
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 Merrimack, 10% of teens 16 to 19 years of age 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-two percent (52%) of all local youth '*agreed*' or '*strongly agreed*' they enjoyed going to school. Overall, females reported more agreement with the statement than males (females, 58%; males, 47%). With regard to school level, middle school and high school students reported they enjoyed school about the same (middle school, 51%; high school, 53%).

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

Figure 9-1: Enjoy Going to School
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by Grade and Gender)

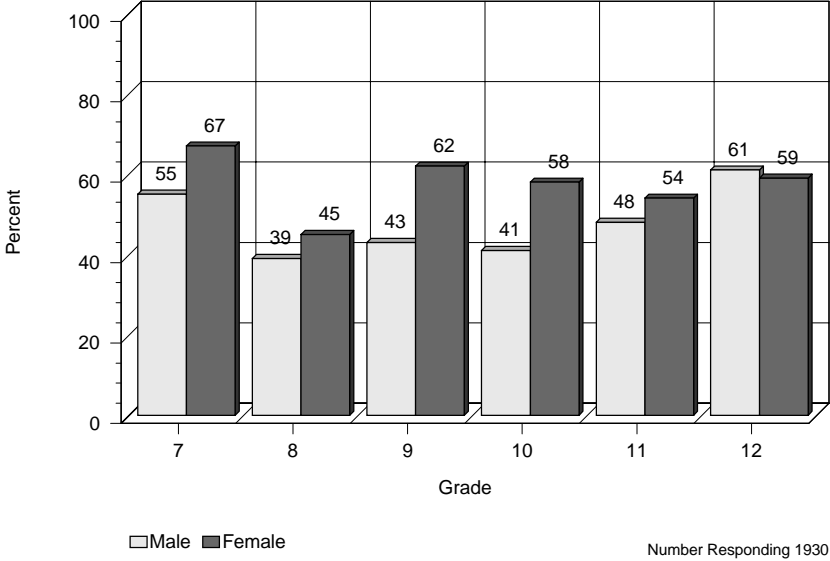
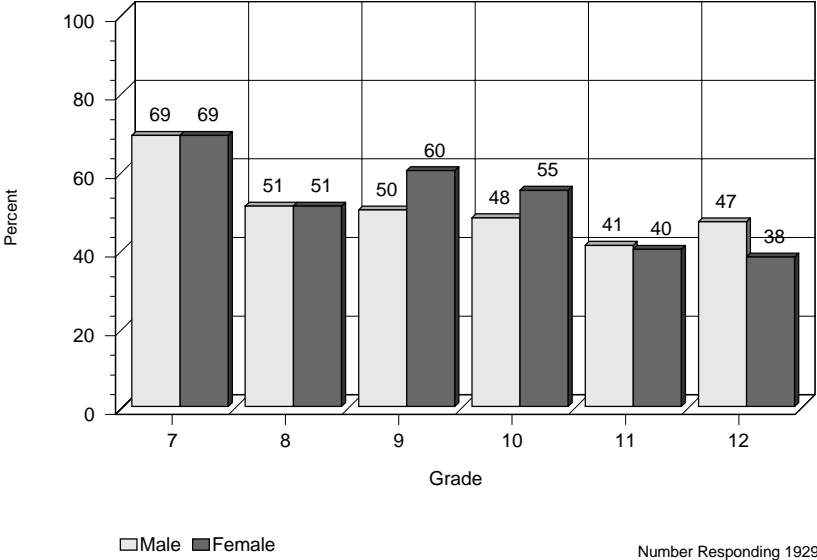


Figure 9-2 displays the percentage of students by grade and gender who "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement "The rules in my school are enforced fairly." Overall, 52% of students reported they felt the rules were enforced fairly. More middle school students (60%) than high school students (48%) reported they felt this way.

Figure 9-2: School Rules Enforced Fairly
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by Grade and Gender)



Students were also asked whether or not they felt they were getting a "good, high quality education at their school." Sixty percent (60%) of students "agree" or "strongly agree" with that statement (middle school, 71%; high school, 54%; males, 60%; females, 60%). For both males and females, the level of agreement is higher in middle school than in high school (middle school males, 69%; high school males, 55%; middle school females 74%; high school females, 54%). Figure 9-3 displays the information broken down by grade and gender.

