
CHAPTER 9

Perceptions of School and Community

Adolescents spend an increasingly greater amount of time away from home as they get older. A majority of their time is spent in school and in the broader community. It is important for adolescents to be connected to these environments and to feel there are meaningful opportunities for them to explore and practice their emerging abilities. Adolescents are more at risk for problem behaviors if they have low grades and/or drop out of school. In New Hampshire, almost 1 in 10 teens over the age of 15 is neither in school, nor at work, nor in the armed services (Terry & Hall, 1996). These teens are called "idle teens." In Dover 11% of this age group are "idle teens." (Terry & Hall, 1996).

Likewise, adolescents with a large amount of free time may be more vulnerable to engaging in risky behaviors such as drug use and early sexual intercourse. Knowing adolescents' perceptions of their school and community can help adults better understand teen motivations and behaviors. For example, adolescents who are more committed to school and involved in prosocial activities are less likely to engage in risky behaviors because they perceive there is more to lose from such behaviors (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Dryfoos, 1990; Elster, Lamb and Taverne, 1987; Mensch and Kandel, 1988).

Perceptions of School

We asked local students to respond to the statement, "*I enjoy going to school.*" Fifty-six percent (56%) of all local youth "*agreed*" or "*strongly agreed*" they enjoyed going to school. Overall, females reported more agreement with the statement than males (females, 62%; males, 51%). With regard to school level, middle school and high school students reported they enjoyed school about the same (58% for middle school, 56% for high school).

Figure 9-1 displays the percentage of local teens by grade and gender who report they "enjoy going to school."

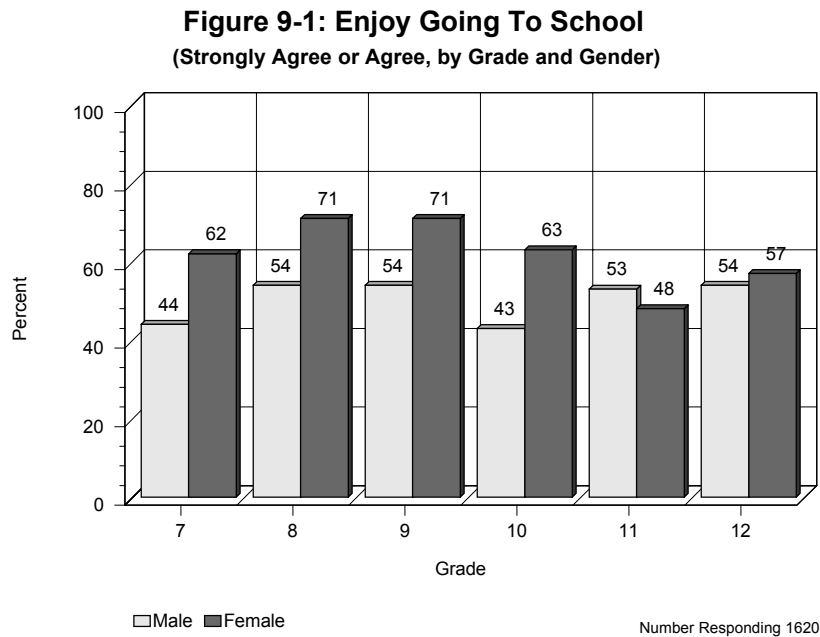
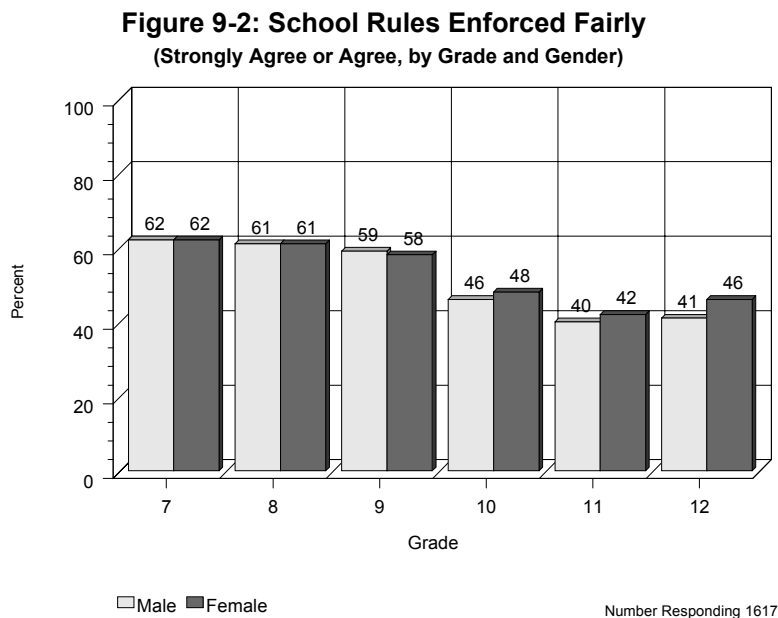
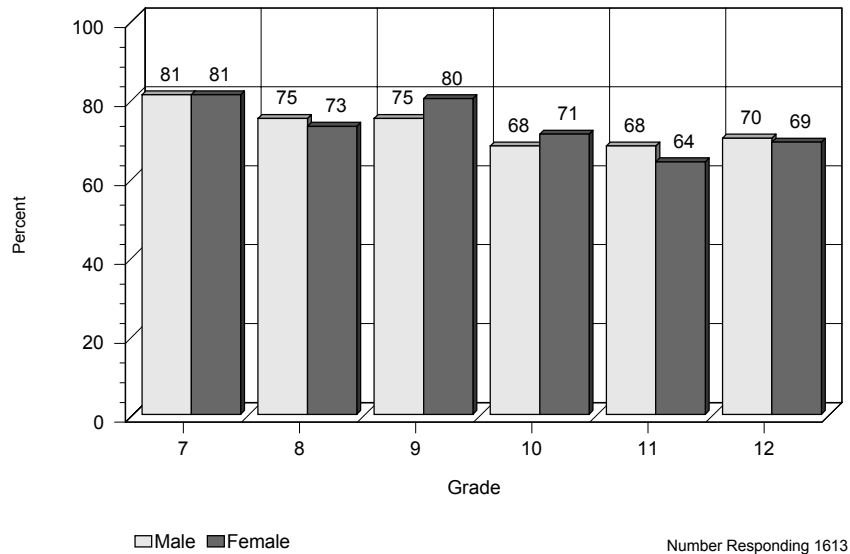


