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# **TAPPING INTO TEEN CONCERNS, PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIOR DOVER SCHOOL DISTRICT**

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## **A Report of the Teen Assessment Project (TAP) University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension**

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## Teen Assessment Project Executive Summary For the Community of Dover

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Concerns about local youth issues prompted the community of Dover to adopt the University of New Hampshire Teen Assessment Project (TAP) survey for use with youth in the Dover School District. The goal of TAP is to provide communities with local research-based information that can help them better support local teens and their families. Survey results provide a vehicle for youth, parent, school, and community education and action, help secure local funding, stimulate program and policy changes, and lead to changes in attitudes and behaviors that build assets/protective factors in families, schools, and communities.

A local steering committee coordinated the review and administration of a 160-item survey which asked teens about their perceptions of self, family, school, and community; their future aspirations, worries, and concerns; and their activities, both positive and problematic. The survey was administered to 7th through 12th grade students in the Dover School District in the Fall of 1999. A total of 1,635 surveys were used for data analysis. This represents approximately 83% of the total student population in the Dover School District. Following are selected local TAP survey results.

### **Family Characteristics**

The TAP survey revealed the most common living situation for local youth is living with two parents (55%). Other reported living situations include living with a single parent (18%), and living with a blended family or step-family (17%).

The majority of youth reported that both of their parents have a high school diploma, Bachelor's Degree, or higher (fathers, 83% and mothers, 87%). Thirty percent (30%) of fathers and 30% of mothers have a high school diploma. Twenty-nine percent (29%) of the fathers and 32% of mothers have a Bachelor's Degree or higher. Only 4% of all fathers and 3% of all mothers were reported to have less than a high school education.

## Alcohol, Tobacco, and Drug Use

The Teen Assessment Project (TAP) survey found many local youth use alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

- Sixty-one percent (61%) of all youth have used alcohol at some time (middle school, 34% and high school, 71%). Thirty-three percent (33%) of all youth reported using alcohol once a month or more often (middle school, 12%; high school, 41%) and 14% reported using it weekly or more often (middle school, 6% and high school, 17%).
- Fifteen percent (15%) of all middle school youth and 41% of all high school youth reported binge drinking ("*5 or more alcoholic drinks in a row*") at least once in the past month with 51% of all seniors reporting binge drinking in the last month.
- Forty-four percent (44%) of all youth have smoked tobacco at some time (middle school, 26% and high school, 51%). Twenty percent (20%) reported smoking monthly or more often (middle school, 8%; high school, 25%) and 15% reported weekly or more often use (middle school, 5% and high school, 19%). Weekly smoking habits peak in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade for females (28%) and in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade for males (20%).
- Thirty-nine percent (39%) of all youth have used marijuana at some time (middle school, 17% and high school, 47%). Twenty-one percent (21%) reported monthly or more often use of marijuana (middle school, 6%; high school, 27%), and 13% reported weekly or more often use (middle school, 3% and high school, 17%).
- Sixty-six percent (66%) of all youth believe it is either "*easy*" or "*very easy*" to get beer/wine/liquor. Fifty percent (50%) believe it is "*easy*" or "*very easy*" to get marijuana.
- Eleven percent (11%) of all youth have used inhalants at some time (middle school, 10% and high school, 12%). Two percent (2%) of all youth have used inhalants monthly or more often (middle school, 2% and high school, 2%). Twenty-six percent (26%) of local youth feel that using inhalants carries "*no*" or "*slight risk*" (middle school, 40%; high school, 20%).

These emerging dependencies put youth at risk of delayed emotional and intellectual growth; developing problems with schools, friends and families; incurring ill health and reduced longevity; accidents; suicide; and unwanted pregnancies (Pedersen & Skrondal, 1996; Pfeifer, Schector, and Yoast, 1987; Small, Silverberg & Kerns, 1993).

## **Sexuality Issues**

Overall, 32% of all youth reported they have had sexual intercourse (middle school, 13% and high school, 39%). Fifty-seven percent (57%) of 12<sup>th</sup> graders have had sexual intercourse. Only 53% of sexually active teens always use some form of birth control (males, 51%; females, 56%; middle school, 49%; and high school, 54%).