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

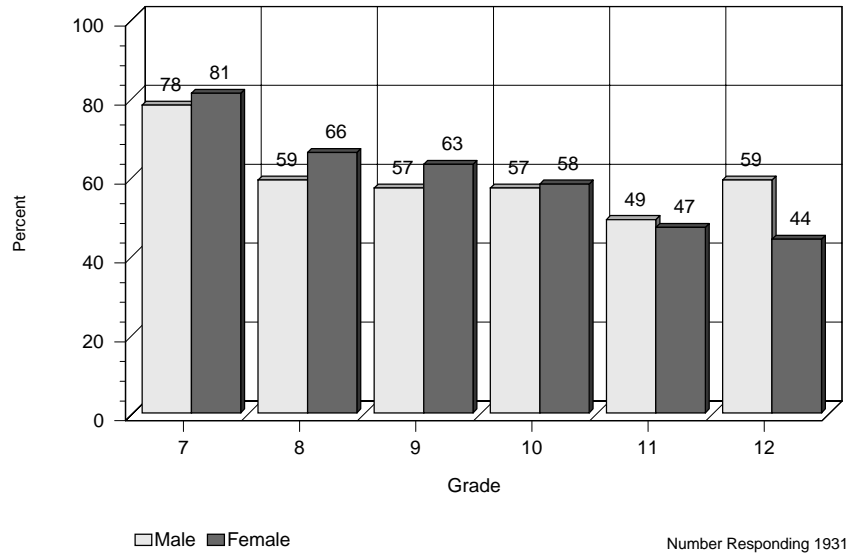


Figure 9-4 shows those students who "agree" or "strongly agree" that their school counselors, social workers and psychologists are helpful when they need them, by grade and gender.

Figure 9-4: School Counselors, Social Workers and Psychologists Are Helpful When I Need Them
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by Grade and Gender)

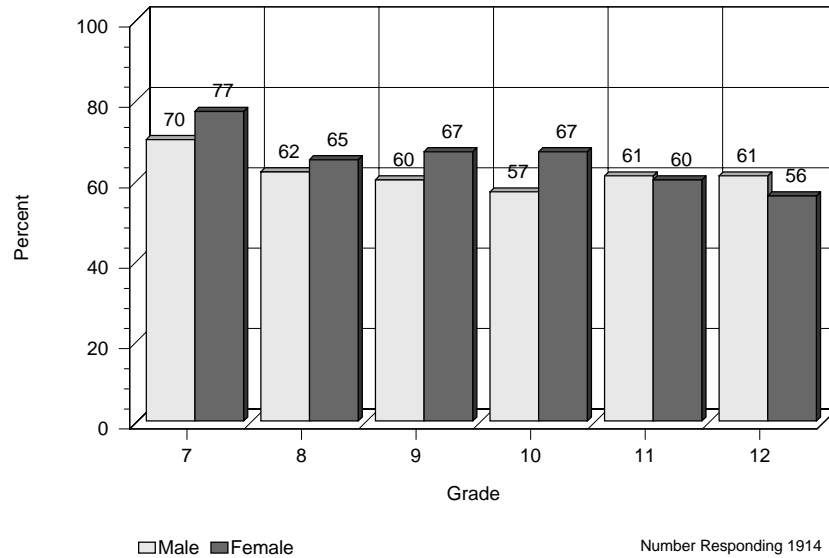
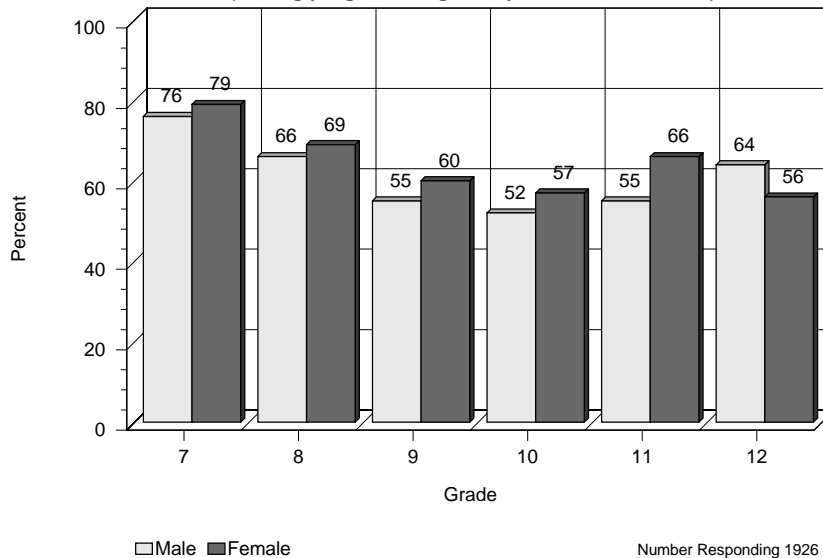


