

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Results From the 2014-2015 Newton Youth Risk Behavior Survey

What type of issues do Newton youth face? How have these issues changed over time? Are they the same as in other similar places? In an attempt to address such questions, the Newton Public Schools and the Newton Department of Health and Human Services conducted the 2014-2015 Newton Youth Risk Behavior Survey in November 2014 with students in grades six through 12. Similar surveys have been conducted every other year in Newton for over a decade. The results are expected to help Newton community leaders and agencies plan and evaluate their policies and programming while developing and enhancing effective ways to support young people. The information can also help parents understand challenges that their children face and encourage them to work in planning prevention and response strategies.

Largely based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, questions on the anonymous and confidential survey focused on issues such as substance use, violence and safety, and physical and mental health. The high school survey (grades 9-12) was adapted for use with middle school students (grades 7 and 8) by omitting or modifying certain questions to facilitate completion by younger students. Due to differences in the survey used with 6th graders, the middle school results reported in this summary are limited only to grades 7 and 8.

Survey organizers caution that the results can present a skewed picture of Newton students because most of the data concern risky behaviors such as substance use and violence. It is important to emphasize the many positive aspects of adolescent life, the fact that these issues are not confined solely to youth, and that they are community issues that require the attention of all community members and organizations. Selected findings, including trend data from 2004 through 2014, are summarized below.

Substance Use

- **Tobacco:** 0% of 7th and 8th graders (referred to as middle school students in this summary) and 3% of high school students reported that they smoked cigarettes in the 30 days prior to the survey (current use), peaking at 5% among 12th graders. Newton has made considerable progress in addressing smoking among youth. Rates of current cigarette use among Newton youth have decreased since 2004 – from 2% in 2004, to 2% in 2006, 1% in 2008, 1% in 2010, <1% in 2012, and 0% in 2014 among middle school students and from 14% to 12% to 13% to 7% to 6% to 3% among high school students. Additionally, current cigarette use among Newton high school students (3%) is lower than the Massachusetts state average of 11% (Massachusetts data from the spring 2013 *Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey of High School Students*).
- **Alcohol:** Alcohol is the most popular substance among Newton youth, with 2% of middle school students and 29% of high school students reporting drinking alcohol in the 30 days prior to the survey. 15% of high school students reported binge drinking – having five or more drinks in a row – in this same timeframe, meaning that just over half (52%) of current high school drinkers engaged in binge drinking. Trend data are promising, with a decrease in current alcohol use since 2004 among both middle (7% in 2004, 6%, 4%, 3%, 2%, 2% in 2014) and high school students (41%, 38%, 37%, 31%, 33%, 29%), and similar decreases in binge drinking among high school students (23%, 23%, 19%, 17%, 18%, 15%). Current alcohol use among Newton high school students (29%) is below the state average of 36%, as is the rate of binge drinking (15% Newton, 19% MA).
- **Marijuana:** Marijuana use is far more common than any other illegal drug use, with <1% of middle school students and 17% of high schoolers reporting that they used marijuana in the 30 days prior to the survey. In fact, current marijuana use was more common among students than cigarette use (for example, 32% of 12th graders reported current use of marijuana compared to 5% for cigarettes). Use increases rapidly by age, from <1% in 7th grade to 4% by 9th grade and 32% by 12th grade. The rate of current marijuana use among Newton high school students remained unchanged in 2014 at 17%. In contrast to decreases observed in use of other common substances like alcohol and cigarettes over the past decade, current marijuana use among Newton high school students had remained more consistent; however, the 2014 rate of 17% maintains an overall decline since 2008 (23% in 2004, 20%, 23%, 19%, 17%, 17% in 2014). The Newton 2014 rate of 17% is below the MA 2013 high school rate of 25%. The rate among middle school students remains low (<1% in 2004, 1%, 1%, <1%, <1%, <1% in 2014).
- **Other Drugs:** Use of illegal drugs other than marijuana is much less common, with less than 1% of Newton high school students reporting current use of substances such as cocaine (<1%), ecstasy (<1%), heroin (<1%), methamphetamines (<1%), steroids (<1%), and Oxycontin (<1%). One percent (1%) of high school students reported the current use of any other illegal drug, a category that included substances such as LSD, PCP, mushrooms, Ketamine (Special K), Rohypnol

(Roofies), GHB, and Oxycontin. The Newton survey included additional items concerning the use of other people's prescription medication and over-the-counter medications to get high, and the use of "study drugs" (like Adderall, Ritalin, or Dexedrine) to stay awake. 2% of Newton high school students reported that they had used someone else's prescription medication to get high during the 12 months prior to the survey, <1% used over-the-counter medications like cough syrup to get high, and 4% used "study drugs" to stay awake. Of note is the increase with age/grade in the use of "study drugs," rising from <1% among 9th graders, to 4% among 10th graders, 6% among 11th graders, and 8% among 12th graders.

