

# 2024-2028 Fremont County Community Health Improvement Plan



*Fremont County Department of Public Health and Environment  
August 2023*



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August 29, 2023

The Fremont County Department of Public Health and Environment is pleased to share this 2024-2028 Community Health Improvement Plan with the Fremont County Board of Health, the community at-large, as well as with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. This public health improvement plan is a result of a community health assessment and planning process that began in 2022 and continued through 2023.

This plan highlights the many strengths of Fremont County as well as some of the most pressing health challenges that the community faces. Fremont County Department of Public Health and Environment will join its community partners in addressing the following priority areas in the next five years.

- Substance use among youth and adults including:
  - Opioid
  - Tobacco
  - Alcohol
- Mental health
- Child maltreatment

These priorities affect Fremont County and are also crucial issues facing the state of Colorado and the nation. This alignment presents significant opportunities for collaboration, coordination, resources, and impact. Successful implementation of this plan will require public health innovation, the strategic use of resources, and an unwavering commitment by public health and its community partners. We are confident in our ability to make a meaningful impact on the community's health in the years to come.

Finally, the Fremont County Department of Public Health and Environment would like to extend its deepest gratitude to all of the organizations and community members who participated in the community health assessment and public health planning processes. Your contributions significantly influenced the quality and value of this plan.

Sincerely,

Paula Buser  
Executive Director

## Introduction

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The purpose of the Fremont County community health improvement plan is to elevate key public health issues that the community is facing and to implement a plan to address and positively impact them. The Colorado Public Health Act of 2008 requires that state and local public health agencies implement the Colorado Public Health Assessment and Planning System (CHAPS), a comprehensive methodology aimed at delivering core public health services to all Coloradans. Since 2008, Colorado's public health agencies have implemented CHAPS every five years. Resulting assessment and planning efforts have positively impacted Coloradans' health and wellbeing in the areas of disease prevention, environmental health, maternal and child health, injury prevention, health promotion, and healthcare access.

This report discusses the methodology employed in the Fremont County community health assessment process including the prioritization process and capacity assessment. It also describes key takeaways from the key informant interviews and the community survey that were conducted as part of this plan. Finally, the report describes Fremont County's prioritized health issues and the plan to address them in the next five years.

## Partnership and Acknowledgements

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Fremont County Department of Public Health and Environment and St. Thomas More Hospital collaborated closely to develop the 2024-2028 Fremont County Department of Public Health and Environment Community Health Improvement Plan and the 2022 St. Thomas More Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA). Collaboration was integral to this process to avoid the duplication of effort and align with existing community initiatives. Together, the health department and hospital collected and reviewed population health and hospital data, engaged community stakeholders, prioritized key health issues, and identified community health strategies.

The [St. Thomas More Hospital Community Health Needs Assessment](#) and the [2023 Community Health Implementation Strategy](#) are available for background information on the shared processes that informed both the CHNA and this community health improvement plan.

The Fremont County Department of Public Health and Environment would also like to thank the many community members and organizations who participated in the community health assessment and public health planning processes. The dedication and input of many stakeholders contributed significantly to the value and quality of this community health improvement plan. Members of the health assessment advisory committee acknowledged here were instrumental in the process.

Community Leaders	Organization
Nancy Bartkowiak, Marco Vegas, Bryan Trujillo	St. Thomas More Hospital
Mykel Kroll	Fremont County Emergency Management
Adam Hartman	Cañon City Schools – RE-1
John Schick	City of Cañon City, Chief of Police
Tony Carochi, Amanda Wright	Department of Human Services, Fremont County
Bill Ritter	Florence Fire Protection District
Cathy Michopoulos	Health Colorado, Inc.
Delwin Lester	Hildebrand Campus of Care
DeeDee Clement	Loaves and Fishes Ministries
Heidi Lammert	Rocky Mountain Behavioral Health

## Community Overview

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### Geography

Nestled in the heart of the Rocky Mountains, Fremont County offers a unique blend of vibrant communities, remarkable landscapes, and outdoor recreation. The county’s cities and towns include Cañon City, Coaldale, Cotopaxi, Florence, Hillside, Howard, and Penrose, among others. Cañon City is designated as the county seat and has a population of 16,369 people. Larger towns include Florence with a population of 3,857, and Penrose with a population of 3,185 (Uncover Colorado, 2020).

Fremont County covers an area of 1,534 square miles (3,970 km<sup>2</sup>), and most of it is land. Only 0.06% of the county's area consists of water. The region is home to the iconic Royal Gorge, a massive canyon carved by the Arkansas River; the Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area; the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness; and portions of the Pike National Forest and the San Isabel National Forest. The county is also home to the Gold Belt Tour National Scenic and Historic Byway.



Fremont County has a diverse array of outdoor activities. Whether experiencing the Royal Gorge by hiking, ziplining, or riding the historic Royal Gorge Route Railroad, visitors experience breathtaking panoramas. Residents and tourists alike enjoy rock climbing, fishing and whitewater rafting on the Arkansas River, hiking and camping in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and mountain biking on the numerous scenic trails.

### **Demographics**

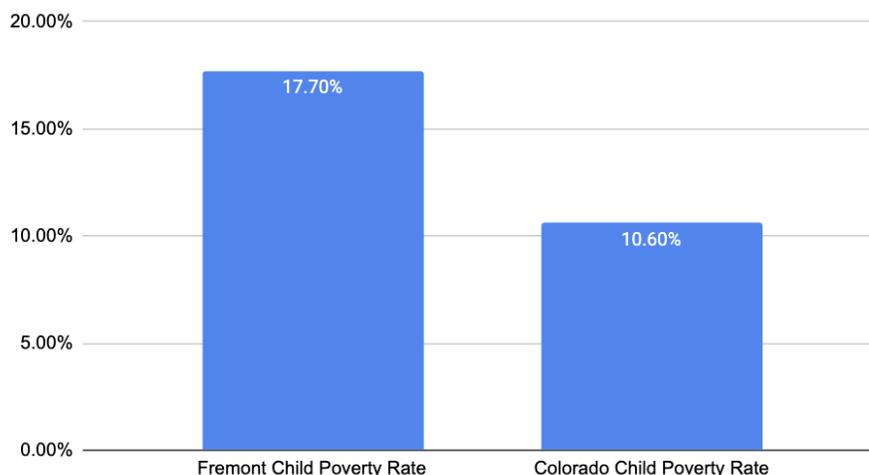
Fremont County is a community with a population of 48,939 (Census Reporter, 2023). The majority of the population is White, accounting for 81.66% of residents. Other racial groups include Black (3.78%), Asian (0.69%), Native American/Alaska Native (1.74%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (0.06%), and individuals identifying with multiple races (6.93%) (Census Reporter, 2023). The median age in the county is 44.8 years, and the population is 58% male and 42% female (Census Reporter, 2023). The U.S. Census data presented here reflect both the residents in Fremont County as well as the individuals who are incarcerated in Fremont County.

