

# SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

## Results From the 2008-2009 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 2008-2009 Newton Youth Risk Behavior Survey was administered in November 2008 to all Newton public school students in grades six through 12. Because similar surveys were conducted in 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2006, we can examine how health and mental health issues are changing in Newton. The results are expected to help Newton community leaders and agencies plan and evaluate their policies and programming while developing and enhancing the most effective ways to support young people. The information can also help parents understand the challenges that their children face and encourage them to work in planning prevention and response strategies. Survey organizers caution that the results can present a skewed picture of Newton youth 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.

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. Although 6<sup>th</sup> graders completed a similar survey, the middle school results reported in this summary are limited only to grades 7 and 8. Some of the main survey findings are summarized below.

### Substance Use

**Tobacco.** 1% of middle school students and 13% of high school students reported that they smoked cigarettes in the 30 days prior to the survey (current use), peaking at 18% among 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Newton has made considerable progress in addressing smoking among youth, with rates of current use decreasing significantly from 1998 to 2008 – from 7% in 1998, to 4% in 2000, 3% in 2002, 2% in 2004, 2% in 2006, and 1% in 2008 among middle school students and from 27% to 20% to 16% to 14% to 12% to 13% among high school students. Additionally, current cigarette use among Newton high school students (13%) is lower than the Massachusetts state average of 18% (state data from the spring 2007 *Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey of High School Students*).

**Alcohol.** Alcohol is the most popular substance among Newton youth, with 4% of middle school students and over one-third (37%) of high school students reporting drinking alcohol in the 30 days prior to the survey. 19% of high school students reported binge drinking – having five or more drinks in a row – in this same timeframe, meaning that just over half (51%) of current high school drinkers engaged in binge drinking. Trends are promising, with a decrease in current alcohol use between 1998 and 2008 among middle (16%, 11%, 9%, 7%, 6%, 4%) and high school students (52%, 51%, 44%, 41%, 38%, 37%), and similar decreases in binge drinking among high school students (31%, 32%, 27%, 23%, 23%, 19%). Current alcohol use among Newton high school students (37%) is also below the state average of 46%, as is the rate of binge drinking (19% Newton, 28% MA).

**Marijuana.** Marijuana use is far more common than any other illegal drug use, with 1% of middle school students and 23% of high schoolers reporting that they used marijuana in the 30 days prior to the survey. Current marijuana use increases rapidly by age, from less than 1% in 7<sup>th</sup> grade to 9% by 9<sup>th</sup> grade and 32% by 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In fact, current marijuana use was more common among students than cigarette use (for example, 32% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders reported current use of marijuana compared to 18% for cigarettes). In contrast to decreases observed in use of other common substances like alcohol and cigarettes between 2006 and 2008 and over the past decade as a whole, current marijuana use among Newton high school students increased between 2006 and 2008 and has remained largely consistent since 1998 (24% in 1998, 26%, 23%, 23%, 20%, 23% in 2008). The Newton 2008 rate of 23% is also very similar to the MA 2007 high school rate of 25%. The rate among middle school students has remained low (3% in 1998, 1%, 3%, 1%, 1%, 1% in 2008).

**Other Drugs.** Use of illegal drugs other than marijuana is much less common, with 2% or less of Newton high school students reporting current use of substances such as cocaine (1%), ecstasy (1%), heroin (1%), methamphetamines (1%), and steroids (1%). Three percent (3%) 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 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, 3% used over-the-counter medications like cough syrup to get high, and 4% used study drugs to stay awake (these behaviors have decreased slightly but consistently over time). Of note is an increase with age/grade in the use of study drugs, rising from 1% among 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders, to 5% among 11<sup>th</sup> graders, and 8% among 12<sup>th</sup> 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 (19% middle school, 16% high school) than when they were *in* school (7% middle school, 9% high school). Overall, reported fighting has decreased since 1998 and Newton high school students reported the same rate of fighting *in* school as Massachusetts students (9% Newton, 9% MA).

**Bullying.** Newton middle school students (29%) were much more likely than high school students (19%) to report that they had been bullied in school in the 30 days prior to the survey. In fact, the percentage of students who reported being bullied in school decreased sharply from grade 7 (32%) to grade 12 (13%). Rates of reported bullying in any location (on way to/from school, in school, when not in or on way to/from school) remained steady among Newton middle school students in 2008, while rates among high school students all increased between 2006 and 2008, reversing decreases previously observed since 2002. A smaller percentage of Newton (19%) than Massachusetts (22%) high school students reported being bullied in school. A new item added to the 2008 Newton survey found that 17% of middle school students and 15% of high school students reported they had been bullied on the Internet in the past 30 days.