Figure 9-2 displays the percentage of students by grade and gender who "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement, "The rules in my school are enforced fairly." Overall, 52% of students reported they felt the rules were enforced fairly. More middle school students (62%) than high school students (48%) reported they felt this way.



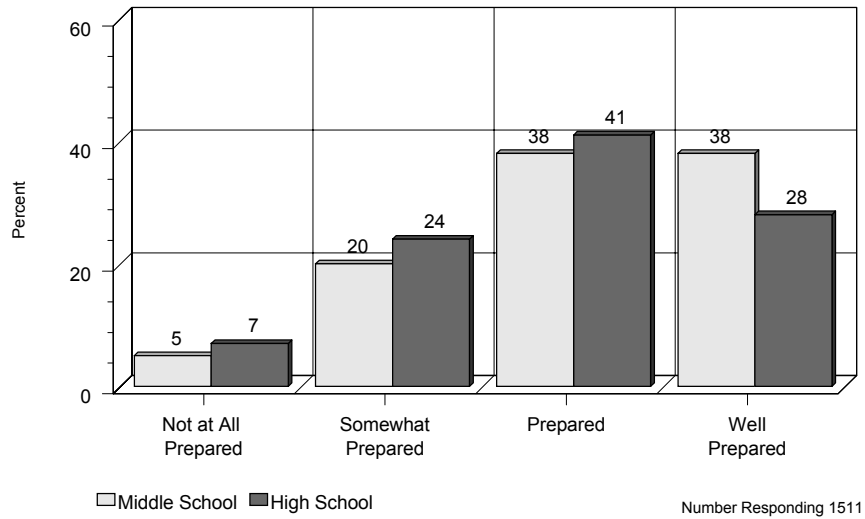
Students were also asked whether or not they felt they were getting a "good, high quality education at their school." Seventy-three (73%) of students "agree" or "strongly agree" with that statement (middle school, 77%; high school, 71%; males, 73% and females, 73%). For both males and females, the level of agreement is higher in middle school than in high school (middle school males, 78%; high school males, 71%; middle school females 77%; high school females, 71%). Figure 9-3 displays the information broken down by gender and by grade.

Figure 9-3: Good Quality Education
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by Grade and Gender)



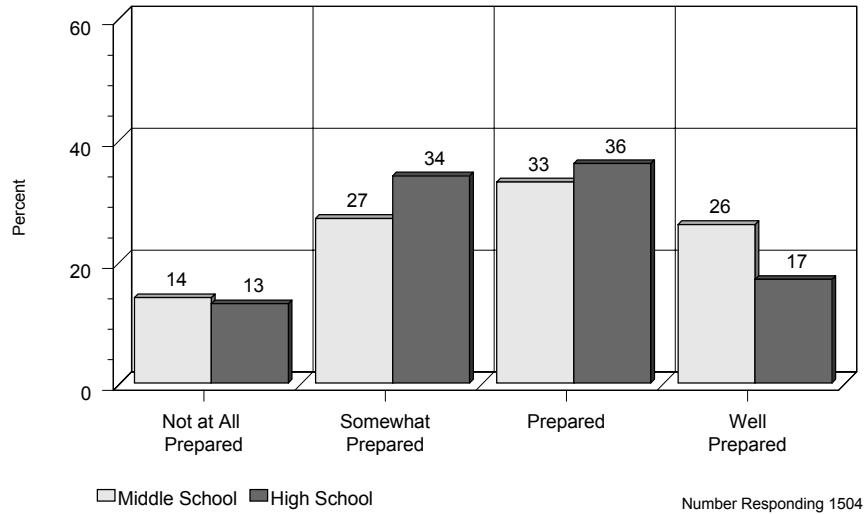
Students were asked when they first started attending their present school, how prepared they felt in handling the classwork and homework, the new building and scheduling format, and the social changes. Seventy one (71%) of students felt that they were “prepared” or “well-prepared” to handle the classwork and homework when they started school. Figure 9-4 shows the responses broken down by school level.

