



NJDOE News

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For Release: May 4, 2005

Survey Provides 2003 Snapshot of New Jersey Teen Behavior

The New Jersey Department of Education and the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services today released the 2003 Student Health Survey, an indicator of how many public high school students are practicing good health habits and how many are engaged in risky behavior.

However, state officials cautioned that because the number of students and schools who ultimately agreed to participate in the 2003 survey did not comprise a response rate large enough for valid statistical weighting, direct comparisons between the 2003 results and the results of prior bi-annual surveys conducted by DOE should not be made.

Schools and classes within those schools are randomly selected to take part in each survey. The anonymity of the schools and students is protected and participation is voluntary (although parents also had to provide written permission for their children to be involved), but if the selected schools or individual students refuse to take part, they cannot be replaced by others without affecting the random nature of the sample.

"Therefore we have to view this as more of a snapshot of what was going on in 2003 with the sample of students who completed the questionnaire and not project it as being reflective of the entire high school population of New Jersey," said Assistant Commissioner of Education Isaac Bryant. "It has value to researchers, program developers, parents and teens, but it shouldn't be used to make statistical conclusions about behavioral trends."

Among the survey findings in the spring of 2003:

- Approximately one quarter (24%) of students engaged in binge drinking (5 or more drinks in a row) during the prior 30 days.
- One in five (19%) students used marijuana in the prior 30 days and 4% used cocaine.
- Ten percent of students had experienced sexual contact against their will at some time in their lives.
- Ten percent of students watched five or more hours of television on an average school day.
- One in five students are either at-risk for being overweight (12%) or are clearly overweight/obese (9%) based upon their self-reported height and weight for their age and gender.

The survey was administered to 1,399 students in 26 public high schools in New Jersey. Students were presented with 92 multiple choice items covering seven broad areas of teen behavior: safety behaviors; violence; use of tobacco; use of alcohol and drugs; sexual behaviors; dietary behaviors; and physical activity. Many of the questions come from the national Youth Risk Behavior Survey, sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Assistant Commissioner Bryant noted that valid trends in teen behavior could be seen by comparing the results of the 2001 New Jersey Youth Risk Behavior Survey (the predecessor to the Student Health Survey) with a prior state-conducted survey in 1995, both of which had significantly higher levels of participation than the 2003 survey.

"For the most part, New Jersey high school students' health-related behaviors were mostly unchanged during that six-year period," he said. "However, there were some notable changes, both good and bad."

According to the surveys, during the period between 1995 and 2001:

- Students reduced their use of tobacco products, with smoking during the prior 30 days down from 36% to 29%.
- Students increased their use of seatbelts, with those who always wore a seat belt increasing from 30% to 39%.
- Fewer students reported carrying a weapon both on and off of school property, though the proportion of those who carried a gun remained unchanged at 5%.
- Students reported a small reduction in suicidal thinking and behavior, with a reduction in the proportion who

- had seriously considered suicide during the past year from 22% to 17%.
- A greater proportion of students felt unsafe, with students who avoided school in the prior 30 days because they felt unsafe increasing from 5% to 9%.
 - While the overall proportion of students who had ever had sexual intercourse decreased slightly from 49% to 47%, the proportion of students who reported having sexual intercourse within the prior 3 months increased slightly from 34% to 36%. (Reported use of birth control pills and condoms remained unchanged.)

"The decline in tobacco use is especially encouraging. This report mirrors some of the health department's own survey results, which show fewer young people are smoking," said Dr. Eddy Bresnitz, Health and Senior Services Deputy Commissioner and State Epidemiologist.

"A significant portion of our Comprehensive Tobacco Control Program has been devoted to encouraging young people not to smoke, and I think we're seeing the benefit of that commitment," he added.

The REBEL (Reaching Everyone By Exposing Lies) youth led anti-tobacco movement is a DHSS program specifically for high school students. Through REBEL chapters in all 21 counties and in 100 high schools, students educate their peers and communities about the dangers of tobacco use. Teens, working with advisors, create activities that appeal to their peers and get the anti-tobacco message across in an effective way.

"We believe that these self-reported student surveys are very important, not just for our planning and program evaluation, but also for parents and everyone else who works directly with teens," said Assistant Commissioner Bryant.

"The survey results help us to recognize our successes, identify priority areas for increased attention, set informed goals for student behavior in high schools, shift emphasis in health instruction to address current issues, and secure public support for changes in school policy," he said.

"Finally, the findings also help teens themselves to see that not everyone is doing 'it' - whatever 'it' may be," Bryant said.

"This survey gives us a clearer idea of the medical issues and health behaviors that can affect young people's health both now and for years to come," said Dr. Bresnitz. "By knowing these trends, we can better focus our prevention and education efforts in areas of need."

DOE provides the findings in both detailed reports and in summary brochures in order to encourage the broadest possible distribution of the information to adults who work with youth or for the benefit of youth. Printed copies of the 2001 and 2003 surveys are being distributed to school officials and local health officials to assist in program planning and encourage community collaborations that support the healthy development of teens.

[Click here to view the 2001 and 2003 reports from the DOE website](#)

DOE administers several programs designed to influence students' health-related behavior. These are designed to:

- strengthen student health knowledge and prevention skills through instructional programs;
- promote both school-wide and individual character development;
- expand use of validated student support services practices to reduce violence and the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, and to address individual health needs;
- strengthen regulatory provisions related to student development; and
- promote collaboration among other state agencies and non-governmental organizations to bring prevention resources to New Jersey schools.

[Click here for a summary of the 2003 survey](#)