

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Results From the 2012-2013 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 2012-2013 Newton Youth Risk Behavior Survey in November 2012 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 are summarized below.

Substance Use

- **Tobacco:** Less than 1% of 7th and 8th graders (referred to as middle school students in this summary) and 6% of high school students reported that they smoked cigarettes in the 30 days prior to the survey (current use), peaking at 10% among 12th graders. Newton has made considerable progress in addressing smoking among youth. Rates of current cigarette use among Newton youth have decreased since 2002 – from 3% in 2002, to 2% in 2004, 2% in 2006, 1% in 2008, 1% in 2010, and <1% in 2012 among middle school students and from 16% to 14% to 12% to 13% to 7% to 6% among high school students. Additionally, current cigarette use among Newton high school students (6%) is lower than the Massachusetts state average of 14% (Massachusetts data from the spring 2011 *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 one-third (33%) of high school students reporting drinking alcohol in the 30 days prior to the survey. 18% of high school students reported binge drinking – having five or more drinks in a row – in this same timeframe, meaning that just over half (55%) of current high school drinkers engaged in binge drinking. While there were slight increases in current alcohol use among Newton high school students between 2010 and 2012, long-term trends are promising, with a decrease in current alcohol use since 2002 among both middle (9% in 2002, 7%, 6%, 4%, 3%, 2% in 2012) and high school students (44%, 41%, 38%, 37%, 31%, 33%), and similar decreases in binge drinking among high school students (27%, 23%, 23%, 19%, 17%, 18%). Current alcohol use among Newton high school students (33%) is below the state average of 40%, as is the rate of binge drinking (18% Newton, 22% 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, 28% of 12th graders reported current use of marijuana compared to 10% for cigarettes). Use increases rapidly by age, from <1% in 7th grade to 5% by 9th grade and 28% by 12th grade. The rate of current marijuana use among Newton high school students decreased from 19% in 2010 to 17% in 2012. 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 largely consistent since 2002; however, the 2012 rate of 17% represents a continued decline since 2008 (23% in 2002, 23%, 20%, 23%, 19%, 17% in 2012). The Newton 2012 rate of 17% is below the MA 2011 high school rate of 28%. The rate among middle school students remains low (3% in 2002, <1%, 1%, 1%, <1%, <1% in 2012).
- **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%). Two percent (2%) 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. 3% 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, 2% used over-the-counter medications like cough syrup to get high, and 5% used "study drugs" to stay awake. Of note is the increase with age/grade in the use of "study drugs," rising from 2% among 9th graders, to 4% among 10th graders, 5% among 11th graders, and 9% among 12th graders, and a halt in decreases previously observed since 2004 in such use (7% in 2004, 5%, 4%, 3%, 5%).

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 (12% middle school, 11% high school) than when they were *in* school (2% middle school, 4% high school). Overall, reported fighting has decreased since 2002 and Newton high school students reported a lower rate of fighting *in* school than Massachusetts students (4% Newton, 7% MA).
- **Being Bullied:** Newton middle school students (18%) were more likely than high school students (14%) 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 in all venues decreased between 2010 and 2012, continuing an overall pattern of decline since 2002. 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 36% in 2002, to 41% in 2004, 30% in 2006, 29% in 2008, 21% in 2010, and 18% in 2012, while the high school rate has also declined (21%, 20%, 17%, 19%, 15%, 14%). Comparative Massachusetts statewide data are not available.
- **Observing and Responding to Bullying:** An item added to the Newton survey in 2010 asks respondents if they saw another student bullied in school in the 30 days prior to the survey. Newton middle school students (43%) were more likely than high school students (38%) to report seeing someone else bullied in school in the 30 days prior to the survey, and rates of observations declined between 2010 and 2012 (MS - 54% to 43%, HS - 42% to 38%). 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, over half at both the middle school (52%) and high school (55%) levels reported trying to get the person/people doing it to stop. Fewer reported telling a teacher, counselor, or another adult at school (24% MS, 17% HS) and/or telling a parent or guardian (29% MS, 20% HS). Active witness bystander behavior was less common. Of those students who reported that they had seen another student bullied at school in the past 30 days, 50% of middle schoolers and 36% of high schoolers reported that they tried to get the person/people doing it to stop, while 11% 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 (45% MS, 62% HS) and, encouragingly, were least likely to report taking part in the bullying (2% MS, 2% HS). Trend data for bystander behavior are encouraging, with a decrease in the percent of students who took part in the bullying (MS - 3% to 2%, HS - 3% to 2%) or did nothing (MS - 55% to 45%, HS - 68% to 62%), and an increase in the percent who reported trying to stop the observed bullying (MS - 43% to 50%, HS - 29% to 36%) and/or reported it to a school adult (MS - 8% to 11%, HS - 4% to 4%).