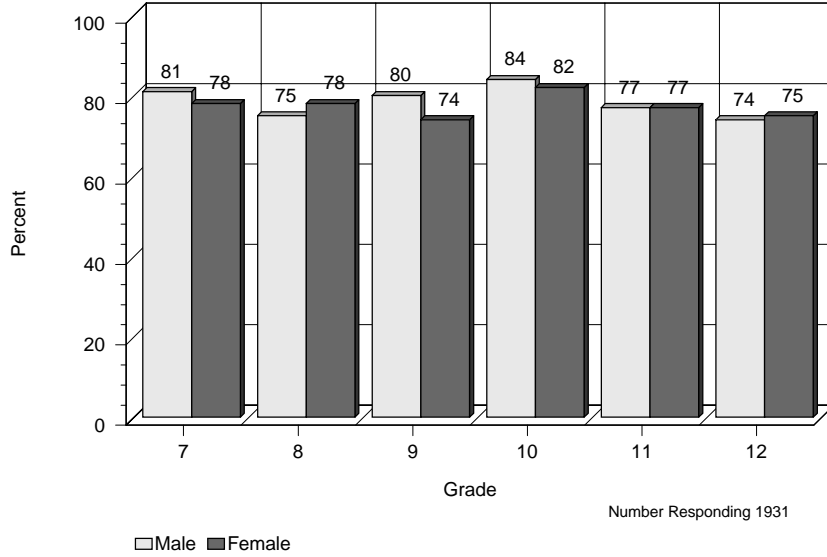
Figure 9-5 shows those students who feel their teachers encourage them to do and be their personal best, by grade and gender.

Figure 9-5: Teachers Encourage Me to Do and Be the Best I Can Be
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by Grade and Gender)



As Figure 9-6 shows, nearly four out of five (78%) of teens "agree" or "strongly agree" that there is a quiet place at their home where they can study or concentrate on homework.

Figure 9-6: At Home There is a Quiet Place Where I Can Study or Concentrate on Homework
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by Grade and Gender)



Peer Susceptibility

Teens sometimes feel pressured by friends and acquaintances to do things to fit in and be popular with their peers. Peer pressure may cause an otherwise stable adolescent to engage in behaviors that put himself or herself in danger. For example, Hawkins (n.d.) found youth who have many protective factors in their lives (such as coming from a well-managed family, getting good grades, living in a well-connected community, etc.) are more likely to use drugs if they socialize with other youth who use drugs.

We asked teens to respond to the statement *"I let friends talk me into doing things I really don't want to do."* Of all youth surveyed, 84% responded *"never"* or *"rarely"* to this statement and only 4% reported they did *"a lot of the time"* or *"always."* Figure 9-7 shows responses broken down by school level.

Figure 9-7: Teens Who Let Friends Talk Them into Doing Things They Don't Want to Do (By School Level)