Figure 9-4: How Prepared Teens Were to Handle Classwork and Homework When They First Started Attending Their Present School (By School Level)



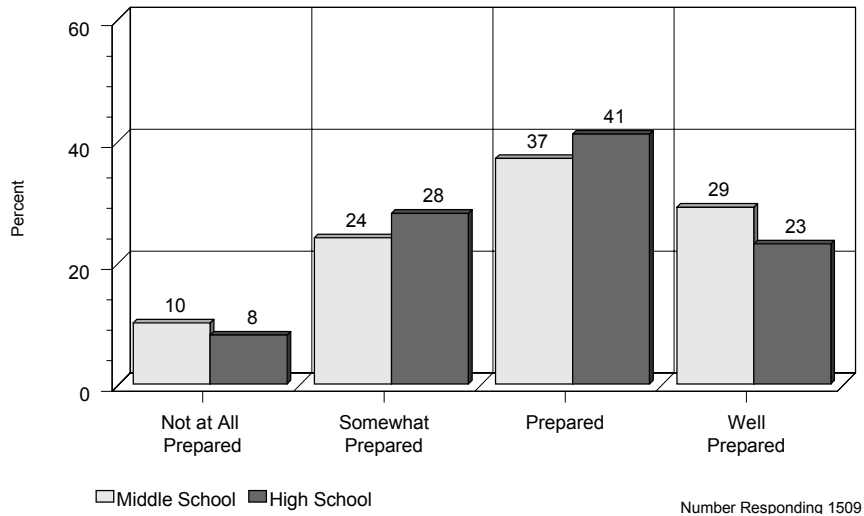
When asked how prepared students felt in handling the new building and scheduling, 54% responded “*prepared*” or “*well-prepared*”. (Note: The TAP survey was given before the new Dover Middle School was opened, so these answers do not reflect responses to the move.) Figure 9-5 shows the responses by school level.

Figure 9-5: How Prepared Teens Were to Handle the New Building and Scheduling When They First Started Attending Their Present School (By School Level)



Sixty four percent (64%) of students felt prepared to handle the social changes when they started attending their present school. Figure 9-6 reports the breakdown of data by school level.

Figure 9-6: How Prepared Teens Were to Handle Social Changes When They First Started Attending Their Present School (By School Level)



Future Plans and Career Plans

When students were asked if they felt they would drop out of school before completing high school, 6% "strongly agreed" or "agreed" (middle school, 7%; high school, 5%; males, 7%; females, 4%). Of course, those high school students who have already dropped out are not reflected in these percentages. Figure 9-7 shows those who strongly agreed or agreed by grade and gender.

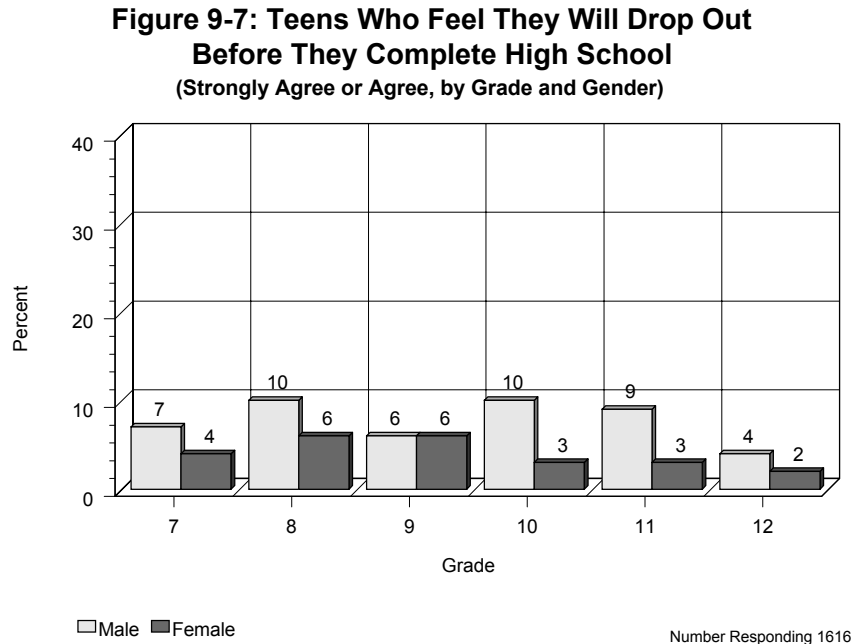


Figure 9-8 shows the future plans middle school students have for after high school graduation. Figure 9-9 shows the same plans for high school students. The rate for females who have plans for future education slightly rises from 75% in middle school to 78% in high school. The rate also rises from middle school to high school for males (middle school males, 65%; high school males, 70%). "Going to a 4-year college or university" was by far the most common response by both males and females and in both school levels.

Figure 9-8: Future Plans After High School
(Middle School Students, by Gender)

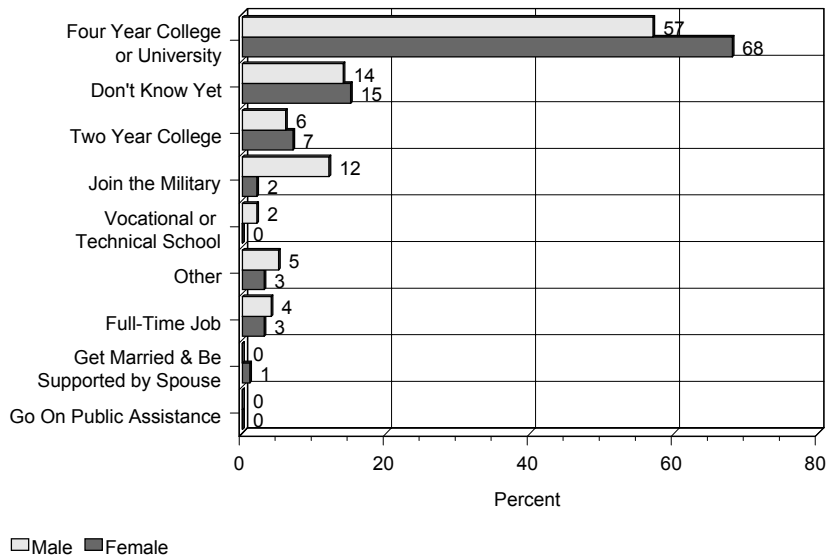
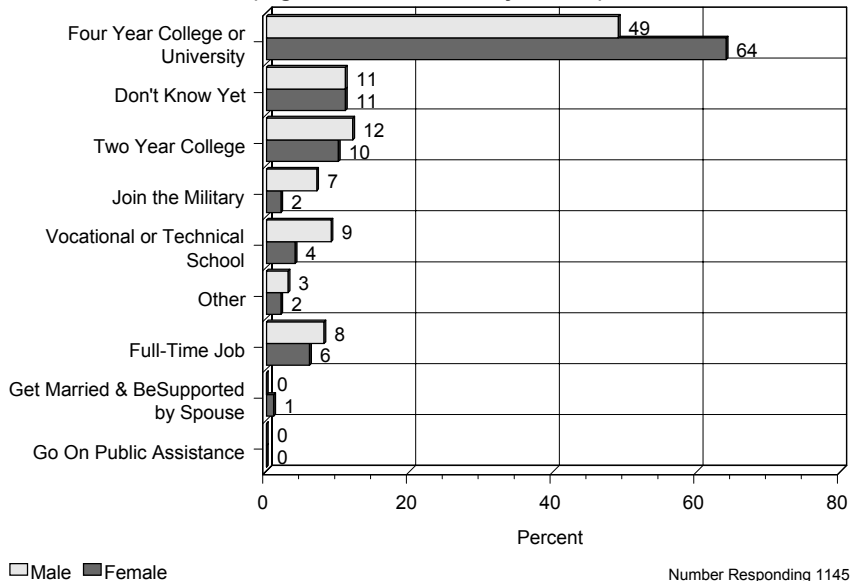