Violence and Safety

- **Fighting:** Students in both middle and high school were twice as likely to report being in a physical fight (in the past 12 months) when they were *out* of school (10% middle school, 7% high school) than when they were *in* school (3% middle school, 3% high school). Overall, reported fighting has decreased since 2004 and Newton high school students reported a lower rate of fighting *in* school than Massachusetts students (3% Newton, 5% MA).
- **Being Bullied:** Newton middle school students (17%) were more likely than high school students (11%) to report that they had been bullied in school in the 30 days prior to the survey. In addition to being bullied in school, students were asked whether they had been bullied in other locations (on their way to/from school, when not in or on way to/from school, and on the internet). Rates of reported bullying decreased slightly between 2012 and 2014, continuing an overall pattern of historical decline. For example, the percentage of Newton middle school students who reported being bullied in school in the 30 days prior to the survey has declined from 41% in 2004, to 30% in 2006, 29% in 2008, 21% in 2010, 18% in 2012, and 17% in 2014, while the high school rate has also declined (20%, 17%, 19%, 15%, 14%, 11%). Comparative Massachusetts statewide data are not available.
- **Observing and Responding to Bullying:** An item added to the 2010 Newton survey asks respondents if they saw another student bullied in school in the 30 days prior to the survey. Newton middle school students (37%) were more likely than high school students (30%) to report seeing someone else bullied in school in the 30 days prior to the survey, and rates of observations have declined since 2010 (MS - 54%, 43%, 37%; HS - 42%, 38%, 30%). Other items added in 2010 focus on how students respond when they are bullied and when they see another student being bullied. Survey organizers were interested in whether students actively respond by trying to stop the bullying and/or telling a trusted adult about it. Of those students who reported that they had been bullied in school in the past 30 days, 45% of middle school students and 20% of high school students reported trying to get the person/people doing it to stop. Fewer reported telling a teacher, counselor, or another adult at school (31% MS, 12% HS) and/or telling a parent or guardian (27% MS, 9% HS). While trends since 2010 are mixed, there was a notable increase in the percentage of middle school bullying victims who actively tried to stop the bullying and reported the incident: tried to get the person/people doing it to stop (MS - 36%, 36%, 45%; HS - 32%, 32%, 20%); told a teacher, counselor or another adult at school (MS - 21%, 17%, 31%; HS - 7%, 10%, 12%); told parent(s)/guardian(s) (MS - 18%, 20%, 27%; HS - 9%, 11%, 9%). Of those students who reported that they had seen another student bullied at school in the past 30 days, 54% of middle schoolers and 34% of high schoolers reported that they tried to get the person/people doing it to stop, while 15% of middle schoolers and 4% of high schoolers told a teacher, counselor, or another adult at school what happened. Students at both levels were most likely to report just watching it and not doing anything (44% MS, 64% HS) and, encouragingly, were least likely to report taking part in the bullying (0% MS, 2% HS). Trend data for bystander behavior are encouraging, with general increases since 2010 in the percent of students who reported trying to stop the observed bullying (MS - 43%, 50%, 54%; HS - 29%, 36%, 34%) and/or reported it to a school adult (MS - 8%, 11%, 15%; HS - 4%, 4%, 4%).

Mental Health

- **Stress:** Roughly half of Newton middle school students (47%) and over three-quarters of high school students (79%) described their lives as either *somewhat stressful* or *very stressful*, and these rates have remained largely consistent over time. Perceived stress increased with age/grade and peaked at 83% among 12th graders. Students generally reported worrying most often about *school* issues (49% MS, 73% HS), followed by *social* issues (23% MS, 39% HS), *appearance* issues (19% MS, 38% HS), and *family* issues (17% MS, 28% HS), with far fewer students worrying about *being bullied* (2% MS, 3% HS). While there has been more historical consistency than variability in perceived stressors, there were slight increases in concern about school issues at both levels between 2012 and 2014: *school* issues (MS - 47%, 49%; HS - 70%, 73%), *social* issues (MS - 23%, 23%; HS - 41%, 39%), *appearance* issues (MS - 21%, 19%; HS - 39%, 38%), *family* issues (MS - 18%, 17%; HS - 33%, 28%), *being bullied* (MS - 4%, 2%; HS - 4%, 3%).

