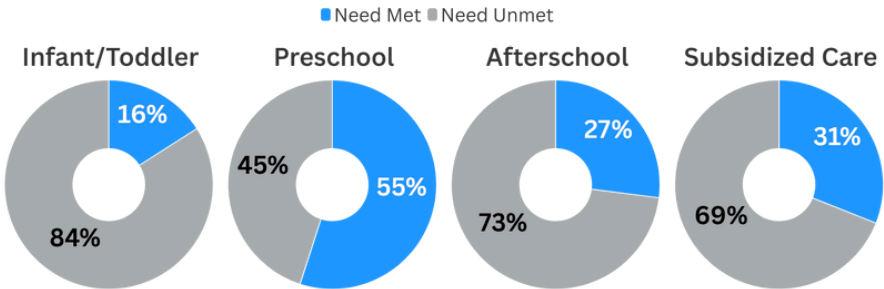
Data on young people who were unhoused are not available at the city level. However, countywide, the percentages of children (0-17 years old) and young adults (18-24 years old) decreased in 2024, after a spike in 2023.



Gaps and Barriers to Young People’s Well-being

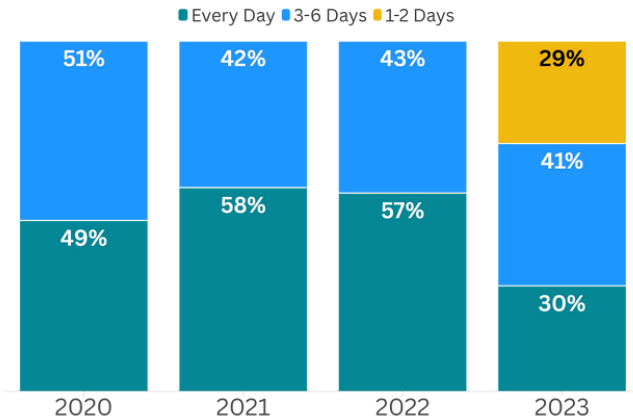
Child Care and Afterschool Care ¹⁵

There is an extreme shortage of child care and afterschool care in the City of Santa Cruz. If every family sought care for their children, there would only be enough spaces to meet 16% of the need for infant/toddler care (0-24 months) and 27% of the need for afterschool care (5-12 years). Similarly, there are only enough subsidized spaces to serve one-third of children ages 0-12 who are eligible for subsidized care.



Family Reading ¹⁶

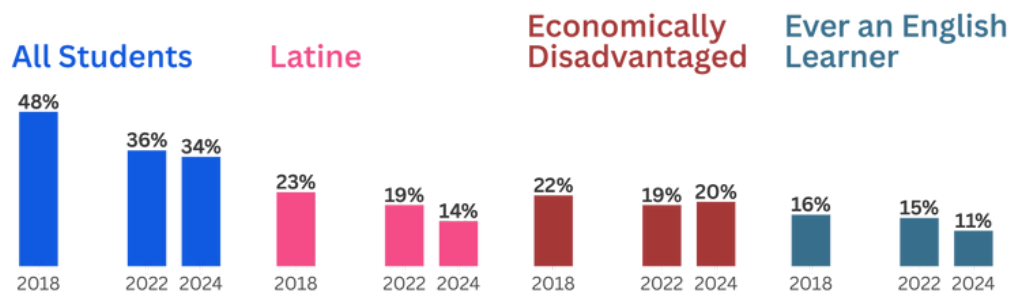
Countywide, the majority of parents/caregivers read frequently with their young children (ages 0-5). However, the percentage of parents/caregivers who said they read every day of the week decreased in 2023, with a corresponding increase in parents/caregivers who said they read 1-2 days per week. This may be a sign of the impact of stress on family bonding time.



This data should be interpreted with caution, due to the small sample size of the survey.

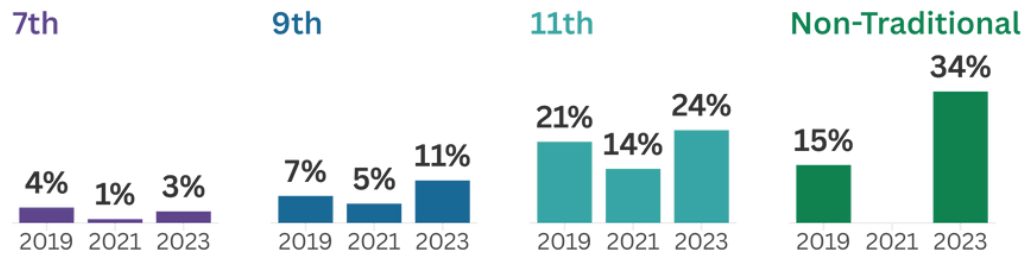
8th Grade Mathematics¹⁷

The percentage of Santa Cruz City Schools 8th grade students meeting or exceeding grade-level standards for Mathematics increased across all students groups in the 2023 school year but then declined in 2024. Percentages have not returned to pre-pandemic levels for any of the student groups, but percentages are lowest among students who are Latine (14%) and have Ever been classified as English Learners (11%).