Figure 9-9: Future Plans After High School
(High School Students, by Gender)



Students were also asked how many classes they cut or missed without an approved excuse in the past month. Overall, 1 in 4 students (23%) reported they had cut or missed classes in the past month. As figure 9-10 shows the rate for high school students is higher than the rate for middle school students (25% vs 18%). Figure 9-11 shows the difference by gender. Overall, males have a slightly higher rate of cutting classes than females (25% vs. 21%).

Figure 9-10: How Many Classes Teens Cut or Miss Without An Approved Excuse (In The Past Month, by School Level)

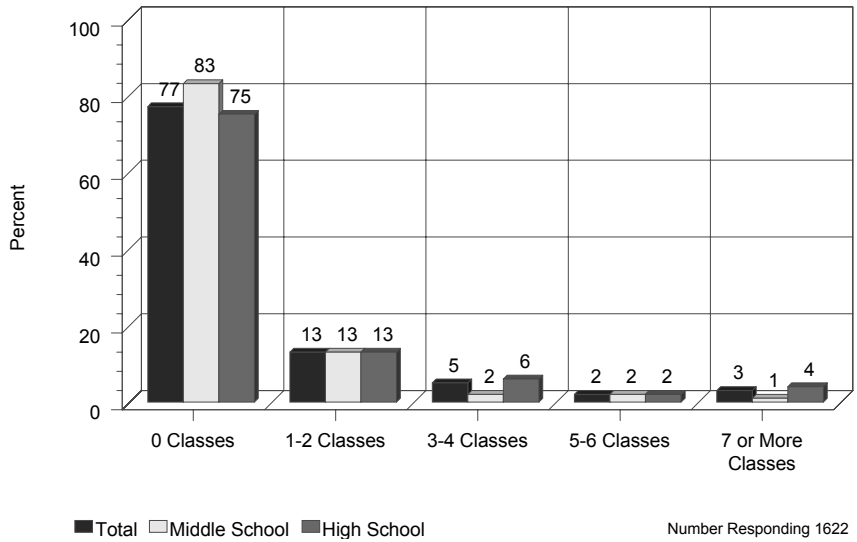
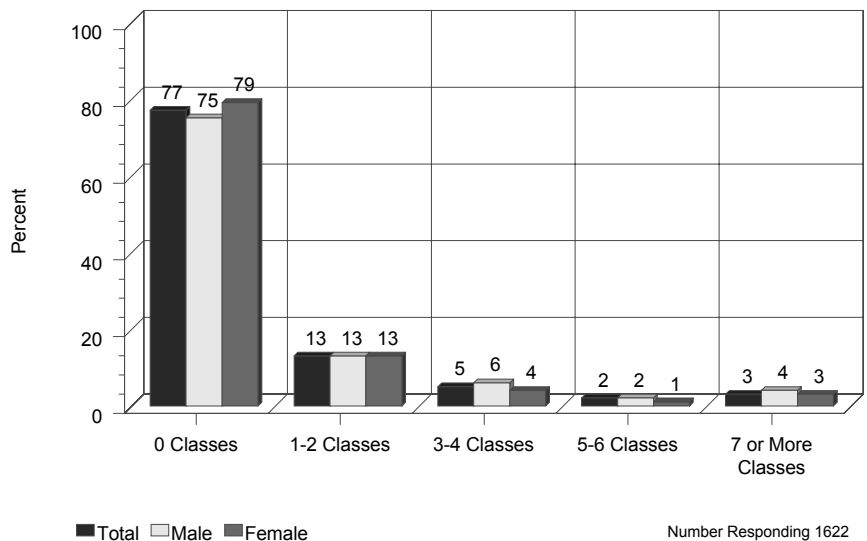