### Mental Health

**Stress.** Half of Newton middle school students (50%) and roughly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of high school students (73%) described their lives as *somewhat stressful* or *very stressful*. These rates have remained largely consistent over time. Perceived stress increased with age/grade and peaked at 81% among 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Students reported worrying most often about school issues, followed by social issues, appearance issues, and family issues. Overall, previously observed decreases in reported worrying about these issues were not sustained in 2008, with concern generally remaining constant or increasing. Perhaps reflecting recent economic uncertainty was concern about family issues ("such as your relationship with your parents, your family's financial situation, family health concerns, etc."), which increased from 33% in 2006 to 36% in 2008 among Newton high school students after decreasing since 2002 (40%) and 2004 (36%).

**Self-Harm.** Students were asked if they had hurt themselves on purpose (cutting/burning themselves intentionally) in the 12 months prior to the survey. 7% of Newton middle school students and 12% of high school students reported doing so, both representing slight increases that reversed previous decreases since 2004 (MS – 10% in 2004, 6% in 2006, 7% in 2008; HS – 15%, 11%, 12%). A smaller percentage of Newton high school students (12%) reported intentional self-harm than did Massachusetts students (17%).

**Depression.** 18% of Newton high school students reported experiencing depression in the 12 months prior to the survey (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"). However, only 8% of respondents reported that they had sought medical help for depression. The rate of reported depression among Newton high school students remained steady in 2008 after decreasing since 2002 (24% in 2002, 22% in 2004, 18% in 2006, 18% in 2008). The 2008 rate of 18% remains below the statewide average of 24%. The percentage of high school students who reported accessing medical help for depression has remained fairly constant over time (9% in 1998, 9%, 10%, 9%, 8%, 8% in 2008).

**Suicide.** The percentage of students who reported considering, planning, and attempting suicide in the 12 months prior to the survey are as follows: *seriously considered* (7% middle, 9% high), *made a plan* (4% middle, 7% high), and *actually attempted* (1% middle, 3% high). Overall, these rates either remained constant or increased slightly between 2006 and 2008 after having decreased previously since 1998. For example, among high school students, those who reported *seriously considering suicide* decreased from 17% in 1998 to 8% in 2006, and then moved to 9% in 2008. Rates of each of these behaviors among high school students are lower in Newton than in Massachusetts: *seriously considered* (9% Newton, 13% MA), *planned* (7% Newton, 11% MA), and *attempted* (3% Newton, 8% MA).

**Support.** Students were asked if they had at least one adult in their school that they can talk to if they have a problem. Roughly half of Newton middle (45%) and high school (53%) students reported having such a trusted school adult. The 2008 middle school rate reflects a decrease since 2002 (53%, 50%, 49%, 45%), while the high school rate increased between 2006 and 2008, continuing increases observed since 2004 (50%, 47%, 50%, 53%). In contrast to most other comparative data, a smaller proportion of Newton than Massachusetts high school students reported having at least one supportive school adult to talk to about a problem (53% Newton, 67% Massachusetts – MA data from the 2005 statewide survey as 2007 data for this item are not available).

### Sexual Behavior

A total of 25% of Newton high school students reported that they had ever had sexual intercourse in their lifetime, increasing from 10% among 9<sup>th</sup> graders, to 17% among 10<sup>th</sup> graders, 30% among 11<sup>th</sup> graders, and 39% among 12<sup>th</sup> graders. These rates have remained steady over time (23% in 1998, 21%, 24%, 24%, 24%, 25% in 2008). A much smaller proportion of Newton (25%) than Massachusetts (44%) high school students reported ever having sexual intercourse and this difference is consistent across all grades (9<sup>th</sup> – 10% Newton, 26% MA; 10<sup>th</sup> – 17% Newton, 40% MA; 11<sup>th</sup> – 30% Newton, 51% MA; 12<sup>th</sup> – 39% Newton, 64% MA). Sexually active Newton students were also more likely than their Massachusetts peers to report using a condom during their last sexual experience (74% Newton, 61% MA).

### Weight Control

Issues concerning weight control are particularly challenging among high school females. For example, 49% of Newton high school females reported that they were actively trying to lose weight, compared to only 25% of males. In their efforts to lose or maintain weight in the 30 days prior to the survey, 8% of females reported fasting, 4% vomited or took laxatives, and 2% took diet pills/powders/liquids. There have been some slight but steady decreases in these rates over time, and they are below the Massachusetts female averages of 15%, 7%, and 7% respectively.