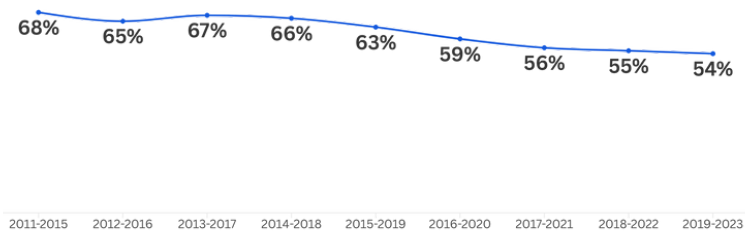
Substance Use¹⁸

The percentage of Santa Cruz City Schools students who said they had one or more drinks of alcohol in the past 30 days increased between 2021 and 2023, particularly among 11th grade students. The percentage was highest in 2023 among students who attend Non-Traditional, or alternative, schools.



Housing Affordability^{19, 20}

Over half of the renters in the City spend 30% or more of their household income on rent. Although this percentage has decreased over time, many families are still struggling to make ends meet.



Countywide, 33% of households have incomes that are below the Real Cost Measure, — the minimum income necessary for a household to afford basic living expenses such as housing, food, child care, and transportation.

Community Insights

Participants in the Youth and Family Survey and the Town Hall shared their insights and feedback about their biggest concerns about the well-being of young people in the City of Santa Cruz.

The majority of responses fell into one of the following five categories:

Child Care

The high cost and limited availability of child care was a common concern, particularly among survey participants, as seen in the quotes below. Some families also need afterschool care and child care outside of traditional work hours, but the options are limited. Additionally, although recreation programs are not meant to be a substitute for quality early care and education, families with young children expressed a desire for more options for summer camps and recreation activities for children under age 6.

Affordable quality childcare for 0-3 year-olds is the single most important thing we need more of in this city.

– Survey respondent (parent)

I'm pregnant and looking for infant care when I have to go back to work. Every center we talked to for infant care were booked out with a waitlist of 1 to 1.5 years from today (aka, the earliest I could get my child in — signing up at 4 months pregnant — would be when they're 7-13 months old.

– Survey participant (parent)

Childcare is a huge problem for families with young children in Santa Cruz. There isn't enough of it. It's wildly expensive, and this even extends to elementary years. Our local emblem school has an afterschool care program, but it only has capacity for 1/5 of the school's population and the waitlist is endless. It's no surprise young families are leaving the area in droves.

– Survey participant (parent)

Mental Health and Wellness

Anxiety, depression, and stress among children, youth, and young adults was the predominant concern mentioned in the survey, particularly when combined with other related concerns about peer pressure, the influence of social media, unhealthy body image, and self-esteem challenges. Town Hall participants raised questions and concerns about access to healthcare for all age groups — which is closely related to accessing mental health care — and how to provide more services or specialized supports for young children (ages 0-5), earlier and at no cost.

Substance Abuse and Risky Behavior

During the Town Hall, participants shared their perspectives about the norms and attitudes about substance use in Santa Cruz, particularly marijuana or weed. Some described weed as having a reputation of “not really [being] a drug,” and that the prefix for City phone numbers, 420 (a number associated with cannabis consumption), might contribute to an undesirable image or perception of Santa Cruz. Some Town Hall participants discussed the normalization of marijuana use as the number of consumption lounges and dispensaries — some of which are located near schools — has grown. Some shared concerns about substance use among elementary and middle school students and the need for prevention and intervention as early as 3rd – 5th grade.

Education and Opportunities

Several survey participants identified lack of access to quality education and opportunities, job opportunities, and affordability of higher education as high-priority concerns. One survey participant said: *“Addressing generational inequality when low-cost or free youth service workers are not earning enough to pay their own costs of living is the main problem to be solved by a coordinated, multi-faceted systems approach, not piecemeal.”*

Safety

Two survey participants identified Safe streets and Safety/violence in schools as one of their top three concerns, and both were parents of children under age 6.

...I simply do not feel safe letting my children play outside on their own, not like I used to as a kid. People using residential streets like they're freeways, texting and driving. The kids on the electric bikes driving like they're on motorcycles ... but in the wrong side of the road or the sidewalk. It's terrifying. No basic traffic laws are enforced, clearly not in way that has any effect anyway.
– Survey participant (parent)

Opportunities for Action

Survey and Town Hall participants provided input and insights about City policies and programs that would address their concerns and make life better for young people and families.

