

Fairfax County Youth Survey

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Fairfax County Youth Survey? The Fairfax County Youth Survey is a comprehensive, anonymous, and voluntary survey that examines the risks and protective behaviors and other factors that influence the health and well-being of our county's youth. The survey is administered to Fairfax County Public Schools 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th graders.

The survey focus areas include:

- use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (ATOD)
- violence
- delinquency
- bullying and aggression
- gang membership
- dating violence
- mental health, such as suicide, depression, body image
- sexual health (8th, 10th, and 12th grade only)
- nutrition and physical activity
- risk and protective factors at home, school, and in the community
- essential life skills

Why do we conduct the Fairfax County Youth Survey? The results provide a snapshot of our youth in Fairfax County but also serve as a barometer of our own effectiveness as a community in fostering healthful choices in our young people. County, school, and community-based organizations rely on the results to assess youth needs and strengths, develop programs, monitor trends, measure countywide outcomes, and guide countywide planning of prevention efforts. The survey is also an important tool for measuring student achievement goals related to essential life skills and responsibility to the community. Most importantly, the survey gives parents, youth, and community members a sense of our challenges and our strengths and how to build upon those strengths.

Are sensitive questions asked on the survey? Some questions may be considered sensitive. They are included in recognition of the importance of these topics and are presented in a straightforward and sensitive manner. If a student is uncomfortable with any question on the survey, he or she does not have to answer that question or may elect to discontinue the survey.

Are the results confidential? Yes. No individually identifying information will be collected from students. All results are presented at a group, or aggregate, level. The survey is not used for any kind of individual diagnostic purpose.

Are individual students tracked over time to see how their behavior changes? No. Surveys are not linked to individual students. No identifying information is collected.

Is participation voluntary? Yes. Parents or guardians will receive a letter of notification and an "opt-out" form to complete if they do not want their son or daughter to participate. If a parent or guardian elects to opt-out, the student will be assigned an alternative activity. No student will be subjected to unfavorable comments or stigmatization for the decision to abstain from or to participate in the survey. In addition, if a student elects not to participate or complete the survey, he or she will be assigned an alternative activity.

How was the survey developed? The survey content was determined by the multidisciplinary Fairfax County Youth Survey Team, made up of key stakeholders from the community, county agencies, and the school system. The questions were selected from only nationally recognized surveys that follow rigorous testing and validation procedures. This ensures not only that the questions have national comparability but that they do, indeed, measure what they propose to measure.

Is the survey valid and reliable? Yes. To ensure comparability, questions included will be the same as those asked in previous surveys. The survey meets scientific standards of reliability and validity. Mechanisms are incorporated to detect invalid responses to survey questions. The protocols used to assess validity are described in the survey reports (available online at: www.fairfaxcounty.gov/youthsurvey).

Do students answer questions truthfully? Yes. Research has shown that this type of data can be gathered as reliably from adolescents as from adults. Youth are assured that the survey is anonymous and that their responses are not linked to them. Several internal reliability checks help identify falsified answers. Those surveys are removed from the analysis.

Will the survey be administered in any foreign languages? No. The survey is currently not administered in any language other than English. However, students may ask teachers for assistance if they are unable to understand a word or question. Teachers are encouraged to use the same reasonable accommodations they use for general classroom testing.

What are risk and protective factors? "Protective factors" promote resiliency including the ability to avoid alcohol and other drug abuse and problem behaviors, while "risk factors" help explain circumstances that may increase the likelihood of problem behaviors. Elevated risk factor scores increase the chance that a young person will be vulnerable to alcohol, tobacco, or other drug use, while high protective factor scores increase a young person's ability to resist use and also indicate positive social skills and stronger family support. Best practice approaches to using protective and risk factors typically encourage the use of both in developing prevention strategies. Focusing on protective factors fosters resiliency in students, views youth as empowered with strengths, rather than confronted by risks, and encourages nurturing youth in order to help them succeed. Further, protective factors typically comprise variables that may be more amenable to programmatic impacts than those that comprise risk factors. Reinforcing protective factor processes can help young people be more resilient when confronting risk factors and risky behaviors.

What is the benefit of adding risk and protective factors to the measures of behavior? If we measure just the rates of alcohol and other drug use, we know how frequently the substances are being used, but we do not know why. Measuring a community's risk and protective factors is the "why." When we know what factors are helping prevent drug use and

what factors contribute to alcohol and other drug use in our community, we know what community problems need to be addressed and what community strengths need to be emphasized. The results of the Fairfax County Youth Survey will provide the data from which Fairfax County's risk and protective factor profile can be measured and understood. Then, the best possible prevention strategies can be identified and implemented.

Why do you ask questions related to sexual health? There are questions that measure the prevalence of sexual activity among survey respondents. These questions will only be asked of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders. By Virginia state law, sixth graders may not be asked about sexual health. This information will provide baseline and continuing information about the sexual health of our youth and will be used to determine the effectiveness of our education and communication. Questions refer to age of first intercourse, number of partners, and use of contraception. The survey allows the examination of the relationships between sexual behavior and substance use, mental health, depression, gang membership, overall risk and protective factors. AIDS, HIV infection, and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are major health problems. Teen pregnancy can have significant consequences for individuals, families, and our community, as a whole. The only way to determine if youth are at risk for these outcomes is to ask questions about their behavior.

How is the survey administered? The survey is administered in a classroom setting. It takes one 50-minute class period. The survey is distributed to the students; the students read the instructions and then complete the survey. Once the class is finished, the surveys are placed in a provided return envelope; the envelope is sealed and sent to the contractor for scoring and analysis. The responses are never reviewed by school or county personnel. No personal or identifying information is requested from the students.

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