### **Economy**

The median household income in Fremont County is \$53,411, which is about two-thirds of the \$80,184 median income in Colorado (Census Reporter, 2023). The poverty rate stands at 14.1% (Census Reporter, 2023). This poverty rate is higher than the Colorado rate of 9.6%, and the national average of 12.6 (Census Reporter, 2023). The U.S. Census data presented here reflect both the residents in Fremont County as well as the individuals who are incarcerated in Fremont County.

Fremont County’s child poverty rate is 17.7%, compared with Colorado’s child poverty rate of 10.6% (Colorado Children’s Campaign, 2020). Many children and families receive economic support. In 2018, 57.3% school-aged children qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and 50% received WIC Program Vouchers (Colorado Children’s Campaign, 2018).

**Child Poverty Rates**

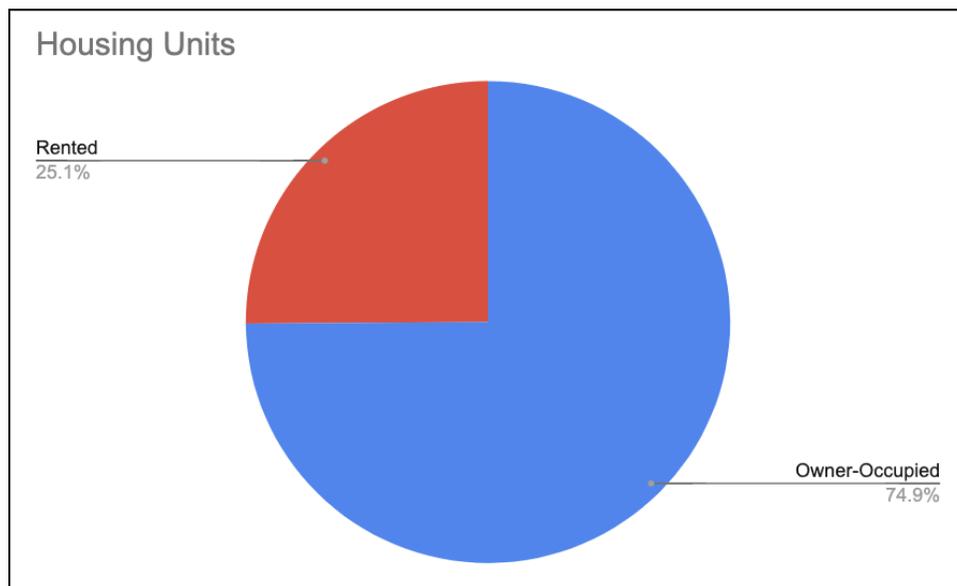


Seventy-eight percent of the workforce in Fremont County is employed in white-collar occupations (Point2, 2023). Blue-collar workers make up the remaining 22% (Point2, 2023). Private companies employ 56% of workers, while governmental institutions provide employment for 18.7% of the population (Point2, 2023). Seven percent of the population is unemployed, which is higher than the national rate of 6.5% (US News, 2023).

Key industries include public administration, federal and state correctional systems, and the healthcare and social service industries (Fremont County Economic Overview, 2021). The county also houses an industrial park, retail areas, and shopping centers (Royal Gorge Chamber Alliance, 2023). In addition, tourism contributes to the local economy, particularly in the summer with outdoor recreation and local festivals.

### **Housing**

Housing in Fremont County consists of 26,004 units, with a median construction year of 1978. Of the 22,568 occupied housing units, 74.9% are owner-occupied, while the remaining 25.1% are rented; compared to a 66.1% owner occupied rate and 33.9% renter occupied rate in Colorado (Census Reporter, 2023). The median value of owner-occupied housing units in Fremont is \$217,500, which is about half the amount in Colorado (\$397,500) (Census Reporter, 2023).



### **Education**

Education levels in the county show that 89.7% of residents have completed at least a high school education (Census Reporter, 2023). However, only 18.6% of the population holds a bachelor's degree or higher, which is about two-fifths of the 42.8% attainment rate in Colorado (Census Reporter, 2023). In terms of educational attainment equity, Fremont County has a racial disparity score of 0.19 out of 1, compared to a national median of 0.16, where a lower score represents less disparity (US News, 2023).



In Fremont county, 92% of youth are within five miles of a public school (US News, 2023). The three school districts in Fremont include Canon City Re-1, Fremont Re-2, and Cotopaxi Re-3 (Great Schools, 2023). Together, the districts include four preschools, nine elementary schools, seven middle schools, and three high

schools, with the smallest district being Cotopaxi Re-3 that includes two schools total (Great Schools, 2023). In each of the Fremont County school districts, the majority of the student demographic is made up of white individuals. Fremont Re-2 is 78% white, Canon City Re-1 is 79% white, and Cotopaxi Re-3 is 83% white. The percentage of Hispanic students is 16% in Fremont Re-2, 14% in Canon City Re-1, and 12% in Cotopaxi Re-3 (Great Schools, 2023). Less than 1% of the student population in all three districts is Black, Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (Great Schools, 2023).

The graduation rates in 2022 were 89% in Fremont Re-2, 80.7% in Canon City Re-1, and 83.3% in Cotopaxi Re-3 (Colorado Department of Education, 2022). In 2022, the percentage of students in all grade levels who met or exceeded expectations of English language proficiency was 37.9% in Fremont Re-2, 39.1% in Canon City Re-1, and 31.2% in Cotopaxi Re-3 (Colorado Department of Education, 2022). That same year, 20.4% of Fremont Re-2 students, 21.7% of Canon City Re-1 students, and 15.1% of Cotopaxi Re-3 students in all grade levels met or exceeded the expectations for mathematics proficiency (Colorado Department of Education, 2022). It is also important to note that both the English and mathematics proficiency scores across all three districts decreased from 2019 to 2022 (Colorado Department of Education, 2022).

### ***Healthcare***

Access to healthcare in Fremont is represented by a ratio of 2,080:1 ratio of patients to primary care physicians, 260:1 patients to mental health providers, and 3,100:1 dentists. These ratios represent fewer providers per patient in Fremont County than in Colorado as a whole. Further, nine percent of people in the county are uninsured (County Health Rankings, 2023). And 65% of Fremont County's adults had recently visited a primary care physician in 2023 (US News, 2023).

