

## What are Positive Childhood Experiences?

**Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs)** are experiences during childhood that promote safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments. PCEs can help children develop a sense of belonging, connectedness, and build resilience (CDC, 2022).

These experiences can include close relationships with any parent or safe, stable adult; feeling safe at home, at school, and in the community; and having chances to learn and belong in a community.

## Why are PCEs among Tennesseans Important?

The future prosperity of Tennessee depends on its ability to foster the health and well-being of the next generation. Healthy child development is the foundation for economic productivity, responsible citizenship, and lifelong health—all elements of a strong community and healthy economy.



PCEs can also protect children from **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)**. ACEs are potentially traumatic experiences during childhood that can affect lifelong health. PCEs can buffer the negative effects of ACEs that have occurred (CDC, 2019). Still, even children without traumatic experiences need to feel belonging and connectedness to thrive.

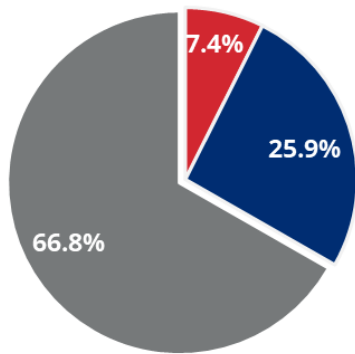
Opportunities for PCEs are affected by a child’s environment and community. Understanding PCEs in Tennessee helps communities create and encourage the conditions to support positive relationships and environments for everyone. Our collective well-being depends on creating a strong foundation of health for all children (Sege et al., 2017).

## PCEs among Tennesseans

In 2021, the **Tennessee Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS)** included the *Positive Childhood Experiences* module, a series of statements about childhood with yes/no responses. The number of “yes” responses indicates a PCEs score out of 7:

- I was able to talk with my family about my feelings
- I felt that my family stood by me during difficult times
- I enjoyed participating in community traditions
- I felt a sense of belonging in high school
- I felt supported by friends
- I had at least two non-parent adults who took a genuine interest in me
- I felt safe and protected by an adult in my home (Bethell et al., 2019)

Percentage of PCEs Experienced



Source: Tennessee BRFSS, 2021

Most adult Tennesseans reported experiencing several positive experiences during childhood.

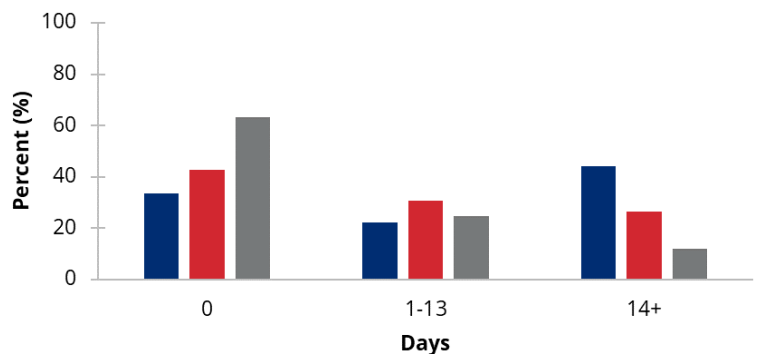
Most reported feeling **safe and supported at home** and **by their friends** while growing up. In fact, **nearly half of adults reported experiencing all 7**. Only 7.4% reported 2 or fewer PCEs.

The least common PCE was *"I felt a sense of belonging in high school"* (71.3%).

## PCEs can lead to better mental and emotional wellbeing . . .

Positive Childhood Experiences were **strongly associated with better mental health**. Adults who had more PCEs were less likely to have ever been diagnosed with depression and had fewer days dealing with poor mental health.

Days with Poor Mental Health in the Last 30 Days

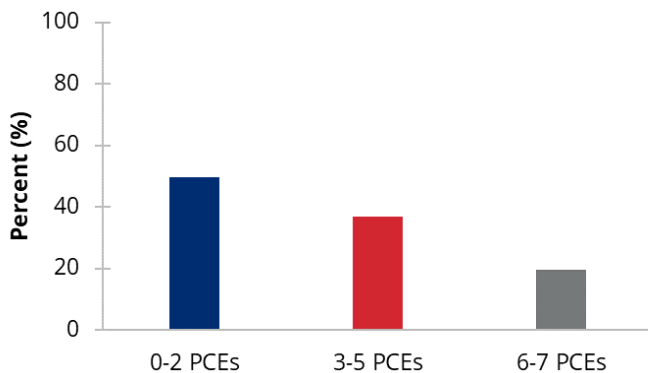


Source: Tennessee BRFSS, 2021



**44% of adults with 0-2 PCEs** spent 2 or more weeks of the last month dealing with **poor mental health**, compared to just **12% of those with 6-7 PCEs**.