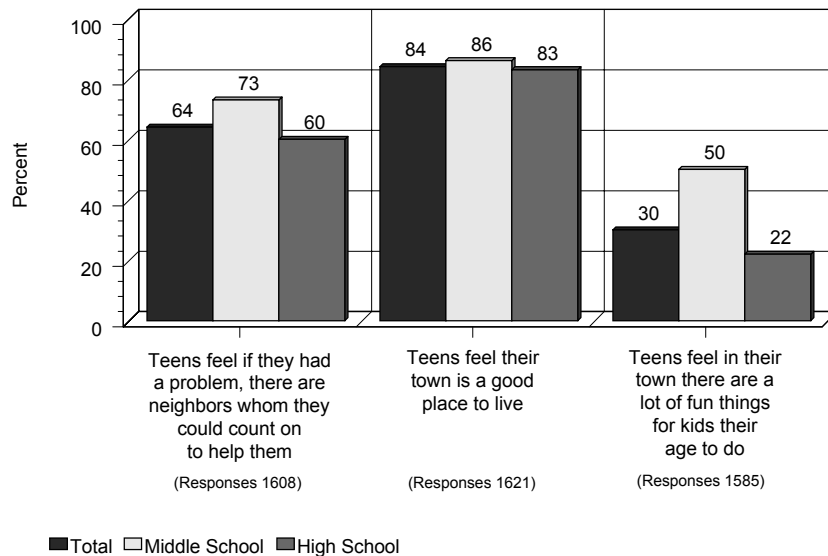
Figure 9-11: How Many Classes Teens Cut or Miss Without An Approved Excuse (In The Past Month, by Gender)



Perceptions of Community

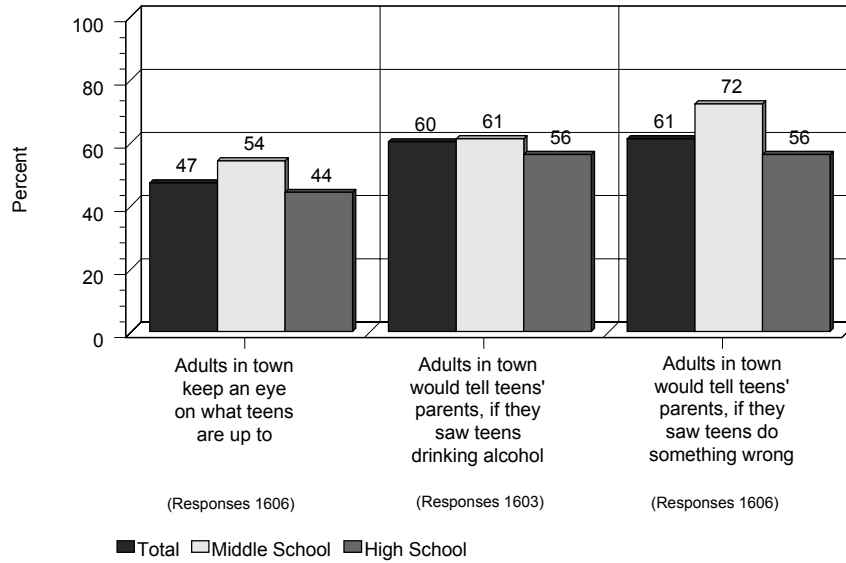
Neighborhood Support. Students told us they felt their community cared about them, and this is seen in Figure 9-12. They felt there were adults other than their parents who they could turn to with problems and for help. Sixty-four percent (64%) reported there are neighbors they can count on if they are in trouble and need help. Although 84% felt their town is a good place to live, only 30% thought there are a lot of fun things for kids their age to do. Far more middle school students (50%) than high school students (22%) reported they felt there are fun things for kids their age to do.

Figure 9-12: Neighborhood Support
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by School Level)



Neighborhood Monitoring. As shown in figure 9-13, almost half of students surveyed (47%) "*Strongly agreed or agreed*" the adults in their community kept an eye on what teens were up to (middle school, 54%; high school, 44%). Sixty percent (60%) said that adults in town would tell their parents if they saw teens drinking alcohol (middle school, 61%; high school, 56%) and 61% felt that if they were to do something wrong, adults in town would tell their parents (middle school, 72%; high school, 56%).

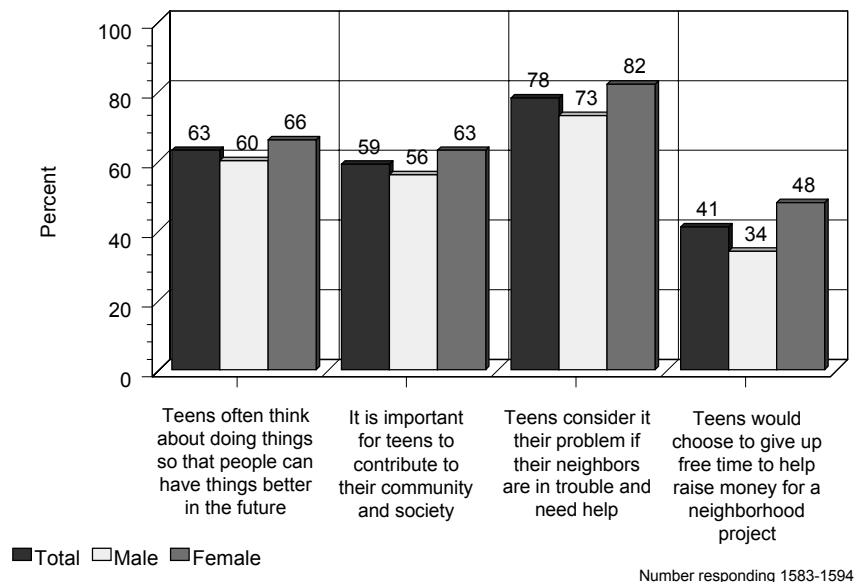
Figure 9-13: Neighborhood Monitoring
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by School Level)



Social Responsibility

Figure 9-14 shows many teens have a well-developed sense of social responsibility toward their community. Almost two-thirds (63%) reported they often think about doing things so that people can have things better in the future (males 60% and females, 66%). Fifty-nine percent (59%) said they feel it is important for teens to contribute to their community and society (males, 56% and females, 63%). Almost four out of five students (78%) said they consider it their problem if their neighbors are in trouble and need help (males, 73% and females, 82%). Forty-one percent (41%) would give up their own free time in order to help raise money for a neighborhood project (males, 34% and females, 48%).

