

## Perinatal Substance Use in Orange County

# Focus on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders

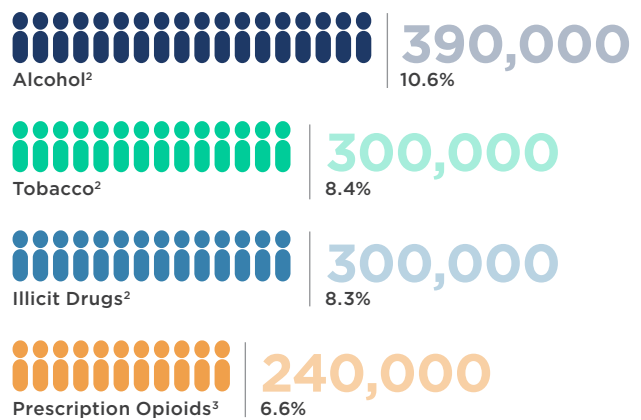
Orange County is on a journey to improve the system of care for families affected by perinatal substance use. Prenatal alcohol use is the most prevalent form of perinatal substance use in Orange County and its impact is often unrecognized and unaccounted for.

FASD (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders) is an umbrella term for a range of effects that occur to an individual whose mother drank alcohol during pregnancy. FASD can include physical, behavioral and intellectual effects ranging from mild to severe. It is often a hidden disability that is not easily recognizable, making it difficult to provide families needed services and supports.

Previously, CDC researchers found that during 2018-2020, 13.5% of pregnant adults in the United States reported current drinking, and 5.2% reported binge drinking in the past 30 days (the rate is even higher for higher-income persons and those with college degrees). Orange County-specific prevalence surveys find results similar to national data, including increased rates for those with higher educational and income levels.

**TABLE 1: Estimated Number of Births in United States with Prenatal Substance Exposure Based on Substance Use Reported During Pregnancy**

Estimated Number of Births (1,000s)



Estimates based on the percentage of women who report use of alcohol, tobacco, illicit drugs, and prescription opioids in 2021 and the number of births (n = 3,613,647)<sup>1</sup> in 2020. The percentages represent women who report use of substances from the following sources.

**Sources:**

<sup>1</sup>Osterman et al. (2022). National Vital Statistics.

<sup>2</sup>National Survey on Drug Use and Health. (2021). Illicit drugs include marijuana, cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens, inhalants, methamphetamine, misuse of prescription psychotherapeutics, opioids, and illicit drugs other than marijuana.

<sup>3</sup>Center for Disease Control and Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS). (2020). 2019 data from 34 states.

### Why it Matters

- FASD is the leading preventable cause of intellectual and developmental disabilities in the United States.
- Early identification and access to supportive services can maximize a child’s potential and help prevent additional conditions from developing.
- FASD is 100% preventable by not drinking alcohol during pregnancy.

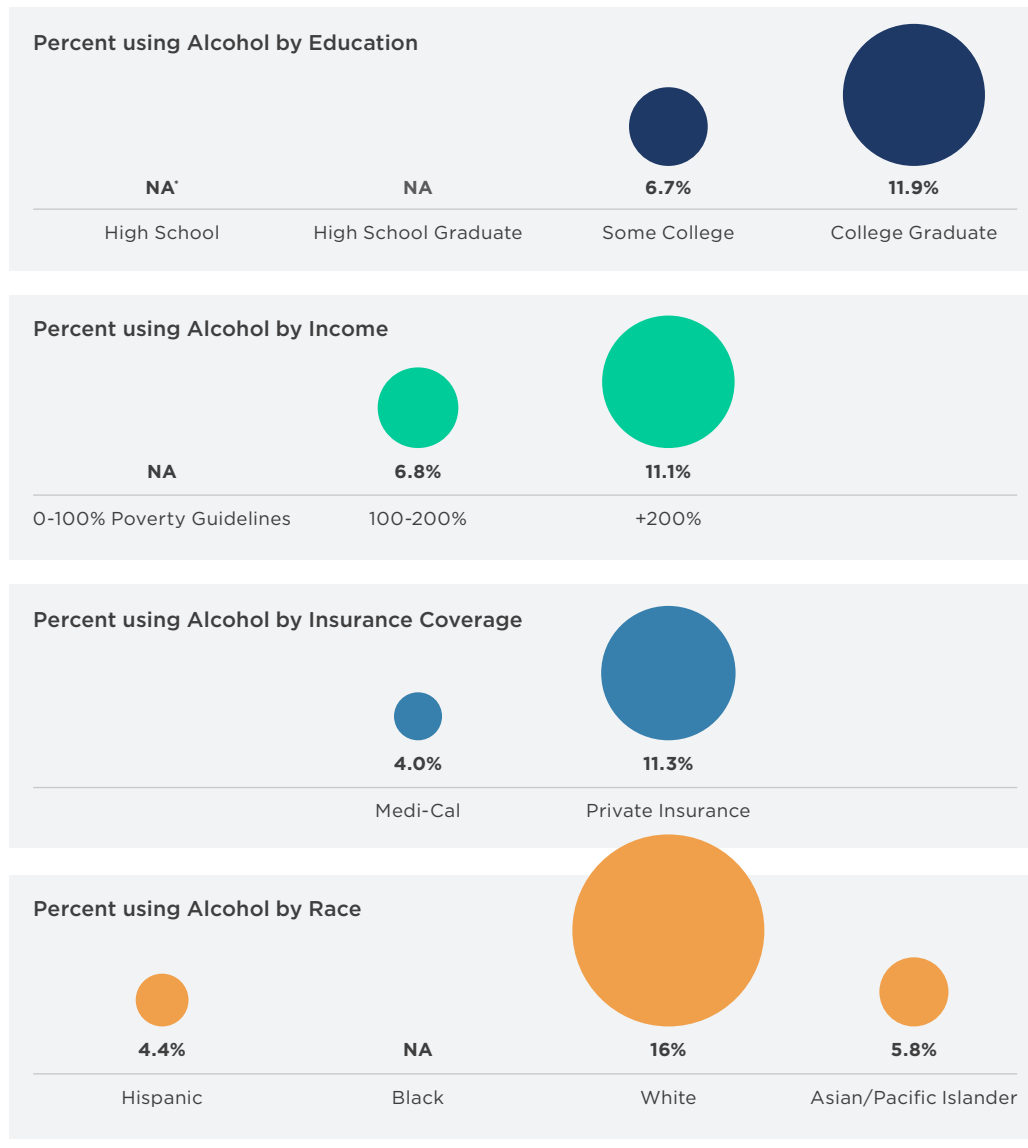
### What does FASD look like in Orange County?