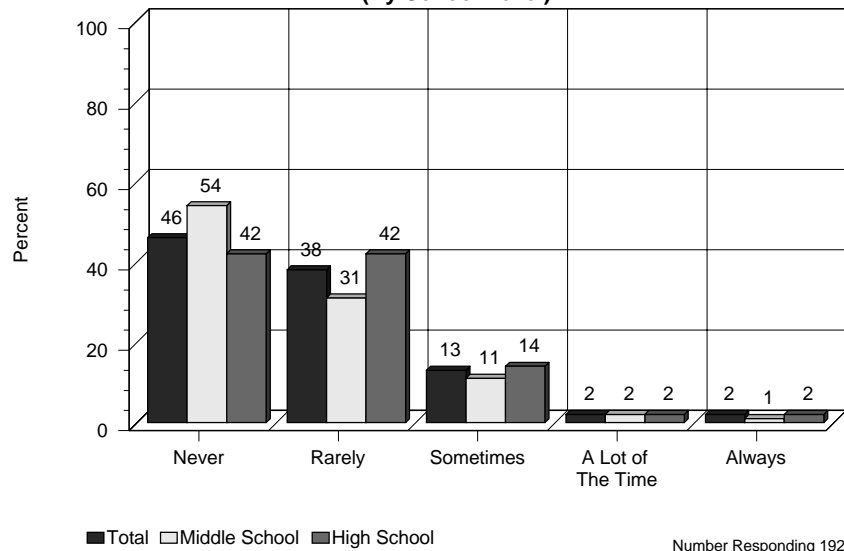
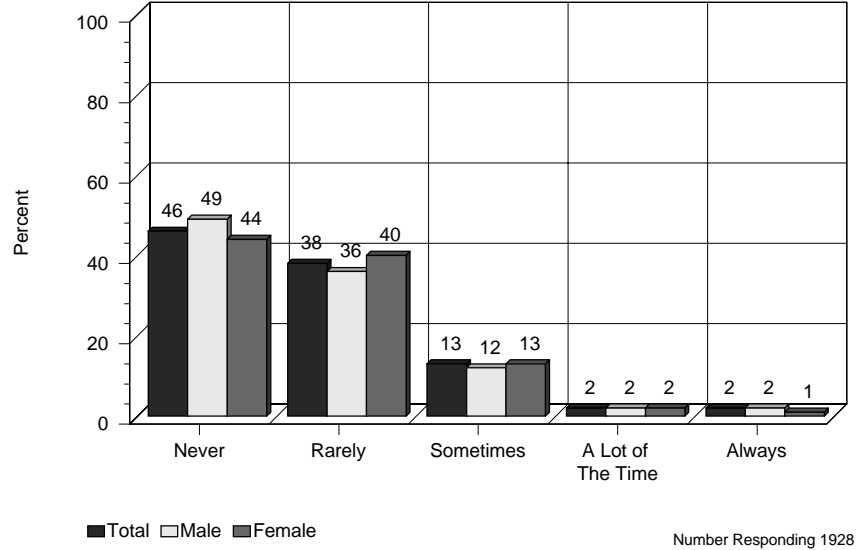


Figure 9-8 shows responses broken down by gender.

Figure 9-8: Teens Who Let Friends Talk Them into Doing Things They Don't Want to Do (By Gender)



We asked teens to respond to the statement "I am afraid to do things my friends won't approve of." Of all youth surveyed, 81% responded "never" or "rarely" to this statement and only 6% reported they did "a lot of the time" or "always." Figure 9-9 shows all responses broken down by school level.

Figure 9-9: Teens Who Are Afraid to Do Things Their Friends Don't Approve Of (By School Level)

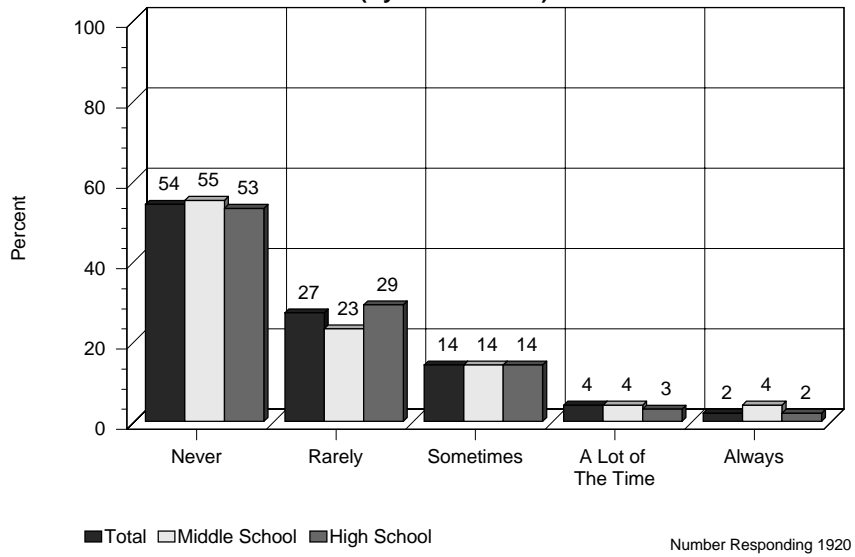


Figure 9-10 shows the data by gender.