- **Self-Harm and Depression:** 11% of 2014 Newton high school students reported that they had hurt themselves on purpose in the 12 months prior to the survey, while 16% reported experiencing depression (students were presented with a clinical definition of adolescent depression which asked if they had felt “so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that [they] stopped doing some usual activities”), and 9% sought medical help for depression (well below the rate of reported depression). Rates have remained largely consistent since 2006: self-harm (15% in 2004, 11% in 2006, 12% in 2008, 10% in 2010, 12% in 2012, 11% in 2014), depression (22%, 18%, 18%, 16%, 18%, 16%), medical help for depression (9%, 8%, 8%, 6%, 8%, 9%). Available comparative data show that the Newton 2014 high school rate of reported depression (16%) remains below the 2013 Massachusetts rate of 25%, and available Newton data show comparatively lower rates among middle schoolers of self-harm (7%) and reported depression (8%) (middle school students were not asked about seeking medical help for depression).
- **Suicide:** The percentage of students who reported considering and attempting suicide in the 12 months prior to the survey are as follows: *seriously considered* (5% middle, 8% high), *actually attempted* (<1% middle, 2% high). Similar to reported rates of self-harm and depression, rates of suicidal ideation and behavior among Newton high school students have been largely consistent since 2006, with 2014 rates reversing slight increases previously observed between 2010 and 2012: *seriously considered* (MS - 10% in 2004, 6% in 2006, 7% in 2008, 5% in 2010, 5% in 2012, 5% in 2014; HS - 11%, 8%, 9%, 7%, 9%, 8%), *actually attempted* (MS - 2%, 1%, 1%, <1%, 1%, <1%; HS - 4%, 3%, 3%, 2%, 4%, 2%) Rates of each of these behaviors among high school students are lower in Newton than in Massachusetts: *seriously considered* (8% Newton, 13% MA), *attempted* (2% Newton, 6% MA).
- **Support and Connections:** Students were asked if they had at least one adult in their school that they can talk to if they have a problem, and 68% of middle school students and 66% of high school students reported having such a trusted school adult confidant. These 2014 rates the highest rates observed since 2004. Notable among middle school students is that the rate of perceived school adult support had decreased since 2002 to its lowest level in 2008 and now has maintained at a much higher level through 2014 (50% in 2004, 49%, 45%, 66%, 66%, 68% in 2014). Among high school students, the 2014 rate of 66% represents a continuation of increases observed since 2004 (47% in 2004, 50%, 53%, 57%, 61%, 66% in 2014).

The Newton survey also contained a set of five items from the National Longitudinal Survey that compose a "school connectedness" scale by assessing student perception of connectivity to their school and the teachers and other people associated with it. Mean connectedness scores range from a low of 1 (less attachment) to a high of 5 (more attachment). Average Newton school connectedness at both the middle and high school levels remained fairly consistent in 2014 after previously increasing (MS - 3.60 in 2004, 3.58 in 2006, 3.68 in 2008, 3.90 in 2010, 4.00 in 2012, 3.97 in 2014; HS - 3.49, 3.56, 3.64, 3.73, 3.77, 3.76).

Physical Health

- A total of 16% of Newton high school students reported that they had ever had sexual intercourse in their lifetime, increasing from 3% among 9th graders, to 8% among 10th graders, 21% among 11th graders, and 36% among 12th graders. While there had been little previous change between 2004 and 2008, the 2014 rate represents a continued decline (24% in 2004, 24%, 25%, 19%, 19%, 16% in 2014). A much smaller proportion of Newton (16%) than Massachusetts (38%) high school students reported ever having sexual intercourse and this difference is consistent across all grades (9th - 3% Newton, 18% MA; 10th - 8% Newton, 31% MA; 11th - 21% Newton, 47% MA; 12th - 36% Newton, 58% MA). Sexually active Newton students were also more likely than their Massachusetts peers to report using a condom during their last sexual experience (72% Newton, 58% MA).
- Issues concerning weight control are particularly challenging among high school females. For example, Newton high school females (45%) were over twice as likely as males (18%) to report that they were actively trying to *lose* weight, even though more similar percentages of females (23%) and males (18%) described themselves as *overweight*. In their efforts to lose or maintain weight in the 30 days prior to the survey, 7% of females reported fasting, 2% vomited or took laxatives, and 1% took diet pills/powders/liquids.
- An item added to the 2010 Newton survey asked respondents on how many of the prior 7 days they had engaged in physical activity for at least 60 minutes. Approximately half (54%) of 2014 Newton middle school students and 41% of high school students reported engaging in 60 or more minutes of physical activity on at least 5 of the prior 7 days. These rates have remained largely consistent over time – middle school (52% in 2010, 52% in 2012, 54% in 2014), high school (40%, 39%, 41%) – and the Newton high school percentage of 41% is below the Massachusetts state average of 44%. Of note is the decline with age/grade in such activity between 7th (56%) and 12th grade (41%).