- Using the California Maternal and Infant Health Assessment (MIHA) estimate that at a minimum 8.3% of all newborns in Orange County are prenatally exposed to alcohol, this results in an estimated 55,000 to 57,000 children and youth under 18 who are potentially affected by FASD in the county.
- Orange County is currently lacking aggregate data on number of persons screened for prenatal alcohol use, results of screenings, and subsequent services provided.

- Orange County has gaps at three crucial points: (1) using validated screening tools for alcohol use, (2) responding with appropriate offers of services and support when alcohol use is acknowledged, and (3) supporting the client in moving toward an appropriate form of treatment.
- Pregnant and parenting persons express a fear that if they respond honestly to questions about alcohol use during pregnancy, they may be reported to child protective services and their infants may be removed to foster care.
- If a pregnant person is identified as using another substance, they are not always screened for alcohol use. It is imperative to screen for alcohol as 40% of persons who use illicit drugs or prescription drugs inappropriately also use alcohol. This screening is not always done.

**TABLE 2: Alcohol Use in Third Trimester of Pregnancy, Orange County<sup>1</sup>**

Average use is 8.3%. However, percent varies according to education, income, insurance type and race



\*NA - Not Available due to small number of respondents  
<sup>1</sup>2018-2022 CA Maternal and Infant Health Assessment (MIHA)

**Initial recommendations to improve Orange County’s response to prenatal alcohol use**

Integrate a focus on alcohol in the current efforts to implement Family Wellness Plans (which are also known as Plans of Safe Care), including creating a sub workgroup within the Family Wellness Plan (FWP) initiative to ensure that alcohol is integrated in the broader FWP work, prioritizing:

- Including alcohol component in stigma reduction strategies.
- Improved data collection
- Trainings for providers on the importance of screening for alcohol and the resources available for treatment and support
- Incorporating alcohol education in provider and community materials

**The data we do have — local, state and national — makes clear that thousands of infants in Orange County are born with fetal alcohol exposure. Current practice and policy related to prenatal substance exposure in Orange County have not devoted proportionate attention to alcohol among the full range of effects of prenatal substance exposure.**

**How this Information was Collected**

In Spring 2023, First 5 Orange County contracted with Children and Family Futures (CFF) to conduct an initial review of Orange County’s current identification of and response to families affected by prenatal alcohol use and FASD.

The intent of the review was to gather information that would help County agencies and organizations understand what FASD-related efforts are under way and provide improvement recommendations. The information gathered will contribute to the efforts to implement Family Wellness Plans (FWP) for infants who are substance-affected, and to increase the availability of family-centered treatment in the County.

In developing the review, CFF surveyed Orange County agencies and organizations who have or potentially have a role in identifying and responding to FASD. In addition to the survey, CFF interviewed staff at selected agencies, reviewed available data sources and attended multiple sessions of community workgroups that have been convening to assist in the successful implementation of FWP in Orange County.