Ever Diagnosed with Depression

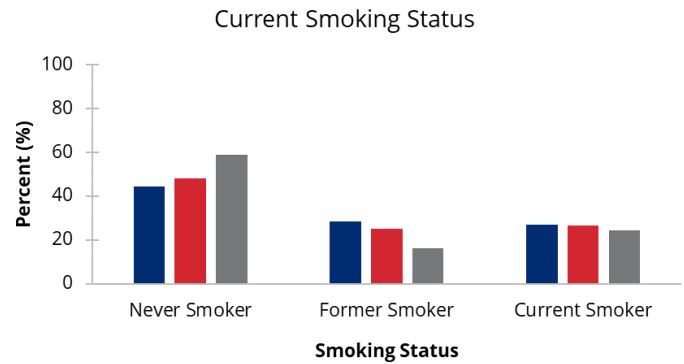


Source: Tennessee BRFSS, 2021

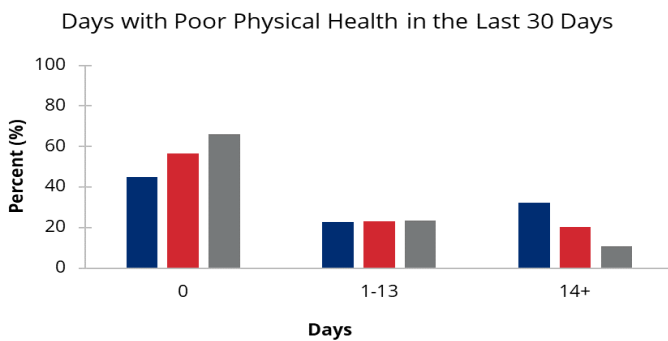
Increased Positive Childhood Experiences were linked to a **lower prevalence of depression**.

## Improved emotional wellbeing lessens the probability of risky health behaviors . . .

Those with **more PCEs** reported having **“never smoked” cigarettes** and fewer reported being a “former smoker”.



Source: Tennessee BRFSS, 2021 ■ 0-2 PCEs ■ 3-5 PCEs ■ 6-7 PCEs

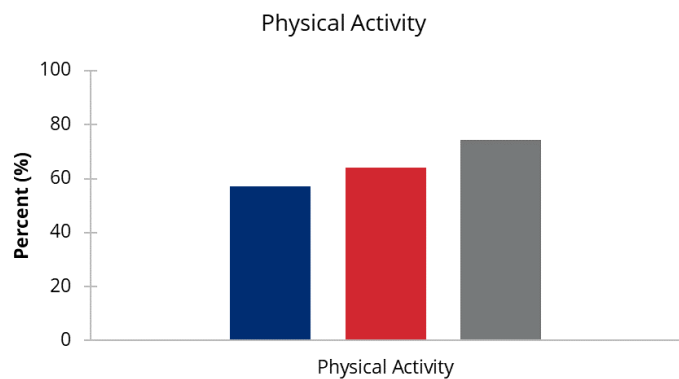


Source: Tennessee BRFSS, 2021 ■ 0-2 PCEs ■ 3-5 PCEs ■ 6-7 PCEs

People with the **highest number of PCEs reported having better physical health** than those with low PCE scores.

Eleven percent (11%) of people with 6-7 PCEs reported spending 14 or more of the last 30 days with poor physical health compared to nearly 1 of 3 (32%) of those with 0-2 PCEs.

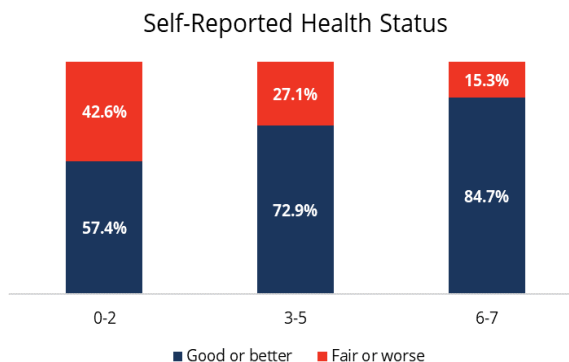
Those with high PCEs had **more physical activity** compared to those with less PCEs.



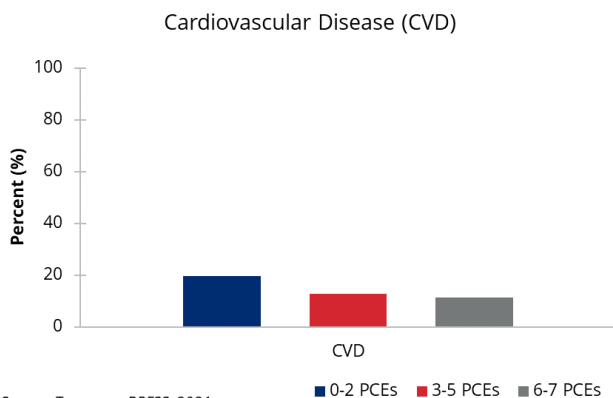
Source: Tennessee BRFSS, 2021 ■ 0-2 PCEs ■ 3-5 PCEs ■ 6-7 PCEs

## ... Improving overall health across the lifespan.

PCEs were associated with **better overall health status**. As the number of PCEs increased, so did the probability of reporting good or better health.



