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Report shows Alaska youth making healthier choices

Tobacco, drug use on the decline

JUNEAU — Alaska teens are participating less in risky behaviors according to the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey. The annual YRBS shows such behaviors as tobacco and drug use, sexual conduct, and violence are either decreasing or remain the same between 1995 and 2011. Compared to recently released national YRBS data, Alaska is doing better or the same as the nation on most measures.

The YRBS is part of a national data system developed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to assess and address health risks among high school students. The survey is conducted in Alaska every other year through the cooperation of the state Department of Health and Social Services, the Department of Education and Early Development and public high schools statewide.

In spring 2011, the departments surveyed 1,327 students from 40 high schools that were scientifically selected to represent all public high schools (excluding boarding schools, alternative schools, correspondence schools and correctional facilities) in Alaska, said Wendy Hamilton, state coordinator for the survey. At the same time, 969 students from 16 alternative high schools (defined as serving high-risk students) were surveyed. The results of these anonymous surveys are posted online at http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/chronic/school/pubs/2011YRBS_Highlights.pdf.

“These surveys supply important information for understanding the health of Alaska’s teens and how families, communities and health professionals can help them make healthier choices,” said Dr. Ward Hurlburt, Alaska’s chief medical officer and director of the Division of Public Health. “Learning where we are today in our fight against teen obesity and tobacco use helps us chart a more productive course for the future.”

Dating violence and bullying are two issues of particular concern in Alaska and the nation. “Too many students are being bullied, or hurt by their boyfriend or girlfriend, and for the first time in Alaska we know that 15 percent of high school students have been bullied over the Internet,” said Commissioner Mike Hanley, Alaska Department of Education and Early Development. “Correcting these behaviors remains a serious challenge for our schools, families and communities.”

TRADITIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS:

Compared to the 1995 YRBS survey results, the 2011 survey results for *traditional* high schools show prevalence rates for the core risk behaviors have been declining or staying the same.

Alcohol and drug use:

- 28.6 percent of high school students had consumed alcohol within the past 30 days, a decrease from 47.5 in 1995;
- 21.2 percent of high school students reported using marijuana in the past 30 days, a decrease from 28.7 percent in 1995; and
- 23.1 percent of students were offered, sold or given an illegal drug by someone on school property during the past 12 months, a decrease from 34.1 percent in 1995.

Violence and suicide:

- 15.3 percent had been electronically (cyber) bullied in the past 12 months (2011 was the first year this question had been asked);
- 12 percent had been physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend in the past year, compared to 10.8 percent in 2003 (2003 was the first year this question had been asked);
- 14.5 percent had seriously considered attempting suicide, a decrease from 23.9 percent in 1995; and
- 8.7 percent had attempted suicide in the past 12 months, which showed *no significant change* from 9.4 percent in 1995.

Other behaviors:

- 38.3 percent of high school students have ever had sexual intercourse compared to 47.2 percent in 1995;
- 14.1 percent of high school students smoked cigarettes in the past 30 days, a decrease from 36.5 percent in 1995; and
- 25.8 percent were overweight or obese, which showed *no significant change* from 25.4 percent in 2003 (question not asked in 1995).

ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOLS:

The YRBS survey was administered to alternative high schools in 2009 for the first time, and the 2011 results show those prevalence rates either decreasing or staying the same. However, *alternative* high schools have higher prevalence rates for almost every measure, indicating these students are at significantly higher risk than their peers at traditional schools.

Alcohol and drug use:

- 49.9 percent of alternative students vs. 28.6 percent of traditional students had consumed alcohol within the past 30 days;
- 47.6 percent of alternative students vs. 21.2 percent of traditional students reported using marijuana in the past 30 days; and
- 30.7 percent of alternative students vs. 23.1 percent of traditional students were offered, sold or given an illegal drug by someone on school property during the past 12 months.

Violence and suicide:

- 20.3 percent of alternative students vs. 15.3 percent of traditional students had been electronically (cyber) bullied in the past 12 months;
- 18.6 percent of alternative students vs. 12 percent of traditional students had been physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend in the past 12 months;
- 21.2 percent of alternative students vs. 14.5 percent of traditional students had seriously considered attempting suicide in the past 12 months; and
- 13.2 percent of alternative students vs. 8.7 percent of traditional students reported attempting suicide in the past 12 months.

Other behaviors that increase the risk of health problems:

- 80.4 percent of alternative students vs. 38.3 percent of traditional students have ever had sexual intercourse;
- 47.7 percent of alternative students vs. 14.1 percent of traditional students smoked cigarettes in the past 30 days;
- 32.9 percent of alternative students vs. 25.8 percent of traditional students were overweight or obese at the time of the survey.

ALASKA COMPARED TO THE U.S.:

More than 15,000 U.S. high school students participated in the 2011 National YRBS in 43 states and 21 large urban school districts. According to the latest national YRBS results released by the CDC, U.S. prevalence rates for many high-risk behaviors are decreasing as well. However, new risk behaviors are surfacing; one in three high school students had texted or emailed while driving a car or other moving vehicle, and one in six had been bullied through electronic media (cyber) bullying.

Alaska is doing the same as or better than the United States on all but two indicators. Alaska high school students are less likely to be attending daily physical education classes and are less physically active than U.S. high school students.

- 78.7 percent of Alaska high school students were *not* physically active at least 60 minutes per day on seven days a week vs. 71.3 percent of U.S. high school students;
- 82.6 percent of Alaska high school students did not attend physical education classes five days week vs. 68.5 percent of U.S. high school students.

For more information on the Youth Risk Behavior Survey go to:

<http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/chronic/school/YRBS.htm>

For more information on the national Youth Risk Behavior Survey go to:

<http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline>

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