

# The 2005 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey

## Statewide Report

How many Vermont teens drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes? Where do they get alcohol and cigarettes? How many use marijuana or cocaine? How many are sexually active, and of those, how many are using condoms? How many have been threatened at school? How many have contemplated suicide? Finding answers to these questions is vitally important. This information can put to rest unwarranted fears when the answers are positive; it can mobilize prevention and intervention efforts when the answers are negative; and it can influence the behavior of students by setting norms.

Every two years since 1985, the Department of Health Division of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs and the Department of Education Comprehensive School Health Programs have sponsored a survey of Vermont students. The Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) measures the prevalence of behaviors that contribute to the leading causes of death, disease, and injury among youth. The YRBS is part of a larger effort to help communities promote the “resiliency” of young people by reducing high risk behaviors and increasing healthy behaviors. The YRBS provides accurate information about Vermont students which enables us to:

- **monitor trends** in their health and risk behaviors
- **compare Vermont** students with a national sample of students
- **plan, evaluate, and improve** community and school programs that prevent health problems and promote healthy behaviors

In 2005, school staff administered the YRBS to 31,617 eighth to twelfth grade Vermont students in 146 schools representing 59 supervisory unions. **For the purposes of this report, data are based on a representative sample of 9,342 Vermont high school and middle school students.** Participation by both schools and individual students was completely voluntary. To protect student privacy, the questionnaire was anonymous. Therefore, it is impossible to identify an individual student’s responses.

## How to use the YRBS

The YRBS provides an important piece of the evaluation puzzle. It can help detect changes in risk behaviors over time. It can help identify differences among ages, grades, and genders. It can help focus primary prevention efforts on specific groups of teens, and can suggest whether or not school policies and community programs are having the intended effect on student behaviors.

Think of the YRBS as a tool for starting discussions, for educating the community, for planning and evaluating programs, and for comparing Vermont students with other students nationwide.

- **Starting the Conversation:** Use the YRBS to begin a conversation with teens about the personal choices they make or about the health of their community. Ask them if the results accurately reflect what they see happening around them. How do they explain the results? What ideas do they have about ways to promote healthy behaviors? From their perspective, what seems to be working and what isn't working?
- **Increasing Awareness:** The YRBS provides an opportunity to break through "denial" and to make community members aware of the risks that their young people face. It can also dispel myths and correct misinformation about the "average teenager". The YRBS can be used to accentuate the positive, and to celebrate the fact that many students are abstaining from behaviors that endanger their health and their ability to succeed.
- **Planning and Evaluating Programs:** The YRBS can serve as the basis of a community needs assessment. It can help identify strengths and weaknesses in your community, and can suggest strategies to address those weaknesses.
- **Vermont Trends and National Comparisons:** We have been able to track some information for over 10 years, because Vermont students have been participating in a student survey since 1985. Also, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conducts a biennial YRBS of a national sample of high school students. These results permit us to draw comparisons between Vermont and the nation.

## A Word of Caution

The YRBS represents the most complete and most recent information available about risk behaviors among Vermont students. However, the YRBS has some limitations that you should keep in mind when interpreting the results.

- **Data Quality:** Several precautions were taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the results. First, the questionnaire has been carefully designed and thoroughly tested by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Second, the survey was anonymous to encourage students to be honest and forthright. Third, over 100 consistency checks were run on the data to exclude careless, invalid, or logically inconsistent answers. Fourth, the results are statistically adjusted or “weighted” so that the sample accurately represents all Vermont 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> graders. These precautions can reduce some sources of error, but not all. For example, some high risk students such as those who have dropped out of school are not represented in the results.
  
- **Comparing Supervisory Unions to Each Other and to the State:** Participating supervisory unions will receive individual reports summarizing their own results. It is natural to want to know how individual supervisory unions compare to the state overall or to other supervisory unions. We urge caution in making such comparisons because the statewide results are “weighted”, whereas the supervisory union results are not. As a result, it is possible that apparent differences, especially small differences, are due to demographic characteristics, rather than to true differences in prevalence.
  
- **What, not Why:** The YRBS can indicate what students are doing. It can also suggest the groups of students (e.g., male vs female, 8<sup>th</sup> graders vs 12<sup>th</sup> graders) who are more likely to engage in these behaviors. However, the survey does not answer the most important question: Why are they doing it?

## A Special Thanks!

We are grateful to the principals and superintendents who chose to participate in the YRBS and to the teachers and school staff who administered the survey or in other ways supported this effort. We also wish to thank the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Adolescent and School Health for sponsoring the statewide survey through a cooperative agreement with the Vermont Department of Education (Program Announcement #309) and Westat Survey Technical Assistance Project for processing and analyzing the data. Finally, we are grateful to the students who took the time to share with us a piece of their lives. This report is our way of thanking all of you. We hope that you find the survey report informative and useful.

The next YRBS is scheduled for 2007. We encourage schools' participation again, because we will be able to continue to monitor trends in students' health and risk behaviors, compare Vermont students with a national sample of students, and plan, evaluate, and improve communities' programs designed to prevent health problems and promote healthy behaviors. If you have any questions or comments about the YRBS, please contact Kelly Hale LaMonda at the Division of Health Surveillance, Vermont Department of Health (802-863-7246).

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## Basic Information

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### Understanding This Report:

- **Format:** The results are presented as data tables, pie charts, bar graphs, and line graphs. In most cases, the data are organized by gender and grade. All results are expressed as percentages of students who endorsed the responses being reported. The percentages in some pie charts may not total 100 percent due to rounding.
- **Healthy Vermonters 2010:** Vermont has established goals for promoting health and reducing risk behaviors in *Healthy Vermonters 2010*. Goals relevant to the behaviors surveyed by the YRBS are included in the report for your reference. For more information, see *The Health Status of Vermonters* and *Healthy Vermonters 2010 Vermont's Blueprint for Improving Public Health*, available from the Vermont Department of Health.

**Remember to look at the positive side.** In most cases the majority of adolescents are NOT engaging in risky behaviors. Although most of the charts are oriented to examining the prevalence of risk behaviors, please do not forget about the percentage of adolescents who are NOT engaging in the behaviors.

## Basic Information

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### Description of the Sample

- **Sampling:** 20 Vermont high schools of varying sizes, along with their 29 associated middle schools, were randomly selected for the state sample (1:3 systematic sample after sorting by enrollments). A survey of this size was required in order to have an error rate of +/- 5% at each of the five grade levels.
  - **Response Rates:** The school response rate was 94 percent, and the student response rate was 77 percent. Therefore, the overall response rate was 72 percent ( $.94 \times .77 = .72$ ).
  - **Weighting:** The results were “weighted” in order to compensate for differences between the sample and the population of all 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in Vermont. The weighting procedure ensures that the sample is representative of the population. This permits us to draw inferences about the entire student population based on the results of the sample.
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### Vermont Students Who Participated in the YRBS

	GRADE					GENDER		
	8	9	10	11	12	F	M	ALL*
<b>Number of students</b>	2,136	2,167	1,986	1,662	1,257	4,650	4,629	9,342

\*NOTE: Some students did not indicate their grade or gender. Therefore, totals by grade and by gender do not equal the overall total.