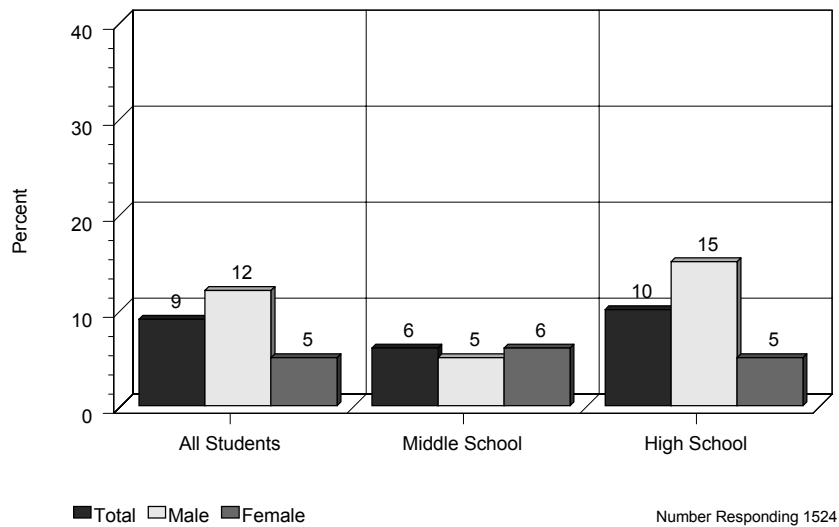
Figure 9-14: Social Responsibility
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by Gender)



Racial, Ethnic and Religious Issues

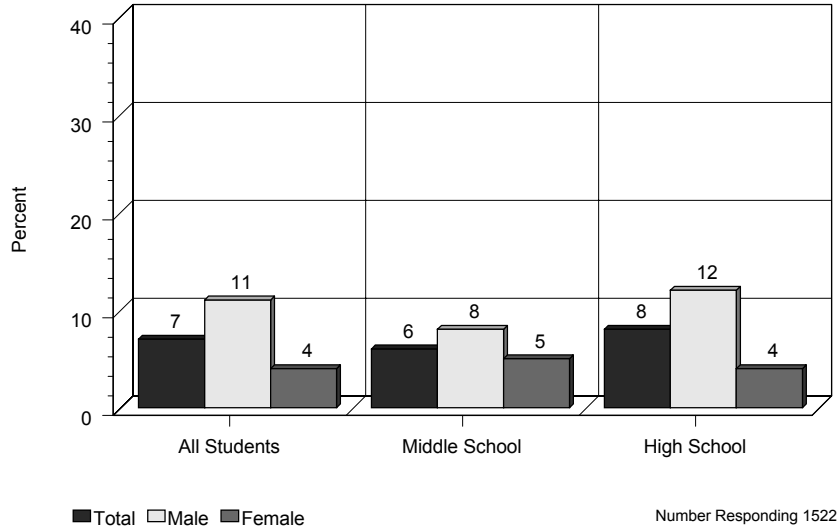
We asked local youth to respond to the following statement: *"Sometimes I treat people differently because of their race or the color of their skin."* Overall, 9% of respondents *"agreed or strongly agreed"* with this statement. Twice as many males as females reported they felt they treated others differently because of their race or color of their skin (12% vs. 5%). More high school students than middle school students felt this way (10% vs. 6%). Figure 9-15 shows those who *"strongly agreed"* or *"agreed"* with this statement broken down by grade and gender.

Figure 9-15: Teens Who Feel They Treat Others Differently Because of Their Race or Color of Their Skin
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by Gender and School Level)



We also asked local teens if they feel they treat people differently because of their religion. Overall, males were more likely to “strongly agree” or “agree than females (11% vs. 4%.) Differences between middle school and high school are negligible. Figure 9-16 shows the responses by school level and gender.

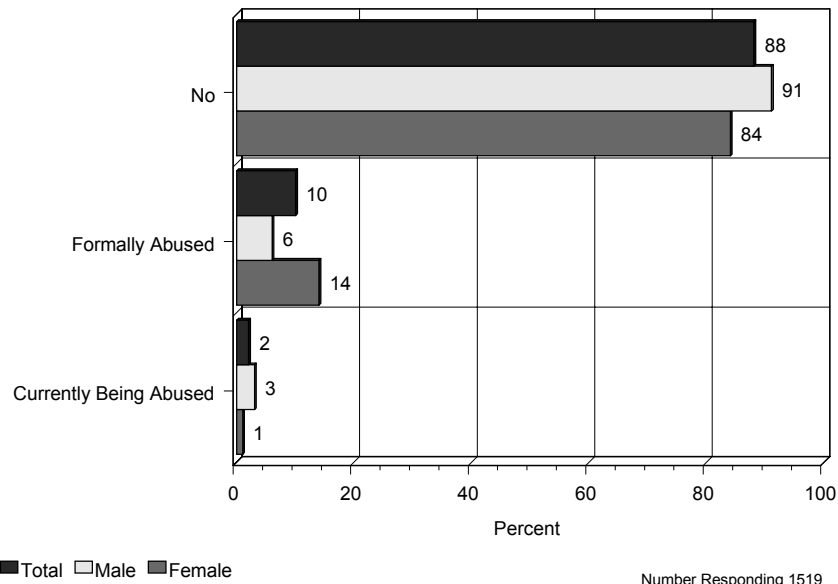
Figure 9-16: Teens Who Feel They Treat Others Differently Because of Their Religion
 (Strongly Agree or Agree, by Gender and School Level)