### ***Environment***

Fremont County's environmental indicators illustrate strengths and challenges. The county's air quality hazard rate (the potential risk of developing serious respiratory complications over the course of a lifetime where smaller values indicate reduced risk) is 0.16, compared to the U.S. average of 0.34 (US News, 2023). The drinking water violation rate in the county is on par with the national median, according to EPA standards per person served, at 0.05/1k for the county and 0.03/1k nationally (US News, 2023). However, Fremont County experiences 15.3 extreme heat days per year compared to 10.3 experienced in the national average, and only 6.0% of the county is area with tree canopy compared to 20.6% nationally (US News, 2023). As temperatures warm over time, extreme heat days may be an issue that requires attention.

### **Public Safety**

Fremont County is a fairly safe community, scoring a 68/100 on the US News public safety score. The violent crime rate is lower than the national median, at 192/100,000 (US News, 2023), and 29.6% of the population lives close to an emergency facility.

### **Infrastructure & Transportation**

Twelve percent of workers in Fremont County commute 60 minutes or more, which is nearly twice the national median. While 5.0% of the population is in a household with no vehicle, this is similar to the national average. The average distance to public transit is about half a mile (US News, 2023).

In terms of built environment, 31.1% of the population is within 0.5 mile of walkable destinations, earning Fremont County a walkability index score of 5.6 compared to the 6.1 U.S. score (US News, 2023). Nearly 40% of the population is within 0.5 mile of a park (US News, 2023). Additionally, 95% of the population has access to broadband (US News, 2023).



### **Community Strengths**

Fremont County offers a remarkable blend of natural beauty, outdoor adventure, rich history, and warm community spirit. The results of the community survey showed that out of the 224 community members who responded to the survey:

- 61% rated their personal health as very healthy or healthy.
- 70% rated the health of the community as somewhat healthy, healthy, or very healthy.
- And 57% of the respondents reported volunteering in their community routinely each month.

In the key informant interviews conducted, several strengths were highlighted by community members including:

- A sense of pride in the region where community members enjoy an excellent climate, plentiful outdoor recreation opportunities and more affordable living, in comparison with other parts of Colorado.
- Strong local partnerships, relationships, and a sense of community.

One community member shared, “we are a community where we can connect and pick up the phone and interact with one another at any time, in real time.”

## Quantitative Data

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The Fremont County Department of Public Health and Environment, in partnership with St. Thomas More Hospital, collected community-wide data on a variety of health indicators. Secondary data from the following sources, among others, were collected and examined:

- U.S. Census,
- Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System,
- American Community Survey,
- County Health Rankings,
- Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, and
- Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

Specific indicator data from each of these sources were selected to share with the community health advisory group including community demographic information; behavior and environmental health drivers; and health care coverage, quality, and access. The steering committee used the quantitative data to identify and prioritize key health issues in Fremont County. Select quantitative data are used to describe the priority issues in the Priorities and Plans section below.

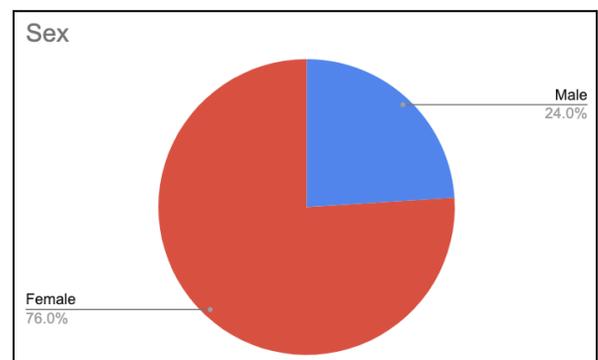
## Qualitative Data

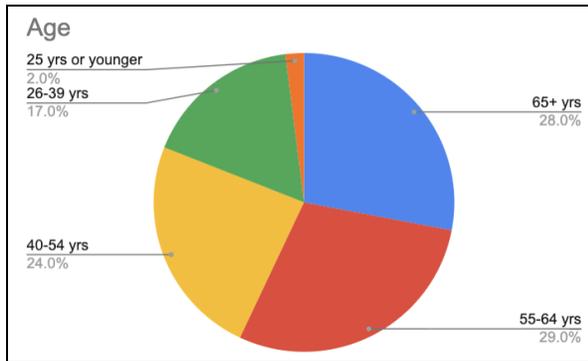
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### ***Community Survey Overview and Results***

As part of the community health assessment process, the public health team administered a community survey to gather input from community members on their perceptions and experiences about health, wellbeing and quality of life in Fremont County. The online survey was conducted in Fall 2022 and was disseminated through various communication mechanisms. Community members received a QR code that they could scan to access the survey. Most respondents received the QR code through the newspaper (33%), their workplace (28%) or other (32%).

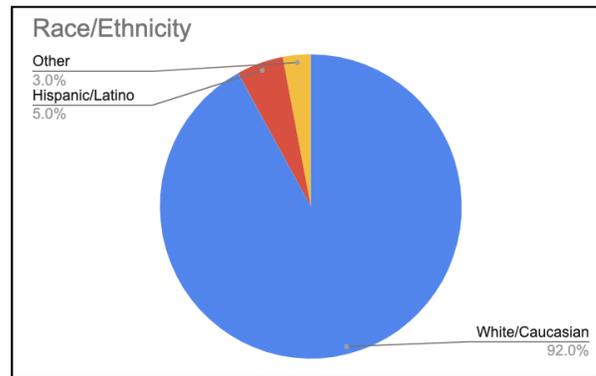
The survey was a significant source of community input with 224 individuals responding. A majority of respondents were female (76%) versus male (24%).





Respondents varied in age with 28% of respondents 65 or older, 29% who are ages 55 to 64, 24% who are ages 40 to 54, 17% who are ages 26 to 39, and 2% who are ages 25 or younger.

Ninety-two percent of respondents identify as White/Caucasian, while 5% identify as Hispanic/Latino. Three percent identify as other.



In terms of education, 72% of survey respondents have a college degree or higher, and 28% have a high school diploma or GED. Seventy-six percent are married, and 24% are not married or single. Finally, 65% of respondents have a household income of over \$50,000 while 22% reported a household income of \$30,000 to \$49,999.

Thirteen percent report having a household income of under \$29,000.