Key themes included:

- 1 Continue to develop and/or enhance child- and youth-centered City policies and programs. Amplify the voices and role of young people in City decision-making processes.
- 2 Increase and/or enhance recreational facilities or activities for young people of all ages.
- 3 Engage with young people and families regularly and consistently, in places and ways that are natural and convenient for them.
- 4 Continue to expand and deepen partnerships with other organizations serving children, youth, and young adults.
- 5 Explore new revenue sources. Communicate with the public about how the City is using its current funding and resources to support the well-being of young people and their families.

These themes, responses, and quotes from participants are summarized on the following pages.

Each of the suggestions will require further discussion and planning to determine whether and how the City should pursue them and identify partners and other resources needed to succeed. However, these suggestions represent Opportunities for Action that can be designed and implemented with youth and community leaders.

Opportunities for Action

1

Continue to develop and/or enhance child- and youth-centered City policies and programs. Amplify the voices and role of young people in City decision-making processes.

- Increase access to affordable, high quality early childhood education programs
- Create opportunities for groups of school-age children to connect around things they have in common
- Provide education about safety for school-age children
- Increase access to afterschool activities
- Improve mental health support and counseling services
- Strengthen substance abuse prevention and treatment programs
- Increase youth-friendly options downtown
- Offer more recreational activities and spaces (examples described below)
- Improve public transportation for youth (routes to school, public facilities, on-time operations)
- Provide more internship opportunities for high school-aged youth
- Regulate marketing of vapes to kids (Tobacco Product Waste ban)

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“Young people want a tribe, and we need to help build that for kids.”

– *Town Hall participant*

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2

Increase and/or enhance recreational facilities or activities for young people of all ages.

- Summer programs for toddlers and preschoolers
- Recreation activities for children under age 6
- Youth-oriented open space
- Art and music programs and events
- Free events and activities
- Downtown activities
- Sports fields
- Skate parks
- Year-round Junior Guards or surf club
- Aquatics (swimming pool, open swim, swim lessons)

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“Youth want a public pool, a world-class aquatic facility where tournaments can happen, aquatics, soccer, etc.” – *Town Hall participant*

“The City could buy warehouses and convert them to fields, indoor fields, and courts to alleviate competition for limited space in Santa Cruz – possible revenue generation.” – *Town Hall participant*

“Reimagine retail space as recreational space.” – *Town Hall participant*

“Depot Park has a great field, but with its central location it could house a Recreation Center with indoor courts, weight rooms, dance studios, and a swimming pool so that families can access low cost recreational centers in the City. Many other cities have these – Santa Cruz should too.”
– *Survey respondent (parent)*

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3

Engage with young people and families regularly and consistently, in places and ways that are natural and convenient for them.

- Create ways for ordinary people to share and express concerns or needs
- Recognize who can't attend [City-hosted] meetings (families, youth, etc.) and gather information in other ways
- Find ways to amplify voices of youth who [were] not at the [Town Hall]
- Hold feedback sessions (or focus groups) at places where children, youth, young adults, and families are – schools, sports, arts, child care, Teen Center, Boys and Girls Club, etc. Do this periodically (instead of one main event), since needs often change throughout the year
- Continue integrating Youth Liaisons into the City's planning and decision-making processes. Communicate with the community about the Youth Liaisons' roles and how they are influencing City policies and programs

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“Young residents have offered many good suggestions at youth-oriented meetings. Yet their info doesn't get integrated into the meetings' results/info. This is unfortunate since their input is the direct pulse of Santa Cruz youth needs.” – *Survey participant (grandparent)*

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Continue to expand and deepen partnerships with other organizations serving children, youth, and young adults.

Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Look to, and consult with, other similar communities and sister cities to learn about and explore models
- Partner with Santa Cruz City Elementary Schools, Santa Cruz County Office of Education, First 5 Santa Cruz County, and other early childhood educators to support local implementation of Universal PreK, including Transitional Kindergarten

5

Explore new revenue sources. Communicate with the public about how the City is using its current funding and resources to support the well-being of young people and their families.

- Use funds from the Sugar-Sweetened Beverage tax wisely
- [Increase] awareness of the Children's Fund and how resources are allocated
- Look for ways to generate funding to have positive impacts on the community

Looking Ahead

The City of Santa Cruz remains committed to promoting and protecting the rights and well-being of children, youth, young adults, particularly during times of heightened stress and uncertainty.

While the City cannot solve all the challenges that young people and their families are facing, the City Council and staff will continue to build relationships and use their institutional power to advocate for and implement policies and programs that will help make life better for young people in the City.

This Well-Being Report reflects the City's commitment to listen to young people and families, reflect on strengths and challenges, and take action so that all young people in Santa Cruz—regardless of age, background, or identity—feel seen, supported, and hopeful about their futures.

References

1. U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (2023). Sex by Age. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B01001.
2. *ibid.*
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