Figure 9-10: Teens Who Are Afraid to Do Things Their Friends Don't Approve Of (By Gender)

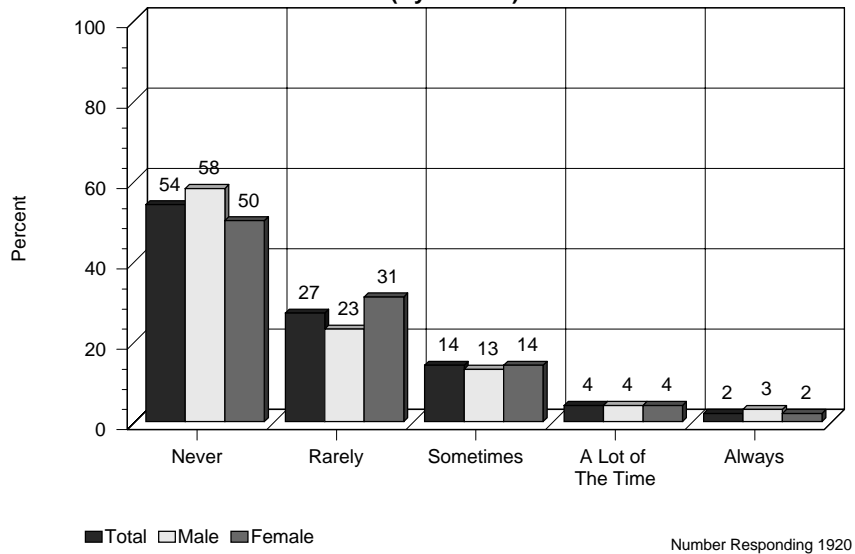


Figure 9-11 shows how students responded to the statement "I do things to be more popular with my friends." Middle school students were slightly more likely than high school students to say that they did "always" or "a lot of the time" (middle school, 11%; high school, 6%). Figure 9-12 shows data for the same statement by gender.

Figure 9-11: Teens Who Do Things to Be More Popular with Friends (By School Level)

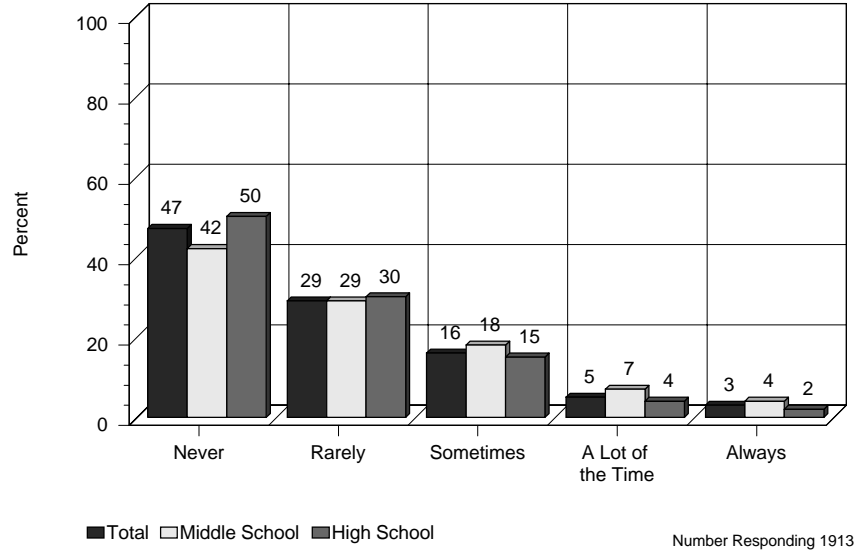
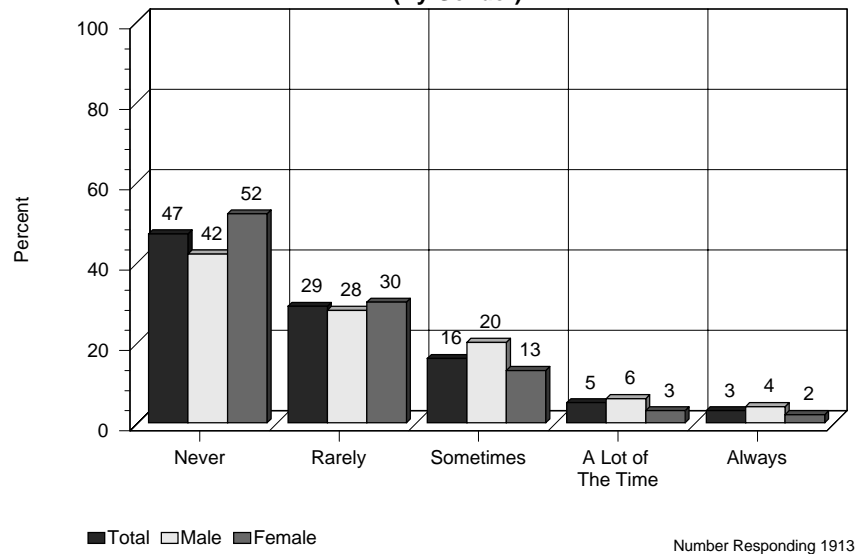