The survey feedback was used to complement the quantitative data collected in the community health assessment and provide a more comprehensive view of health issues that are impacting the community. The survey results also provided the public health team with a better understanding of which health issues are most important to Fremont County community members and should be addressed in the community health improvement plan. Survey results are integrated throughout this report to highlight the community's perspective, alongside relevant statistical data.

### **Key Informant Interview Summary**

The Fremont County Department of Public Health and Environment, in partnership with St. Thomas More Hospital and the Colorado Health Institute, conducted five key informant interviews in June 2022 to learn more from stakeholders in the local government, education and health care sectors about key health issues. Interview questions explored the perceptions of community stakeholders, the assets and gaps in the community, and potential solutions. The interview data was summarized and shared to inform the prioritization process and capacity assessment.

The strengths of the county emerged as a theme in the interviews, as cited in the community overview section of this report. However, the primary focus of the key informant interviews was behavioral health. Key takeaways regarding behavioral health included:

- The current behavioral health programs are working well to address the mental health and substance abuse needs in the community.
- Improvement has been observed in recent years.
- Behavioral health services could be improved with better workforce retention efforts, improved transportation options, and better access to detoxification services.

The interviewees emphasized how critically important mental health is to address in Fremont County. The following programs and services, while not an exhaustive list, are currently operating in the county to serve the mental health needs of community members.

- Solvista Health
- Rocky Mountain Behavioral Health
- Gateway to Success
- Canon City Co-Response Unit
- School-Based Behavioral Health Services
- Green Thumb Initiative
- Crib to Kindergarten
- Built for Zero

Finally, interviewees identified gaps in the behavioral health systems and supports in Fremont County including the following.

- There are not enough inpatient beds in Fremont County.
- There is a need for better access to detoxification and inpatient services.
- Transportation is the most commonly cited challenge for accessing behavioral health services.
- Affordability is another challenge to accessing care.
- The county may need more behavioral health providers.
- Organizations can do a better job of supporting and retaining existing providers.
- There is a need for behavioral health services and supports for children, youth, and young adults in addition to those individuals experiencing homelessness.

## **Prioritization Process and Capacity Assessment**

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### ***Prioritization Process***

In partnership with St. Thomas More Hospital, the Fremont County Department of Public Health and Environment participated in the health assessment steering committee to inform the selection of community health improvement plan priorities. The committee was made up of public health staff, hospital staff, community leaders, and stakeholders. The committee engaged in the following efforts to select Fremont County's top health needs:

- Conducted an environmental scan to determine health needs;

- Reviewed qualitative and quantitative data and provided insight; and
- Learned about top health concerns from residents and community leaders.

The steering committee used the following criteria to prioritize the county's health needs.

- The magnitude of health issues, as compared to the Colorado benchmark.
- The severity of the health issue on a scale from “very serious” to “not serious.”
- And the opportunity for alignment between the health issue and potential solutions across the public health department, the hospital, and other community organizations.

The steering committee selected priorities for the St. Thomas More Community Health Needs Assessment including:

- Access to behavioral health care,
- Adult smoking and substance use,
- Heart disease, and
- Food security.

### ***Capacity Assessment***

The Fremont County Department of Public Health and Environment team started with the above priorities and conducted a public health capacity assessment in order to determine which priorities they should include in the public health improvement plan. The capacity assessment occurred through several conversations with public health staff.

The public health team considered the following factors:

- The public health role of using a population health and systems-level approach that focuses on prevention, screening, and early intervention.
- Potential health issues that are best addressed by the county's public health agency.
- Opportunities for collaboration with other government and community agencies.
- Available resources to address potential health issues including funding and staff time.
- And the feasibility of making an impact on potential health issues.

As a result of the capacity assessment, the Fremont County Department of Public Health and Environment identified the following priorities for their community health improvement plan:

- Behavioral health among youth and adults including:
  - Opioid
  - Tobacco
  - Alcohol
- Mental health
- Child maltreatment

These prioritized issues are critical to address in the next five years in Fremont County. Each priority area is discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

## Priorities and Plans

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### ***Behavioral Health***

Behavioral health, including substance use and mental health, was identified as a top priority in the Fremont County community health improvement plan. Behavioral health is a critical issue facing not only Fremont County, but also the state of Colorado and the nation. Limited access to behavioral health care, stigma associated with seeking treatment for mental health and substance use, and other social determinants of health such as poverty, social isolation, and cost of care contribute to the complexities of identifying and treating behavioral health challenges among individuals and families.

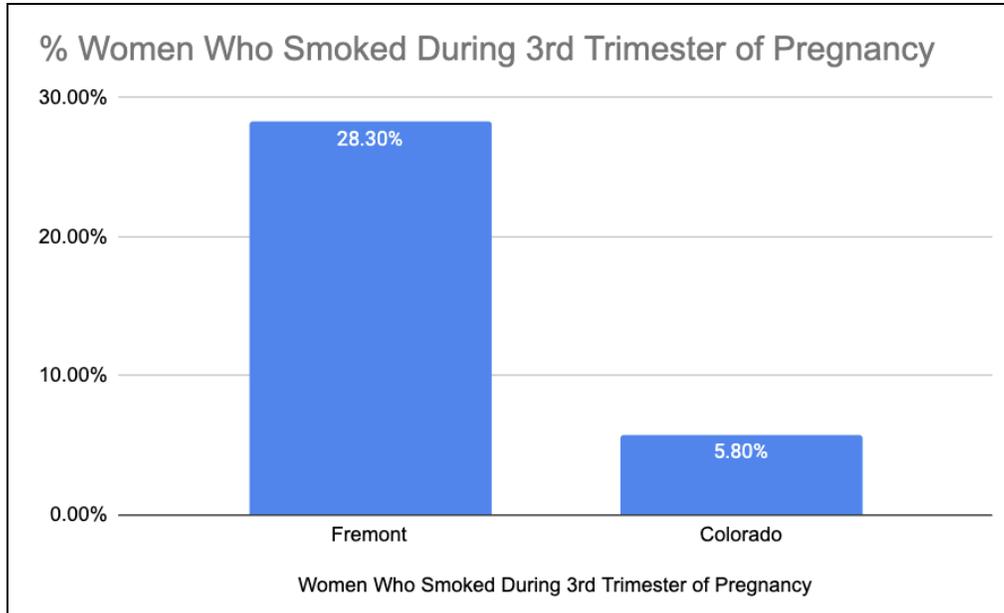
### ***Adult Substance Use***

Both the quantitative and qualitative data collected as part of the community health assessment process indicate that opioid, tobacco, and alcohol use, specifically drinking and driving, among adults are health issues that require attention in Fremont County.