Abuse and Violence in the School and Community

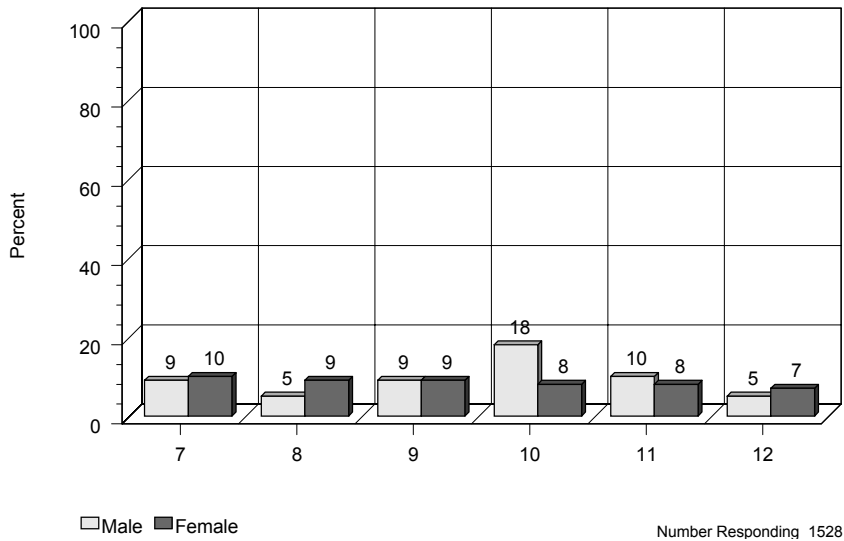
Figure 9-17 shows 12% of local teens reported current or past physical abuse by an adult (e.g. beat up, hit with an object, kicked, or some other form of physical force). There was no gender difference between levels of current abuse; however, females reported a higher level of previous physical abuse than males (males, 6%; females, 14%). More high school youth than middle school youth reported physical abuse at some point in their lives (high school, 15%; middle school, 6%).

**Figure 9-17: Teens Who Have Been Physically Abused
(By Gender)**



We also asked local youth how many days in the past month they did not go to school because they felt unsafe. Nine percent (9%) answered they missed school on one or more days in the past month because they felt unsafe (middle school, 8%, high school, 10%; males, 10%; and females, 9%). It is interesting to note that almost twice as many males in grade 10 than any other grade missed school because they felt unsafe. Figure 9-18 shows the breakdown by grade and gender.

Figure 9-18: Teens Who Missed School on One or More Days Because They Felt Unsafe
(In the Past Month, by Grade and Gender)



A national survey found 4.0% (N.H., 2.1%) of high school students (*grades 9-12*) surveyed felt too unsafe to go to school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1998). New Hampshire ranks 31st out of the 33 states surveyed by the CDC.

We asked local youth, "During the *past month*, on how many days did you carry a weapon such as a gun, knife, or club on school property?" At the time of the survey, 10% of local youth reported they carried a weapon (e.g. a gun, knife or other sharp weapon, club, baseball bat, or pipe, etc.) onto school property. Middle school youth were slightly less likely to carry a weapon on to school property than high school youth (7% vs. 12%), as Figure 9-19 shows.

Figure 9-19: Days Teens Carried Weapons on to School Property
(In the Past Month, by School Level)

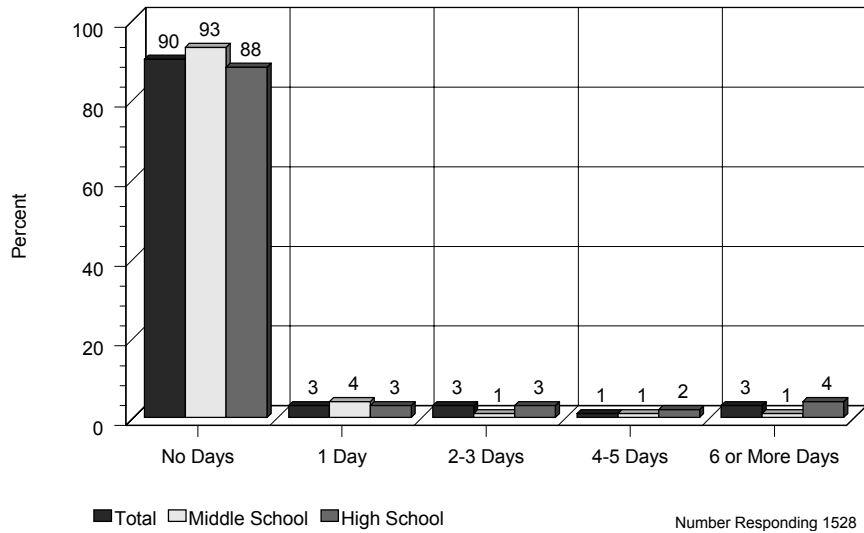
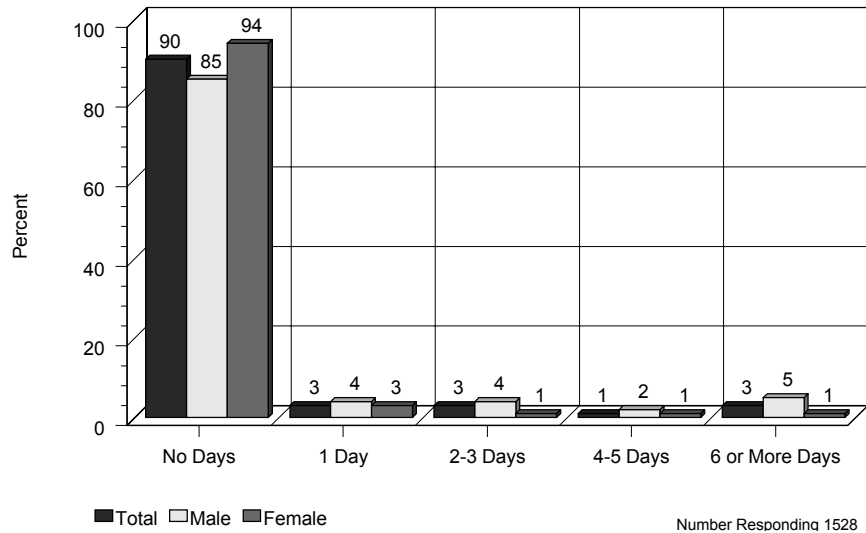