A high percentage of local teens do not talk with their parents about sexuality issues. Within the past year, 55% either "*never*" or "*rarely*" talked to their mothers and 68% "*never*" or "*rarely*" talked to their fathers about whether or not it is okay to have sex. Even fewer teens had birth control discussions with their parents in the past year, with 70% who either "*never*" or "*rarely*" talked to their mothers and 79% who "*never*" or "*rarely*" talked to their fathers about the issue.

Six percent (6%) of local teens reported some degree of forced sexual activity by an adult (males, 4% and females, 9%). One percent (1%) reported current sexual abuse by an adult and 5% reported previous sexual abuse.

## **Emotional Health Issues**

Worries of local youth, listed from greatest to least are: getting good grades at school (52%); how they look (34%); getting along with parents at home (26%); that they are too fat or too thin (21%); how well their parents get along with each other (20%); that a friend is considering suicide (12%); not fitting in with the other kids at school (12%); that they might get pregnant or get someone else pregnant (9%); being picked on or hurt by another teen (8%); being pressured into having sex (7%); that their parents drink too much or use drugs (6%); being pressured into drinking or using drugs (6%); that their parents might physically harm them (3%); and whether they are "straight" or "gay" (3%).

Overall, 67% of all local teens reported feeling depressed or sad at some time during the past month (77% for females and 57% for males). Eighteen percent (18%) of local youth reported having serious thoughts of suicide during the past month (16% for males and 21% for females). Eighteen percent (18%) of local youth had made plans at some time to kill themselves (16% for males and 21% for females) and 12% reported they had actually attempted suicide at some time in the past (10% for males and 15% for females).

## **Parent-Teen Relations**

Good communication is a key part of healthy parent-teen relationships. Many local youth felt they had not had a good talk with their mothers or fathers in the past year about whether or not it is okay to have sex, birth control, AIDS and other STDs, the risks of drinking and using drugs, and personal problems. Parents were much more likely to talk with their teens about job or education plans.

Twenty-six percent (26%) of all teens reported they worried either *"very much"* or *"quite a bit"* about getting along with their parents at home (middle school, 36% and high school, 23%). A high percentage of teens felt their parents either *"often"* or *"very often"* cared about them; 90% felt this way about their mothers and 81% for their fathers. Sixty-two percent (62%) of students felt that their mothers were fair *"often"* or *"very often"* when it came to enforcing the family rules; 57% felt this about their fathers. Parental monitoring, sharing family values, and letting teens know that there would be consequences were all found to be related to lower rates of regular smoking, drinking, and sexual activity by local teens.

### **Student Time Use**

Local youth spend the most time (at the level of 5 or more hours a week) at home alone with no adults present (57%). Local youth also spend 5 or more hours per week watching TV (56%); doing homework or studying (54%); participating in extra-curricular school sports or activities (38%); working for pay (36%); and engaging in non-school activities (14%).

### **Perceptions of School and Community**

Seventy-three percent (73%) of local youth felt they were getting a good, high quality education, 56% indicated they enjoyed going to school, and another 52% felt school rules were enforced fairly.

Sixty-three percent (63%) of youth often think about doing things so that people can have things better in the future, 59% felt it is important for them to contribute to their community and society and 78% consider it their problem if their neighbors are in trouble and need help. An additional 41% of teens would choose to give up their free time to help raise money for a neighborhood project. Eighty-four percent (84%) feel their community is a good place to live.

Nine percent (9%) of students have missed school at least once in the past month because they felt unsafe. Ten percent (10%) of students have carried a weapon onto school property in the past month, and 37% have been in a physical fight at least once in the past year.

### **In Closing**

Youth today face many challenges as they grow and develop. The Teen Assessment Project (TAP) provides information that empowers youth, parents, neighborhoods, schools, youth-serving organizations, agencies, the spiritual community, law enforcement, and community leaders to work together to develop and implement strategies addressing concerns identified. TAP can serve as a vehicle for youth, parent, school, and community education and action. In addition, it sets a baseline from which to evaluate the impact of local efforts to encourage positive youth development in families, schools and communities.