The rate of drug overdose deaths in Fremont has increased steadily since 2000, and 2022 marked the peak of total overdose deaths (56) due to any drug overdose among Fremont County residents (CDPHE Drug Overdose Dashboard, 2022). Using data from 2020-2022, the total number of drug overdose deaths occurring among residents of Fremont County due to any opioid (prescription or heroin) was 27 (COHID, 2022).

Various social factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and polysubstance use (using two or more substances at once) have contributed to an increased risk for drug addiction and overdose along with worsening stigma and criminalization (CHNA, 2022). According to data provided by Solvista Health in Canon City, 4.8% of the 4,717 diagnoses they made from January 2021 to December 2022 were for substance-use disorder. Ninety-nine percent of those diagnoses were among adults older than 18 years of age (Solvista Health, 2022). Furthermore, drug abuse was identified by 26% of community survey respondents to be the most important risky behavior in the community.

Tobacco use is also a concern in Fremont County with 19% percent of adults in Fremont County reporting that they smoke cigarettes, which is higher than both the Colorado rate of 13% and the U.S. rate of 16% (County Health Rankings, 2023). Three percent of adults in Fremont reported current E-cigarette use compared to 7% in Colorado (COHID, 2020). Notably, the percentage of women who smoked during the third trimester of their pregnancy was 28.3% in Fremont, which is nearly five times higher than the Colorado rate of 5.8% (COHID, 2020). Additionally, a slightly higher percentage of adults reported smoking marijuana one or more times in the past month (19%) than the percentage of adults in Colorado that had done so (18.3%).



The excessive drinking rate in Fremont County is 20%, which is the same as the Colorado rate (County Health Rankings, 2023). Furthermore, 2.5% of adults in Fremont County identified as heavy drinkers compared to 7.2% in Colorado, and 9.7% of adults in Fremont County reported binge drinking 1 or more times in the past month compared to 18.7% in Colorado (COHID, 2020). Eight percent of the 4,717 diagnoses that Solvista Health made from January 2021 to December 2022 were for alcohol-related diagnoses. One hundred percent of those diagnoses were among adults ages 18 years and older (Solvista Health, 2022).

It is concerning that 27% of deaths in Fremont County were due to alcohol-impaired driving (County Health Rankings, 2023) and that 35.3% of fatal crashes in Fremont County involved a driver/motorcyclist with a BAC of .08 and above compared to 33.7% of fatal crashes in Colorado (COHID, 2020). It is also important to note that 22% of community survey respondents believe that alcohol abuse is one of the most important “risky behaviors” in the community, which was the second-most frequently mentioned response behind drug abuse.

### **Youth Substance Use**

The Healthy Kids Colorado Survey (HKCS) is administered in partnership with local school districts and collects information from young people about their attitudes and experiences related to many health topics. The HKCS data included below is from Canon City High School, the largest high school in Fremont County with 961 students. In comparison, Florence High School has 597 students, and Cotopaxi Junior-Senior High School has 115 students.

At Canon City High School, 691 out of 961 eligible high school students completed the survey, with a response rate of 72%. The data presented below represent the students who responded to the survey. However, this data can also be used to provide a helpful understanding of young people’s experiences from across the county. Measures of youth substance use include marijuana, alcohol, and E-cigarettes or tobacco.

In regards to E-cigarette and tobacco use, 12.3% of Canon City High School survey respondents reported using an E-Cigarette in the past 30 days compared to the state average of 16.1% (HKCS, 2021). Furthermore, 46.1% of students thought it would be sort of or very easy to get E-cigarettes, and 37.5% thought it would be sort of or very easy to get cigarettes. The state average for these measures is 51.4% for E-cigarettes and 41.7% for cigarettes (HKCS, 2021). Finally, the HKCS measured students' perception of harm and found that 75% of students reported thinking that people who use E-cigarettes every day have moderate to great risk of harm and that 86.7% of students thought the same for people who smoke 1+ packs of cigarettes per day. Both measures are slightly less than the state averages, with 79.6% of students perceiving E-cigarette harm and 91.0% perceiving harm associated with cigarette smoking (HKCS, 2021).

When it comes to marijuana use, 4.6% of students in Canon City had used marijuana in the 30 days before taking the survey, compared to the state average of 13.3%. Additionally, 29% of survey respondents thought it would be sort of easy or very easy to get marijuana, which is less than the state average of 40.3% of students who think it is easily accessible (HKCS, 2021). Nearly 64% of students perceived that people who use marijuana regularly have moderate to great risk of harm, and 71.1% thought it is wrong or very wrong for someone their age to use marijuana. The state comparisons for the aforementioned measures are 60.4% and 64.1% respectively, both lower than the perception of harm measurements for Canon City students (HKCS, 2021).

Lastly, the survey looked at alcohol use among Canon City High School students. In the past 30 days from taking the survey, 13.2% of students had consumed alcohol in the past 30 days compared to a state average of 23.6% (HKCS, 2021). Forty percent of students thought it would be sort of or very easy to get alcohol compared to the state average of 53.1% (HKCS, 2021). Looking at perception of harm, 76.4% of students in Canon City and 79.9% of students in Colorado reported that people who have 1-2 drinks per day have moderate to great risk of harm. Additionally, 72.7% of students in Canon City and 65.3% of students in Colorado thought it is wrong or very wrong for someone their age to drink alcohol regularly (HKCS, 2021).

Overall, Canon City High School students reported healthier attitudes and behaviors related to substance use than students from across Colorado. However, risky attitudes and behaviors among youth are important to address. Research shows that such behaviors are associated with decreased academic achievement and increased risk for poor mental health outcomes and injury (HKCS, 2021). In addition, adopting unhealthy behaviors and attitudes in adolescence can impact the health and wellbeing of young people into adulthood.

