

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Results From the 2016-2017 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 2016-2017 Newton Youth Risk Behavior Survey in November 2016 with students in grades six through 12. Similar surveys have been conducted every other year in Newton since 1998. The results 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 also helps parents understand challenges that their children face and encourages all community members 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 2006 through 2016, are summarized below.

Substance Use

- **Tobacco:** 0% of 7th and 8th graders (referred to as middle school students in this summary) and 2% 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 cigarette smoking among youth. Rates of current cigarette use among Newton youth have decreased, from 2% in 2006, 1% in 2008, 1% in 2010, <1% in 2012, 0% in 2014, and 0% in 2016 among middle school students and from 12% to 13% to 7% to 6% to 3% to 2% among high school students. Additionally, current cigarette use among Newton high school students (2%) is lower than the Massachusetts state average of 8% (Massachusetts data from the spring 2015 *Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey of High School Students*). For the first time in 2016, the 2016 Newton survey also assessed use of electronic tobacco products, such as e-cigarettes, e-cigars, e-pipes, vape pipes, vaping pens, e-hookahs, and hookah pens. Use of electronic tobacco was more common than use of cigarettes, with 0.2% of middle school students and 4% of high school students reporting current use (well below the MA rate of 24%), and use peaking at 8% among 12th graders.
- **Alcohol:** Alcohol is the most popular substance among Newton youth, with 1% of middle school students and 28% of high school students reporting drinking alcohol in the 30 days prior to the survey. 14% of high school students reported binge drinking – having five or more drinks in a row – in this same timeframe, meaning that half (50%) of current high school drinkers engaged in binge drinking. Trend data are promising, with historical decreases in current alcohol use among both middle school students (6% in 2006, 4%, 3%, 2%, 2%, 1% in 2016) and high school students (38%, 37%, 31%, 33%, 29%, 28%), and similar decreases in binge drinking among high school students (23%, 19%, 17%, 18%, 15%, 14%). Current alcohol use among Newton high school students (28%) is below the state average of 34%, as is the rate of binge drinking (14% Newton, 18% MA).
- **Marijuana:** Marijuana use is far more common than any other illegal drug use, with <1% of middle school students and 19% of high schoolers reporting that they used marijuana in the 30 days prior to the survey. In fact, current marijuana use is far more common among students than cigarette use (for example, 34% of 12th graders reported current use of marijuana compared to 5% for cigarettes and 8% for electronic tobacco). Use increases rapidly by age, from 0% in 7th grade to 14% by 9th grade and 34% by 12th grade. The 19% rate of current marijuana use among Newton high school students remains below the MA 2015 rate (25%), but increased from 17% in 2014 to 19% in 2016. In contrast to decreases observed in use of other common substances like alcohol and cigarettes over the past decade, current marijuana use among Newton students has remained more consistent (high school – 20% in 2006, 23%, 19%, 17%, 17%, 19% in 2016; middle school – 1%, 1%, <1%, <1%, <1%, <1%). For the first time in 2016, the Newton survey included items that asked respondents to rate how much they think people risk harming themselves if they use cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, or prescription drugs that are not prescribed to them. Students in every grade perceive

occasional use of marijuana to be less risky than use of other substances, with the percent of respondents who perceive *no risk* or *slight risk* increasing from 16% among 7th graders to 71% among 12th graders.

- **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%), Oxycontin (<1%), and any other illegal drugs combined (<1%). 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. 1% 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 3% 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 2% among 10th graders, 5% among 11th graders, and 7% among 12th graders.

Violence and Safety

- **Safety Concerns:** Students in middle and high school were more likely to report being concerned about their safety when they were *out* of school (13% middle school, 14% high school) than when they were *in* school (4% middle school, 7% high school). Asked if they had stayed home from school out of fear for their safety in the 30 days prior to the survey, 1% of middle schoolers and 4% of high schoolers reported doing so. There was little change prior to 2016; however, rates among high school students increased in 2016 (HS worried about safety *out* of school – 12% in 2006, 13%, 10%, 11%, 10%, 14% in 2016; worried about safety *in* school – 5%, 5%, 5%, 4%, 5%, 7%; stayed home from school out of fear – 2%, 4%, 3%, 3%, 2%, 4% [MA 2015 = 5%]), while rates among middle school students decreased slightly (MS worried about safety *out* of school – 16% in 2006, 18%, 14%, 15%, 15%, 13% in 2016; worried about safety *in* school – 6%, 6%, 6%, 5%, 6%, 4%; stayed home from school out of fear – 1%, 2%, 1%, 1%, 1%, 1%).
- **Being Bullied:** Newton middle and high school students were almost equally likely to report that they were bullied in the 30 days prior to the survey, both *in school* (15% MS, 16% HS) and *electronically* (e.g., false or threatening messages/posts) (10% MS, 11% HS). Similar to trends in safety concerns, reported bullying among Newton high school students increased in 2016, reversing prior declines (HS bullied in school – 17% in 2006, 19%, 15%, 14%, 11%, 16% in 2016; bullied electronically – 15% in 2008, 12%, 11%, 7%, 11% in 2016), while rates among middle school students decreased and continued historical declines (MS bullied in school – 30% in 2006, 29%, 21%, 18%, 17%, 15% in 2016; bullied electronically – 17% in 2008, 12%, 11%, 11%, 10% in 2016). Comparative Massachusetts data are not available.
- **Observing and Responding to Bullying:** Newton middle school students (27%) were less 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 middle school observations have declined since the item was added to the survey in 2010 (54% in 2010, 43%, 37%, 27% in 2016), while high school observations increased for the first time in 2016 (42%, 38%, 30%, 38%). Other survey items focus on how students respond when they are bullied or when they see another student being bullied to see 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, 40% of middle school students and 30% 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 (12% MS, 10% HS) and/or telling a parent or guardian (23% MS, 12% HS). Of those students who reported that they had seen another student bullied at school in the past 30 days, 52% of middle schoolers and 35% of high schoolers reported that they tried to get the person/people doing it to stop, while 12% of middle schoolers and 5% of high schoolers told a teacher, counselor, or another adult at school what happened. Students at both levels were least likely to report taking part in the bullying (0.9% MS, 1% HS).