Figure 9-12: Teens Who Do Things to Be More Popular with Friends (By Gender)



We asked teens to respond to the statement "I trust my friends." Of all youth surveyed, 76% responded "always" or "usually" to this statement and only 6% reported they "never" or "almost never" did. Figure 9-13 shows all responses broken down by school level.

**Figure 9-13: Teens Who Trust Their Friends
(By School Level)**

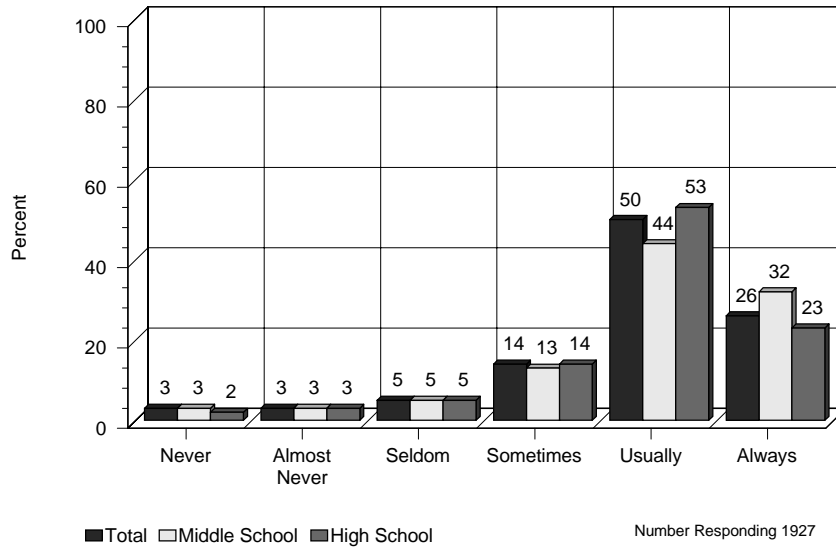
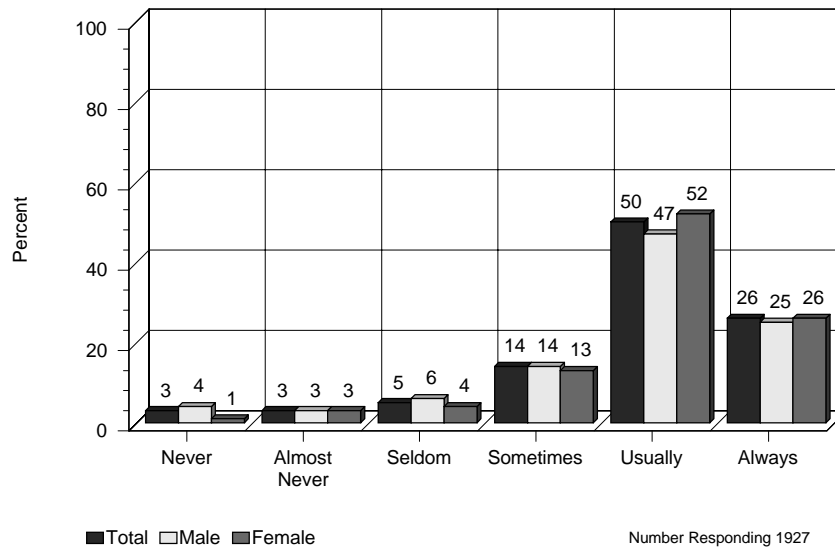