The strategies presented below to address substance use primarily focus on the prevention and intervention of opioid use, tobacco use, and alcohol among adults and/or youth. The data shows that these issues require attention in Fremont County, and there is available funding, staff capacity, and community-wide efforts already underway to implement the following plan. The

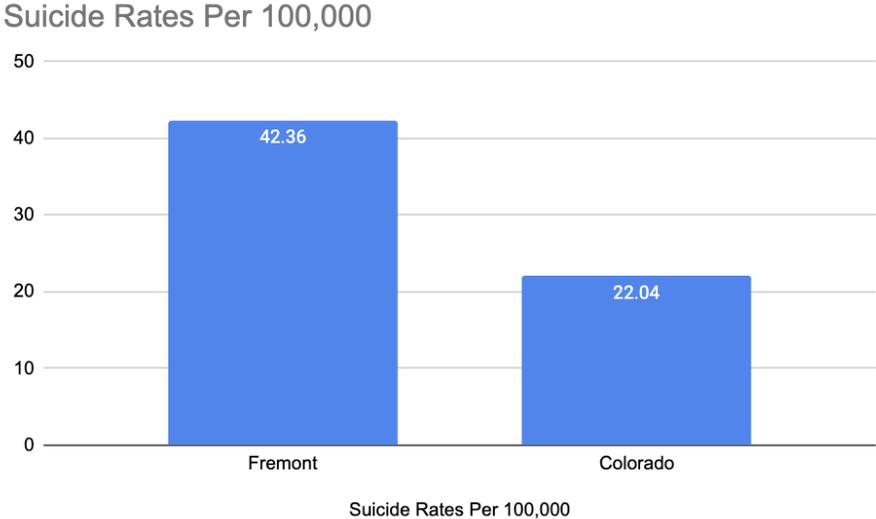
public health team aims to work collaboratively with community partners to address these significant and important priority areas.

<b>Substance Use</b>	
<b>Goals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To prevent opioid addiction, overdose, and fatalities among adults.</li> <li>● To reduce tobacco use among adults, particularly youth, young adults, and adults with lower socio-economic status.</li> <li>● To prevent youth ages 12 to 18 from initiating the use of tobacco, vape, ECIG, or other nicotine-containing products.</li> <li>● To prevent alcohol consumption among youth ages 12 to 18.</li> <li>● To prevent youth injury and fatalities from driving under the influence of alcohol and other drugs.</li> </ul>
<b>Strategies</b>	<p><b>Opioid</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Acquire continuation funding to support harm reduction strategies.</li> <li>● Maintain partnerships and protocols to effectively distribute naloxone.</li> <li>● Participate in regional opioid settlement planning and collaborate on resulting public health strategies.</li> </ul> <p><b>Tobacco</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Build and maintain tobacco expertise among Fremont County Public Health staff to stay knowledgeable on current and arising issues related to tobacco education and prevention.</li> <li>● Identify and engage community partners and stakeholders in elevating the community awareness of the burden of tobacco use through collaboration and outreach activities.</li> <li>● Provide education to build awareness around the importance of tobacco-free school policies.</li> <li>● Educate healthcare providers and community members on the evidence-based resources available to help people quit.</li> <li>● Promote smoking cessation resources to the community.</li> <li>● Boys and Girls Club to implement Smart Moves curriculum as part of their youth programs.</li> <li>● Fremont County Extension 4-H Club to implement Health Rocks as part of their youth programs.</li> </ul> <p><b>Alcohol</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Conduct an assessment of community members' (including youth) perceptions and attitudes related to alcohol use through prosocial events, pre- and post-surveys, key informant interviews, and focus groups.</li> <li>● Use free and earned media to promote and encourage positive norms about drinking and driving among youth and adults.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and engage community partners and stakeholders in elevating community awareness of the impacts of youth drinking and driving on the community members.</li> <li>• Promote and educate parents on the myths and misperceptions of drinking and driving that contribute to risky behavior through events and outreach.</li> <li>• Engage and collaborate with existing youth efforts and organizations to increase knowledge of youth drinking and driving.</li> <li>• Implement prosocial activities that build social connection and promote protective factors among youth and families.</li> <li>• Boys and Girls Club to implement Smart Moves curriculum as part of their youth programs.</li> <li>• Fremont County Extension 4-H Club to implement Health Rocks as part of their youth programs.</li> </ul>
<b>Measures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To reduce the number of deaths among adults from any drug overdose from 58 in 2022 to 40 in 2028.</li> <li>• To decrease the percentage of adults who smoke from 19% in 2023 to 15% in 2028.</li> <li>• To decrease the percentage of high school youth who report tobacco use in the past 30 days from 12% in 2022 to 8% in 2028.</li> <li>• To reduce the percentage of high school youth who report alcohol use in the past 30 days from 13% in 2021 to 10% in 2028.</li> <li>• To reduce Fremont County deaths due to alcohol-impaired driving from 27% in 2023 to 23% in 2028.</li> </ul>

**Adult Mental Health**

Fremont County has notably higher suicide rates of 42.36 per 100,000, compared to Colorado's rate of 22.04 per 100,000 (CDPHE, 2022).



Based on data from Solvista Health, it is clear that mental health issues are impacting the adult population in Fremont. According to their data, 87% of the 4,717 diagnoses made from January 2021 to December 2022 were related to mental health. Approximately 70-80% of those patients were adults ages 18 and older (Solvista Health, 2022).

Additionally, the average number of poor mental health days reported in the past 30 days among adults was 4.7, compared to 4.3 in Colorado, and 4.1% of adults in Fremont County experienced frequent mental distress (US News, 2023). Nearly 20 percent of adults in Fremont County have had a depressive order, which is similar to Colorado's rate. Adults in the county also had similar rates of anxiety disorder (18.4%) when compared to Colorado at large (COHID VISION, 2018-2021). Lastly, the percentage of adults receiving treatment for a mental health condition or emotional problem was 9.3% in Fremont County and 14.3% in Colorado (COHID VISION, 2019).

One reason that adults may be receiving less treatment is that the county has fewer mental health providers than Colorado with a patient to provider ratio of 260:1 in Fremont and 230:1 in Colorado (County Health Rankings, 2023). The primary behavioral health providers in the county include Solvista, a community mental health center, and Rocky Mountain Behavioral Health. Residents also have access to St. Thomas More Hospital, Good Neighborhood LLC, and Gateway to Success.

Some barriers to accessing mental health care include transportation, cost, lack of insurance coverage, and stigma within community norms surrounding mental illness. During key informant interviews, community stakeholders highlighted a lack of inpatient beds and providers for behavioral health, transportation, affordability, and a need for both better access to detoxification services and improved support and retention of the existing providers. Furthermore, interviewees stated a need for better youth mental health support in addition to support for those experiencing homelessness.

### ***Youth Mental Health***

Youth mental health is a concern in Fremont County and throughout the state of Colorado. In May 2021, Children's Hospital Colorado declared a youth mental health "state of emergency" (Children's Hospital, 2023). Children's Hospital Colorado notes that the rates of anxiety and depression in Colorado youth have doubled during the pandemic years and that suicide is currently the leading cause of death in youth aged 10 to 24 years old in Colorado.