Mental Health

- **Stress:** Roughly half of Newton middle school students (47%) and three-quarters of high school students (74%) 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 82% among 12th graders. Students generally reported worrying most often about *school* issues (47% MS, 70% HS), followed by *social* issues (23% MS, 41% HS), *appearance* issues (21% MS, 39% HS), and *family* issues (18% MS, 33% HS), with far fewer students worrying about *being bullied* (4% MS, 4% HS). While there has been an overall decrease in the percentage of students reporting worrying about these issues since 2002, there were some changes among high school students between 2010 and 2012, with increased concern about *school* (65% to 70%), *social* (40% to 41%), and *appearance* issues (31% to 39%), a decrease in concern over *family* issues (37% to 33%), and no change in concern about *being bullied* (4% and 4%).
- **Self-Harm and Depression:** 12% of 2012 Newton high school students reported that they had hurt themselves on purpose (e.g., by cutting or burning themselves intentionally) in the 12 months prior to the survey, while 18% 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 8% sought medical help for depression (well below the rate of reported depression). While rates have remained largely consistent since 2006, the percent of Newton high school students reporting each of these issues increased slightly between 2010 and 2012: self-harm (N/A in 2002, 15% in 2004, 11% in 2006, 12% in 2008, 10% in 2010, 12% in 2012), depression (24%, 22%, 18%, 18%, 16%, 18%), medical help for depression (10%, 9%, 8%, 8%, 6%, 8%). Available comparative data show that the Newton 2012 high school rate of reported depression (18%) remains below the 2011 Massachusetts 2011 rate of 25%, and available Newton data show comparatively lower rates among middle schoolers of self-harm (5%) and reported depression (7%) (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, 9% high), *actually attempted* (1% middle, 4% 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 after prior declines, but increased slightly between 2010 and 2012: *seriously considered* (MS - 12% in 2002, 10% in 2004, 6% in 2006, 7% in 2008, 5% in 2010, 5% in 2012; HS - 14%, 11%, 8%, 9%, 7%, 9%), *actually attempted* (MS - 3%, 2%, 1%, 1%, <1%, 1%; HS - 6%, 4%, 3%, 3%, 2%, 4%) Rates of each of these behaviors among high school students are lower in Newton than in Massachusetts: *seriously considered* (9% Newton, 13% MA), *attempted* (4% Newton, 7% 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 66% of middle school students and 61% of high school students reported having such a trusted school adult confidant. These 2012 rates the highest rates observed since 2002. 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 in 2010 and 2012 (53% in 2002, 50%, 49%, 45%, 66%, 66% in 2012). Among high school students, the 2012 rate of 61% represents a continuation of increases observed since 2004 (50% in 2002, 47%, 50%, 53%, 57%, 61% in 2012).

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 increased between 2010 and 2012, continuing a pattern of improvement since 2004 (MS - 3.69 in 2002, 3.63 in 2004, 3.62 in 2006, 3.77 in 2008, 3.95 in 2010, 4.02 in 2012; HS - 3.50, 3.49, 3.56, 3.64, 3.73, 3.77).

Sexual Behavior

- A total of 19% of Newton high school students reported that they had ever had sexual intercourse in their lifetime, increasing from 7% among 9th graders, to 11% among 10th graders, 24% among 11th graders, and 38% among 12th graders. While there had been little previous change between 2002 and 2008, the unchanged 2012 rate remains comparatively low (24% in 2002, 24%, 24%, 25%, 19%, 19% in 2012). A much smaller proportion of Newton (19%) than Massachusetts (42%) high school students reported ever having sexual intercourse and this difference is consistent across all grades (9th - 7% Newton, 28% MA; 10th - 11% Newton, 34% MA; 11th - 24% Newton, 50% MA; 12th - 38% Newton, 59% MA). Sexually active Newton students were also more likely than their Massachusetts peers to report using a condom during their last sexual experience (76% Newton, 58% MA).

Weight and Physical Activity

- Issues concerning weight control are particularly challenging among high school females. For example, Newton high school females (47%) were over twice as likely as males (22%) to report that they were actively trying to *lose* weight, even though more similar percentages of females (24%) 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, 4% vomited or took laxatives, and 2% 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 (52%) of 2012 Newton middle school students and 39% of high school students reported engaging in 60 or more minutes of physical activity on at least 5 of the prior 7 days. Of note is the decline with age/grade in such activity between 7th and 12th grade (7th - 54%, 8th - 49%, 9th - 42%, 10th - 38%, 11th - 40%, 12th - 36%). The Newton high school percentage of 39% is similar to the 2010 rate of 40% and lower than the Massachusetts state average of 43%.