Figure 9-14 shows responses to this statement by gender.

**Figure 9-14: Teens Who Trust Their Friends
(By Gender)**



Future Plans and Career Plans

When students were asked if they felt they would drop out of school before completing high school, 5% strongly agreed or agreed (middle school, 5%; high school, 6%; males, 6%; females, 4%). Of course, those high school students who have already dropped out are not reflected in these percentages. Figure 9-15 shows those who "strongly agree" or "agree" they will drop out before they complete high school by grade and gender.

Figure 9-15: Teens Who Feel They Will Drop Out Before They Complete High School
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by Grade and Gender)

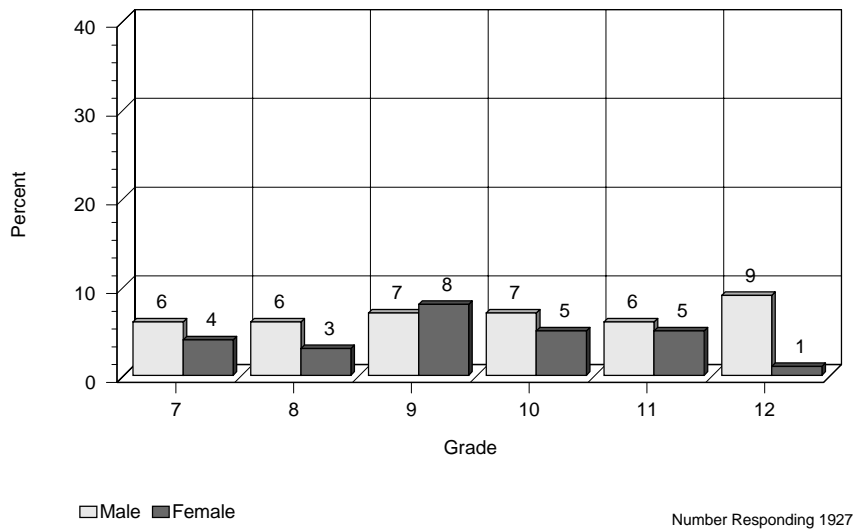
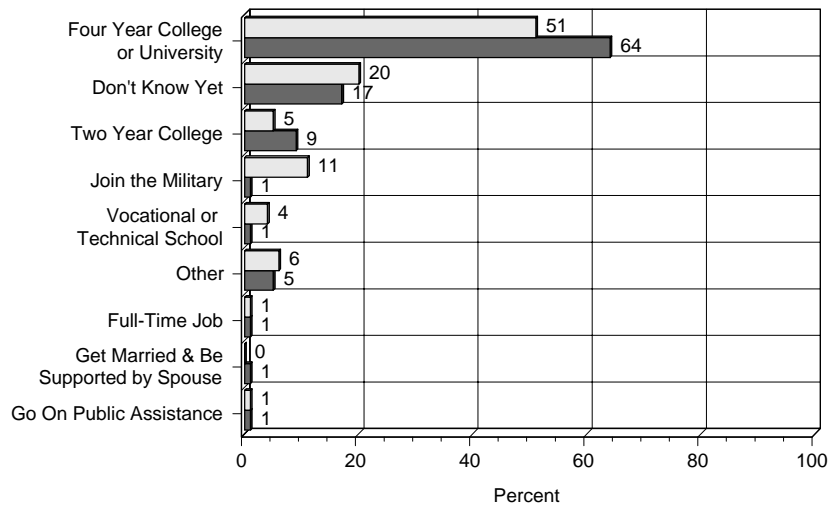


Figure 9-16 shows the future plans middle school students have for after high school graduation. Figure 9-17 shows the same plans for high school students. "Go to a 4-year college or university" was by far the most common response by both males and females at both school levels.