In Canon City, the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey measured mental health and supportive relationships among the same 691 high school students who were asked about substance use and other health indicators. The survey found that the percentage of students who had considered suicide in the past twelve months was 12.3% compared to the state average of 17.1%, and 5.6% of Canon City students had actually attempted suicide one or more times in the past twelve months compared to the state average of 7.2% (HKCS, 2021). It is also important to note that 35.2% of survey respondents reported feeling sad or hopeless for two or more weeks in the twelve months prior to taking the survey, which is only slightly less than the

state percentage of 39.6% (HKCS, 2021). Lastly, 75.7% of Canon City High School students reported having an adult to go to for help with a serious problem and 84.8% feel they could ask a parent or guardian for help if they had a personal problem. The state averages for these two measures are similar at 73.5% and 82.4%, respectively (HKCS, 2021).

The need for mental health care services among youth in Fremont County is supported by the data from Solvista Health. Out of the 4,717 mental health disorders diagnosed from January 2021 to December 2022, between 20% to 40% of the most common diagnoses were among children and youth ages 18 and younger (Solvista Health, 2022).

The strategies included in this plan to improve the mental health and wellbeing among youth and adults primarily focus on increasing access to behavioral healthcare and preventing suicide. The data shows that these issues require attention and that there is available funding, staff capacity, and community-wide efforts already underway to implement the following plan. The public health team aims to work collaboratively with community partners to address mental health among youth and adults. To this end, the stigma reduction and workforce development strategies are shared, community-wide strategies that are also featured in the 2023 St. Thomas More Hospital Community Health Implementation Strategy. The youth development strategies are implemented in partnership with community-based, youth serving organizations.

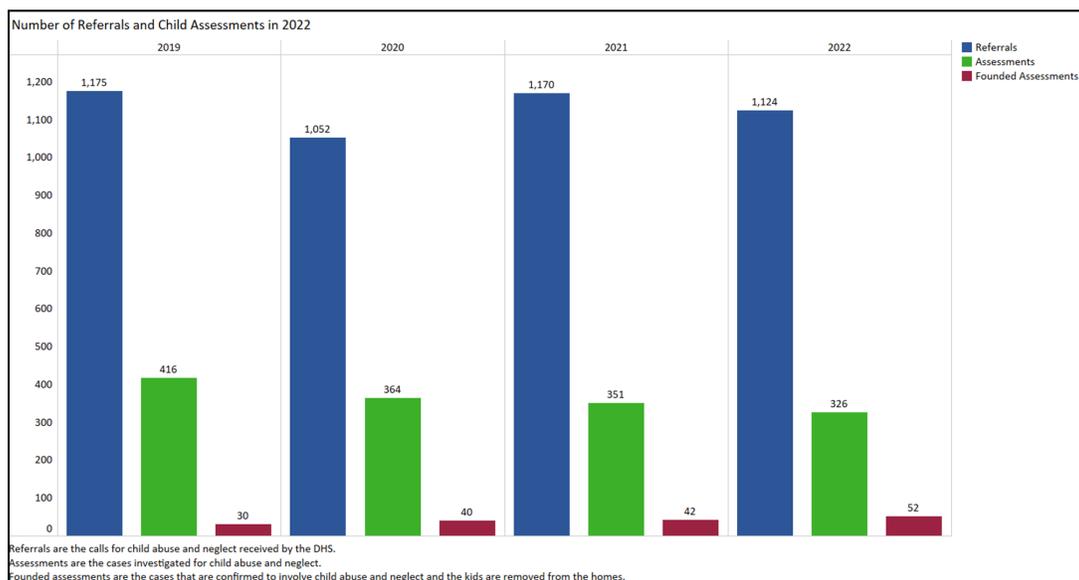
<b>Mental Health</b>	
<b>Goals</b>	To improve the mental health and wellbeing of community members in Fremont County.
<b>Strategies</b>	<p><b>Stigma Reduction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Advance stigma reduction messaging and information through website and social media campaigns.</li> <li>● Utilize community partnership and unique opportunities to advance culturally relevant messaging and available resources to our diverse communities.</li> <li>● Activate ambassadors to improve stigma reduction and outcomes within the community.</li> </ul> <p><b>Workforce Development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Centura Health to collaborate with local school districts and community/technical colleges to develop a pilot program that supports leadership and professional development pathways for high school students interested in entry-level, high demand professions such as behavioral health and nursing.</li> </ul> <p><b>Youth Development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Implement prosocial activities that build social connection and promote protective factors among youth and families.</li> <li>● Boys and Girls Club to implement Smart Moves curriculum as part of their youth</li> </ul>

	<p>programs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fremont County Extension 4-H Club to implement Health Rocks as part of their youth programs.</li> </ul>
<b>Measures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To decrease the suicide rate among adults from 42 per 100,000 in 2022 to 36 per 100,000 in 2028.</li> <li>• To increase the percent of adults receiving treatment for mental health conditions or emotional problems from 9.3% in 2019 to 12% in 2028.</li> <li>• To decrease the percentage of high school youth in Fremont County who report feeling sad or hopeless for two weeks or more in the past 12 months from 35% in 2021 to 25% in 2028.</li> </ul>

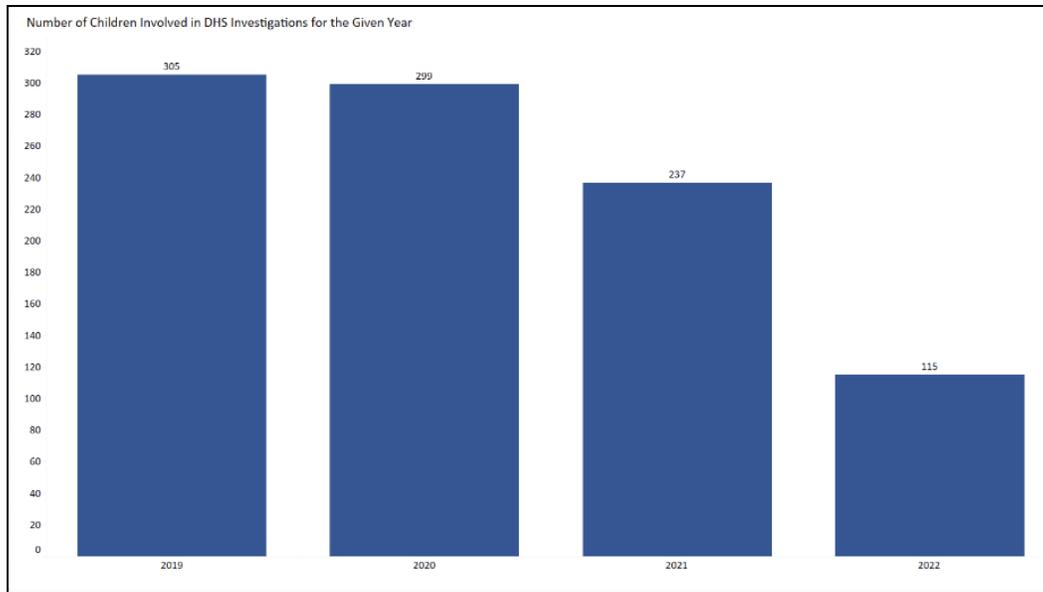
### **Child Maltreatment**

Child maltreatment includes “all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence, and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development, or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power” (World Health Organization, 2023). Child maltreatment is often hidden, and children who are abused are more likely to abuse others in their own adulthood. Therefore, it is crucial to break the cycle of violence (World Health Organization, 2023).

