

2008 Fairfax County Youth Survey

Executive Summary

Revised March 19, 2009

A complete copy of this report, as well as the 2001, 2003, 2005, and 2008 youth survey reports, may be found on our Web site at:

www.fairfaxcounty.gov/youthsurvey.



To request this information in an alternative format, call 703-324-5638 or TTY: 711 (Virginia Relay)

Executive Summary

This report includes data collected from the 2008 Fairfax County Youth Survey - a comprehensive, anonymous, and voluntary survey that examines behaviors, experiences, and other factors that influence the health and well-being of the county's youth. The 2008 survey continues the efforts of youth surveys conducted in 2001, 2003, and 2005. The survey is designed to provide information about youth behaviors – those that are positive as well as those that are harmful. These data provide insight into the prevalence and frequency of substance abuse, violence and delinquency, health and health risk behaviors, and positive behaviors.

Information from this survey allows the county to monitor trends in substance abuse, health, mental health, and delinquency, in order to support county efforts to plan, evaluate, and improve community and school programs designed to prevent health problems and promote healthy behaviors. The 2008 survey included questions in several new areas, including sexual health, physical activity, nutrition, weight perceptions, weight loss behaviors, and dating violence.

The 2008 youth survey was conducted in the spring of 2008 and resulted in a randomly drawn, statistically valid sample of 22,251 students. The major findings of this study are captured in narratives prefacing each of the following sections:

- Fairfax County Trends
- Comparisons to National Data
- Substance Use
- Sexual Activity
- Delinquent Behaviors
- Bullying and Aggression
- Health, Mental Health, and Safety
- Physical Activity and Health and Nutrition
- Risk and Protective Factors

Risk and Protective Factors

This survey assesses a set of Risk and Protective Factors. Focusing on protective factors fosters resiliency in our young people, views youth as empowered with strengths rather than confronted by risks, and encourages nurturing young people in order to help them succeed. Reinforcing protective factor processes can help young people be more resilient when confronting risk factors and risky behaviors.

Young people in Fairfax County report positive influences from their communities, families, schools, and friends that decrease the likelihood they will engage in substance use or problem behaviors. These influences include the following:

- Opportunities to engage in community activities, such as sports, scouting, 4-H, or clubs. These community factors can be strong and positive predictors of successful kids.
- Strong family support, as well as enjoying spending time with parents.
- Positive interactions with teachers, as well as opportunities to participate in school-related activities.
- Social competencies that empower youth to respond appropriately to scenarios that require them to make decisions about substance use or problem behaviors.

The disparity seen for perceived availability of activities by gang members has decreased since the 2005 survey, and the percent of youth reporting opportunities to be involved in activities has increased for all youth, including those who speak English as a second language.

Substance Use

Substance usage rates in Fairfax County continue to decline and, for the most part, to be lower than national usage rates.

- Alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana continue to be the most frequently used substances reported in Fairfax County.
- Alcohol use among older youth still remains quite high.
- Inhalant use in the eighth grade is still above the national average.
- The use of drugs other than alcohol, tobacco, or marijuana is generally low. Prescription drugs and painkillers are the most frequently used other drugs reported in Fairfax County.
- Youth who have used drugs or alcohol in the last 30 days were more likely to have carried a weapon, been depressed or considered suicide, had sexual intercourse, or been a victim of sexual assault.

Vehicle Safety

One-third of our young people report that they have ridden in a car with someone who had been drinking. Since 2005, we are seeing consistent reports regarding seatbelt use, driving after drinking, and riding in a car driven by someone who has been drinking.

Sexual Activity

This is the first year the Fairfax County Youth Survey has asked questions regarding sexual activity.

- Compared to youth nationally, a significantly lower percentage of Fairfax youth report ever engaging in sexual intercourse.
- Of twelfth grade students, 44 percent report having ever engaged in sexual intercourse. This is well below the national average.
- For 20 percent of youth who have ever had sex, drugs or alcohol were used the last time they had sex.
- Condom use was the most prevalent form of contraception, more than 60 percent used a condom the last time they had sex.
- Contraceptive use increases with age.

Bullying and Aggression

Many of the county's youth report being bullied, and some report this as a chronic problem. Youth who are bullied are more likely to report carrying a weapon; using drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes; being lonely or depressed; or considering suicide. Kids reporting being in gangs are also more likely to be depressed, consider suicide, and use drugs. They are also more likely to have engaged in sexual intercourse or to have been victims of dating violence.

- More than half of all students reported being bullied or teased, and 11 percent reported that this happened at least 20 times in the past year.
- More than half of all students reported that someone had said something bad about their race or culture, a significant increase over 2005 reports.
- Although below the national average, seven percent of youth report being physically harmed by a boyfriend or girlfriend, and five percent report being forced to have sexual intercourse.

- Violence and weapon activity trends have slightly increased, although reports of weapons in school remain stable.
- Four percent of Fairfax County youth reported having ever been in a gang.

Mental Health

Mental health issues, including depression, impact a number of the county's young people.

- One-third of all respondents reported feeling so sad or hopeless almost every day for weeks or more in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities.
- Overall, reports of depression and considering suicide are lower than in 2005; however there were slight increases for both depression and considering suicide in tenth graders.
- Races/ethnicities other than white are more likely to report feeling depressed and considering suicide, following national trends.
- Fairfax County youth report slightly higher rates of depression than youth nationally.

Unhealthy Weight Loss Behavior

Unhealthy weight loss behaviors include fasting to lose weight, vomiting or taking laxatives, and using diet products without doctor supervision.

- Ten percent of youth report using unhealthy weight loss behaviors in the past 30 days.
- Many more females use unhealthy weight loss techniques than males, though nearly a third of respondents who reported doing one of the behaviors in the past 30 days were male.

Nutrition and Physical Activity

This is the first year the Fairfax County Youth Survey has asked questions regarding nutrition.

- The national recommendation of being physically active for at least 60 minutes during the past week decreases with grade level, but Fairfax County students report higher levels than students nationally.
- Healthy eating behaviors decrease with grade level, most significantly between the sixth and eighth grades.
- Fairfax County youth watch about the same amount of television as their peers nationally but engage in significantly more non-academic "screen-time," including computers, electronic games, and communication devices.

Using the Fairfax County Youth Survey Data

County, school, and community-based organizations rely on the survey to assess youth needs and strengths, develop programs, monitor trends, measure outcomes, and guide countywide planning of prevention efforts. The data from the survey provides baseline measures and ongoing data that allow us to track our progress over time in building on youth assets and reducing risk. The survey ensures that we make decisions based on data and ensures a more efficient and effective use of resources.

Most importantly, the results of this survey provide a snapshot of our youth, as well as serve as a barometer of our own effectiveness as a community in fostering healthy choices in our young people. The findings should be used to generate dialogue in the community and be a catalyst for initiating action among parents, teachers, other professionals, and the community at large.