Mental Health

- **Stress:** Roughly half of Newton middle school students (52%) and over three-quarters of high school students (78%) 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 88% among 12th graders. Students generally reported worrying most often about *school* issues (51% MS, 72% HS), followed by *social* issues (23% MS, 41% HS), *appearance* issues (22% MS, 38% HS), and *family* issues (19% MS, 31% HS), with far fewer students worrying about *being bullied* (3% MS, 5% HS). While there has been more historical consistency than variability in perceived stressors, there were some increases between 2014 and 2016: *school* issues (MS – 49%, 51%; HS – 73%, 72%), *social* issues (MS – 23%, 23%; HS – 39%, 41%), *appearance* issues (MS – 19%, 22%; HS – 38%, 38%), *family* issues (MS – 17%, 19%; HS – 28%, 31%), *being bullied* (MS – 2%, 3%; HS – 3%, 5%).

- **Self-Harm and Depression:** 11% of 2016 Newton high school students reported that they hurt themselves on purpose in the 12 months prior to the survey, while 19% 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 (approximately half the rate of reported depression). Rates have remained largely consistent since 2006: self-harm (11% in 2006, 12%, 10%, 12%, 11%, 11% in 2016), depression (18%, 18%, 16%, 18%, 16%, 19%), medical help for depression (8%, 8%, 6%, 8%, 9%, 9%). Available comparative data show that the Newton 2016 high school rate of reported depression (19%) remains below the 2015 Massachusetts rate of 27%, and additional trend data reveal historically consistent and comparatively lower rates among middle schoolers of self-harm (4%) 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* (6% 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: *seriously considered* (MS – 6% in 2006, 7%, 5%, 5%, 5%, 6% in 2016; HS – 8%, 9%, 7%, 9%, 8%, 8%), *actually attempted* (MS – 1%, 1%, <1%, 1%, <1%, <1%; HS – 3%, 3%, 2%, 4%, 2%, 2%). Rates of these behaviors among high school students are lower in Newton than in Massachusetts: *seriously considered* (8% Newton, 15% MA), *attempted* (2% 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 63% of middle school students and 67% of high school students reported having such a trusted school adult confidant. The middle school rate of perceived school adult support decreased in 2016 after previously increasing since 2008 (MS – 49% in 2006, 45%, 66%, 66%, 68%, 63% in 2016) while the high school rate of 67% represents a continuation of previous increases (50%, 53%, 57%, 61%, 66%, 67%).

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 declined slightly in 2016 after previously increasing between 2006 and 2012 (MS – 3.58 in 2006, 3.68, 3.90, 4.00, 3.97, 3.93 in 2016; HS – 3.56, 3.64, 3.73, 3.77, 3.76, 3.70).

Physical Health

- A total of 17% of 2016 Newton high school students reported that they had ever had sexual intercourse in their lifetime, increasing from 4% among 9th graders, to 8% among 10th graders, 22% among 11th graders, and 38% among 12th graders. The 2016 rate is similar to the 2014 rate (24% in 2006, 25%, 19%, 19%, 16%, 17% in 2016). A much smaller proportion of Newton (17%) than Massachusetts (36%) high school students reported ever having sexual intercourse and this difference is consistent across all grades (9th – 4% Newton, 14% MA; 10th – 8% Newton, 31% MA; 11th – 22% Newton, 42% MA; 12th – 38% Newton, 60% MA). Sexually active Newton students were also more likely than their Massachusetts peers to report using a condom during their last sexual experience (70% Newton, 63% MA), although the rate of condom use has declined since 2010 (74% in 2006, 74%, 80%, 76%, 72%, 70% in 2016).
- Issues concerning weight control are particularly challenging among high school females. For example, Newton high school females (44%) were over twice as likely as males (19%) to report that they were actively trying to *lose* weight, even though more similar percentages of females (23%) and males (19%) described themselves as *overweight*. In their efforts to lose or maintain weight in the 30 days prior to the survey, 8% of females reported fasting, 3% vomited or took laxatives, and 1% took diet pills/powders/liquids.
- Students were asked on how many of the prior 7 days they had engaged in physical activity for at least 60 minutes. Over half (58%) of 2016 Newton middle school students and 43% of high school students reported engaging in the recommended level of 60 or more minutes of physical activity on at least 5 of the prior 7 days. While remaining fairly consistent over time, rates increased slightly in 2016 – middle school (52% in 2010, 52%, 54%, 58% in 2016), high school (40%, 39%, 41%, 43%) – and the Newton high school percentage of 43% is similar to the Massachusetts state average of 45%. Of note is the decline with age/grade in such activity between 7th (57%) and 12th grade (32%).