In Fremont County, the child abuse and neglect rate was 8.6 per 1,000 in 2020 compared to 9.0 per 1,000 in Colorado (Colorado Children’s Campaign, 2020). The number of referrals or calls for child abuse and neglect that the Fremont County Department of Human Services (DHS) received was 1,124 in 2022 (Fremont County Department of Human Services, 2022). Of the 326 cases that were investigated, 54 cases were “founded assessments” which means that they did involve child abuse and neglect, and the child was removed from the home (Fremont County Department of Human Services, 2022).



The number of children involved in the county's DHS investigations has steadily decreased since 2019, falling from 237 in 2021 to 115 in 2022 (Fremont County Department of Human Services, 2022). However, the number of court cases filed per year for the removal of children from a home has increased from 25 to 56 between 2021 and 2022 (Fremont County Department of Human Services, 2022). The re-entry rate to DHS care was 18.4% in 2022, which has increased from 13.9% in 2021 (Fremont County Department of Human Services, 2022).



Given the increases in founded assessments, removal of children from the home due to child abuse and neglect, and reentry of children into DHS care, the Fremont County Department of Public Health and Environment identified child maltreatment as a key priority in the public health improvement plan. Child maltreatment is a complex issue that is difficult to prevent. When considering how to address child maltreatment, it is important to understand and focus on the risk and protective factors that contribute to its occurrence.

### ***Risk Factors***

There are many risk factors that contribute to child abuse and neglect. Risk factors are characteristics that may increase the likelihood of experiencing or perpetrating child abuse and neglect, but they may or may not be direct causes. A combination of individual, relational, community, and societal factors contribute to the risk of child abuse and neglect (CDC, 2023).

At the individual level, caregivers are at an increased likelihood of perpetrating child abuse and neglect if they:

- abuse substances or experience mental health issues;
- are young, single, or have several children;
- have limited education;
- have lower income levels;

- experienced violence growing up;
- or use corporal punishment such as spanking in the home.

Families are at increased risk of perpetrating child maltreatment if they:

- have household members in prison,
- are socially disconnected,
- experience other types of violence such as relationship violence,
- and have high conflict and negative communication styles.

Finally, communities with high rates of violence, drugs, unemployment, poverty, limited educational opportunity, food insecurity, and social isolation contribute to the occurrence of child maltreatment (CDC, 2023).

In the county overview and behavioral health sections of this report, the data demonstrate that several of these contributing factors are persistent in Fremont County. For example, Fremont County's child poverty rate is 17.7%, compared with Colorado's child poverty rate of 10.6%. Another example is that only 19% of the population has a bachelor's degree or higher. Finally, it is evident that substance use and mental health issues are notable among adults and youth.

### ***Protective Factors***

Protective factors may lessen the likelihood of children being abused or neglected. Identifying and understanding protective factors are equally as important as researching risk factors (CDC, 2023). Protective factors at the individual level center on caregivers who:

- create safe, positive relationships with children,
- practice nurturing parenting skills and provide emotional support,
- can meet basic needs of food, shelter, education, and health services,
- have a college degree or higher and have steady employment.

At the family level, protective factors involve families:

- who have strong social support networks and stable, positive relationships with the people around them,
- where caregivers are present and interested in the child,
- where caregivers enforce household rules and engage in child monitoring,
- with caring adults outside the family who can serve as role models or mentors.

Finally, communities where families have access to:

- high-quality preschool,
- nurturing and safe childcare,
- safe, engaging after school programs and activities,
- medical care and mental health services,
- economic and financial help,
- workplaces with family-friendly policies.

Public health and community strategies featured in this plan focus on increasing protective factors while minimizing risk factors at all levels in Fremont County. Public health cannot make an impact alone. Rather, it will require a collaborative and multi-prong approach among partners and agencies from across the community. Therefore, the strategies included here are also featured in Fremont County’s Child Maltreatment Prevention Framework for Action developed by Starpoint.

<b>Child Maltreatment</b>	
<b>Goals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To prevent child maltreatment among families and children in Fremont County.</li> <li>● To increase protective factors and decrease risk factors that contribute to child maltreatment.</li> </ul>
<b>Strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Promote family-friendly business practices and employment opportunities through the use of the Executives Partnering to Invest in Children toolkit and conducting outreach at job fairs in order to increase the retention of parents and caretakers in the workplace.</li> <li>● Provide social emotional screening for children under six through ECHO screening who might be at risk for social emotional issues and to provide appropriate follow-up services.</li> <li>● Support families to improve their parenting attitudes (and resulting AAPI scores) by providing home visitation services, evidence-based life skills training to adolescents, and comprehensive resources to families.</li> <li>● Implement systems change so that parents and caretakers participating in out-of-county detox services experience a warm hand-off to Fremont County recovery services, including support for children under the age of 6 impacted by parental substance abuse.</li> </ul>
<b>Measures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To decrease the child abuse and neglect rate from 8.6 per 1,000 in 2020 to 6 per 1,000 in 2028.</li> </ul>

## **Conclusion**

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The 2024-2028 Fremont County Community Health Improvement Plan provides the county’s public health team and its community partners with a helpful understanding of the health-related strengths and challenges facing the community. Overall, residents enjoy a beautiful environment and a strong sense of community. They also experience the priority challenges of substance use, mental health, and child maltreatment. These are issues faced by many communities across Colorado and the United States.

This plan not only presents data to describe the priority issues in detail, but also presents evidence-based strategies that will be implemented by the Public Health team and other

community organizations to make an impact. The Fremont County Department of Public Health and Environment will aim to effectively address these complex public health challenges through staff commitment, dedicated resources, and ongoing collaboration.

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