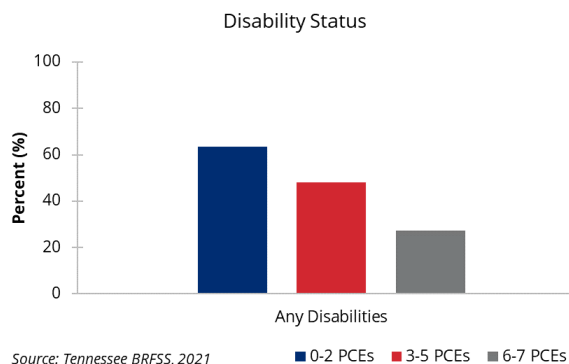
Source: Tennessee BRFSS, 2021



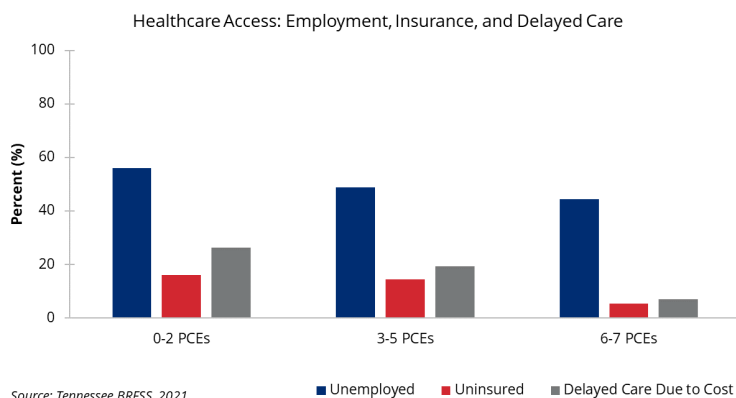
Source: Tennessee BRFSS, 2021

PCEs were associated with CVD; those with more PCEs **less commonly reported cardiovascular diseases** (3-5 PCEs: **12.9%** and 6-7 PCEs: **11.4%**)—such as coronary heart disease, heart attack, and stroke—compared to those with 0-2 PCEs (19.7%).

People with more PCEs **less commonly reported having any disabilities**.



Source: Tennessee BRFSS, 2021



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People with more PCEs are **more commonly employed**, giving them better access to insurance.

Because they're **more likely to have health insurance** and be employed, people with more PCEs are also **less likely to delay medical care** due to cost.

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## What are the Public Health Implications?

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The PCEs data tell us that encouraging safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments for children has lifelong positive effects on the health of Tennesseans. Children with high PCE scores are less likely to engage in risky health behaviors, less likely to experience long-term illness, and more likely to enjoy better mental health and overall health later in life.

However, many children are born into systems and structures that limit opportunities for connection and safety. Not all communities in Tennessee have fair access to resources that provide protection against harmful experiences like ACEs. For example, communities lacking affordable housing, high-quality schooling, or healthy food may negatively impact a child's environment.

When we focus on community conditions (seen in the roots of the tree) *and* support opportunities for safety, stability, and meaningful relationships (seen in the leaves of the tree), we can help all children thrive, no matter where they live. This affects safety, tax spending, and quality of life for communities across our state (Levine & Reed, 2022).

High PCE scores improve resilience, well-being, and prosperity for us all.



*Adapted from Center for Community Resilience, Community Resilience Tree*

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### Statewide and Community Strategies to Increase PCEs

Strategies to increase PCEs encourage relationship-building and community connectedness, such as:

- Teaching children relationship and self-regulation skills in school and community programs
- Supporting children's mentorship programs, extra-curricular programs, and civic, arts, and cultural programs
- Strengthening public-private partnerships to address policy and systems improvements in support of children's well-being, such as [Resilient TN Collaborative](#) and [County Health Councils](#)
- Increasing access to early childhood programs, including high-quality childcare and evidence-based home visiting
- Adapting systems of care to focus on whole-person wellness in addition to physical health
- Improving economic support for families, lowering overall family stress and freeing up resources for programming that supports child development

## Tennessee Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System

The Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, or BRFSS, is a national telephone-based random digit dialed survey focused on health behavior and chronic disease prevalence in adults (18+ years). All 50 states and three U.S. territories participate in the BRFSS with CDC support. Tennessee has been participating in the BRFSS since its inception in 1984.



For more information about TN BRFSS:

**Visit:** <https://www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/statistics/health-data/brfss/brfss/about-brfss.html>

Or contact the **BRFSS coordinator** by: **Email:** TNBRFSS.Health@tn.gov | **Phone:** 615-532-7890

### References

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