Figure 9-20 shows the days teens carried weapons on to school property by gender. While 15% of the males carried a weapon on school property at some time in the past month, only 6% of the females did so.

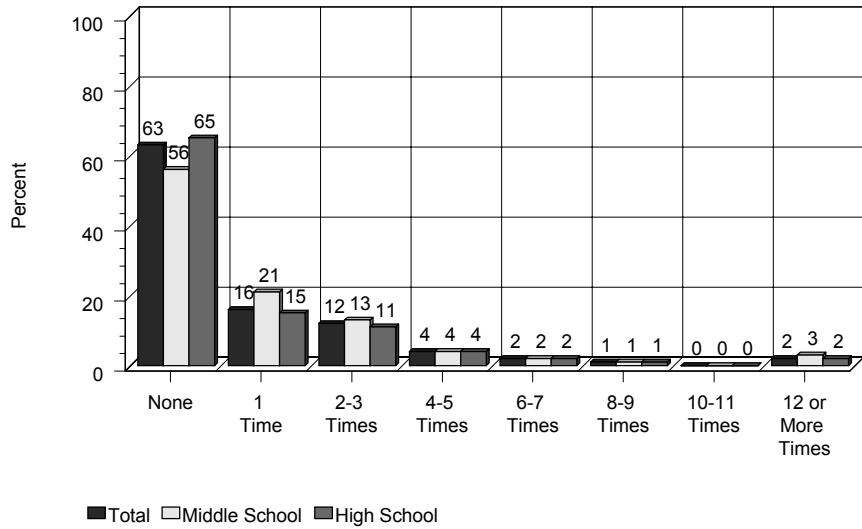
Figure 9-20: Days Teens Carried Weapons on to School Property
(In the Past Month, by Gender)



Nationally, 8.5% (N.H., 7.4%) youth (*grades 9-12*) reported they carried a weapon on to school property in the month preceding the survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1998). New Hampshire ranks 30th out of 33 states surveyed by the CDC.

Students were also asked about the number of physical fights they had been in during the past year. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of local youth have been involved in one or more physical fights in the past year. For males, the incidence of fighting decreases from middle school to high school (middle school males, 53%; high school males, 41%). Incidence of fighting decreases to a smaller degree for females (middle school females, 34%; high school females, 28%). Figure 9-21 shows 44% of middle school students and 35% of high school students were involved in one or more fights in the past year.

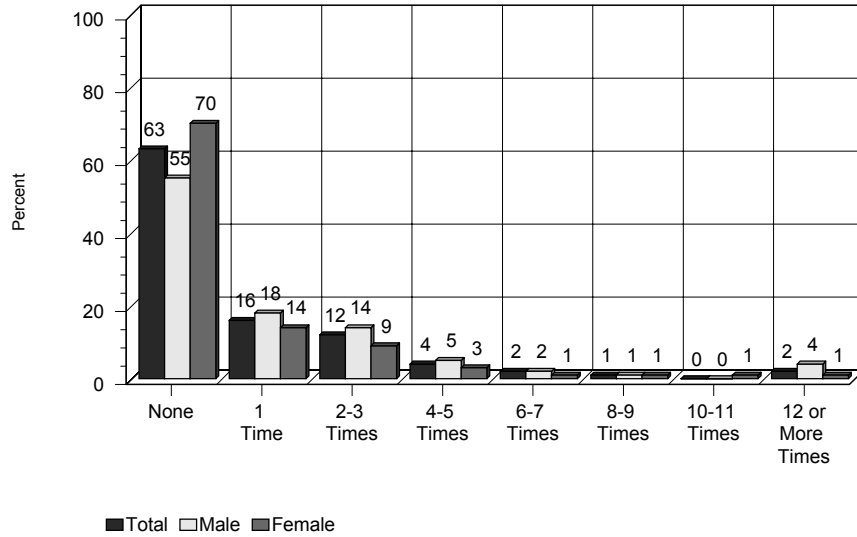
Figure 9-21: How Many Times Teens Were in a Physical Fight
(In the Past Year, by School Level)



Number Responding 1532

Figure 9-22 shows more males than females were involved in a physical fight on one or more occasions in the past year (males, 45% and females, 30%).

Figure 9-22: How Many Times Teens Were in a Physical Fight (In The Past Year, by Gender)



Number Responding 1532

On a nationwide level, 36.6% (N.H., 30.8%) of high school students surveyed in grades 9-12 have been in a physical fight at least one time in the past year (Centers for Disease Control, 1998). New Hampshire ranks 30th out of the 33 states surveyed by the CDC.