



NJDOE News

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2005 Student Health Survey: Less Smoking and Drinking, More Seatbelt Use

Fewer New Jersey high school students say that they smoke, drink alcohol and carry weapons, and more of them say they always wear a seat belt, according to the results of the 2005 Student Health Survey released today by acting Commissioner of Education Lucille E. Davy.

The survey was completed by 1,495 students at 29 public high schools in the spring of last year. The high schools were randomly selected and had to agree to participate, and student participation was also voluntary and required parental consent.

Students answered questions about their health-related behavior in six areas that are closely related to preventable illness and injury among young people: unintentional injuries (safety) and violence; the use of tobacco; the use of alcohol and drugs; sexual behavior; dietary behavior; and physical activity.

The 2005 overall participation rate was sufficient to obtain a weighted sample representative of all regular public school students in grades 9 through 12 in the state. This meant that the New Jersey information could be included in the federal Centers for Disease Control national report.

It also permitted comparisons between the 2005 results and answers students gave in the 2001 and 1995 surveys, which were the two other recent years in which a representative sample was obtained in New Jersey.

"We're very pleased to see that that young people are reporting less risky behavior in many of the areas covered by the survey," acting Commissioner Davy said. "The decrease in smoking and drinking and the increase in seatbelt use tell us that the messages being sent about these matters seem to be getting through."

Key findings in the survey include:

- High school students reported substantial further reductions in use of tobacco products, with cigarette smoking during the prior 30 days down to 20 percent in 2005 from 30 percent in 2001 and 37 percent in 1995.
- High school student use of seatbelts also showed continued improvement, with close to one half (47 percent) of students always wearing a seat belt, up from 39 percent in 2001 and 30 percent in 1995.
- Fewer high school students reported having had one or more alcoholic drinks within the prior 30 days (46 percent) than in 2001 (56 percent) or in 1995 (51 percent), and rates of binge drinking followed a similar pattern, decreasing to 27 percent in 2005 from 33 percent in 2001 and 31 percent in 1995.
- Fewer high school students reported carrying any kind of weapon on and off school property, continuing a downward trend to 10 percent from 13 percent in 2001 and 18 percent in 1995. Two percent (2 percent) of students reported carrying a gun, reduced from 5 percent in 2001 and 5 percent in 1995.
- The overall proportion of high school students who ever had sexual intercourse continued a slow downward trend to 44 percent from 47 percent in 2001 and 49 percent in 1995. The proportion of students who reported having had sexual intercourse within the prior three months remained at about one third (33 percent). Among students who had sexual intercourse in the prior 30 days, use of a condom "the last time" reached a high of 75 percent, compared with 67 percent in 2001 and 1995.

For the first time in the spring of 2005, DOE also administered a shorter version of the Student Health Survey to seventh- and eight-grade students. The middle school survey covered similar topics, excluding sexual behavior. Thirty middle schools out of the 36 selected in the sample agreed to participate, and 1,409 students out of a possible 2,156 completed the survey.

Since these participation rates did not meet the minimum standards set by the CDC, the data could not be weighted to reflect the statewide population and could not be included in the national survey. In addition, since this is the first time the survey was administered, no historic comparisons can be made.

Key findings in the middle school survey include:

- About one in six (17 percent) middle grade students reported drinking one or more alcoholic beverages within the prior month; 5 percent reported smoking a cigarette during the prior month.
- One in five (21 percent) of middle grades students had thought seriously about suicide; 7 percent had tried to commit suicide.
- Based on self-reported height and weight, 12 percent of both middle grades and high school students were overweight, meaning they had a Body Mass Index greater than the 95th percentile for weight of a CDC established index population of their same gender, age and height.

The Student Health Survey is a collaborative effort with the Department of Health and Senior Services (which contributes to the funding of the project) and the Department of Law and Public Safety.

DOE provides a summary brochure about the survey to all middle schools and high schools so that survey findings can be disseminated widely among both school and community members that play a role in promoting healthy adolescent development. DOE and other state government departments and agencies also use the survey in the development of policies and programs that address adolescent behavior.

Local school districts and community organizations also use the findings to:

- Recognize program successes influencing adolescent behaviors;
- Identify priority areas for changes in school and agency policy and programs; collaboration with community agencies;
- Establish district, school and community benchmarks for reducing adolescent risks and increasing pro-social behaviors;
- Provide teens with fact-based peer norms rather than inaccurate perceptions of what their peers are doing; and
- Provide teachers with a basis for allocating instructional time in the health and physical education curriculum.

The summary report, the detailed report (including the questionnaire and an appendix) and the data tables can be found online here: <http://www.nj.gov/njded/students/yrbs/>