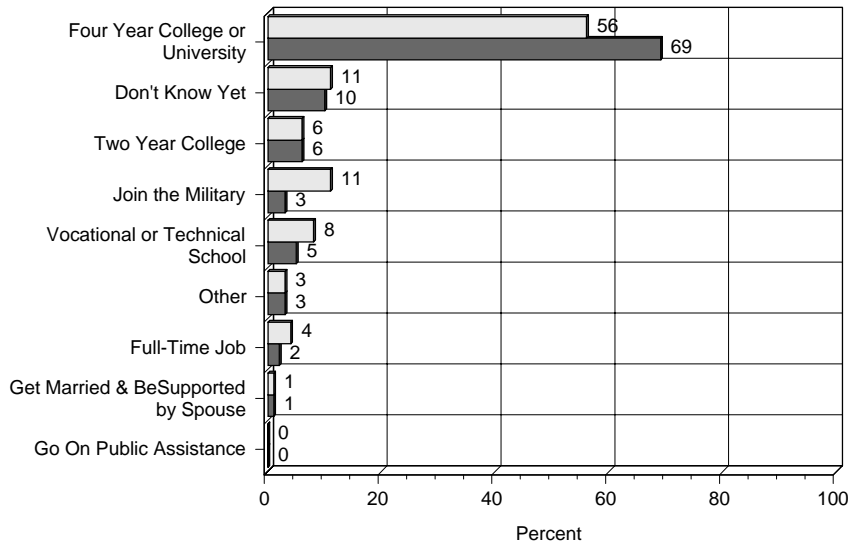
**Figure 9-16: Future Plans After High School
(Middle School Students, by Gender)**



□ Male ■ Female

Number Responding 707

**Figure 9-17: Future Plans After High School
(High School Students, by Gender)**



□ Male ■ Female

Number Responding 1222

Students were also asked how many classes they cut or missed without an approved excuse in the past month. Overall, about 1 in 4 students (26%) reported they had cut or missed classes in the past month. As Figure 9-18 shows, the rate for high school students is higher than the rate for middle school students (34% vs. 11%). Figure 9-19 shows the difference by gender. Overall, males have a slightly higher rate of cutting classes than females (28% vs. 24%).

Figure 9-18: Classes Teens Cut or Missed Without an Approved Excuse
(In The Past Month, by School Level)

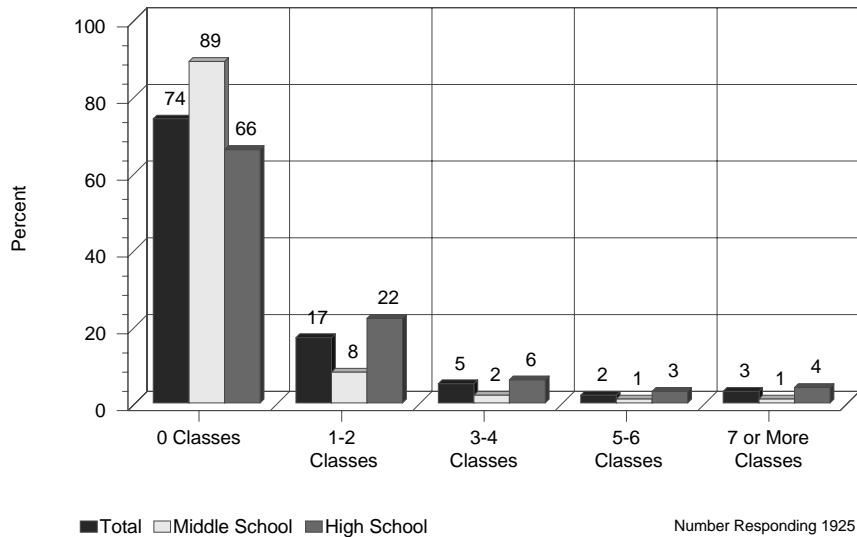
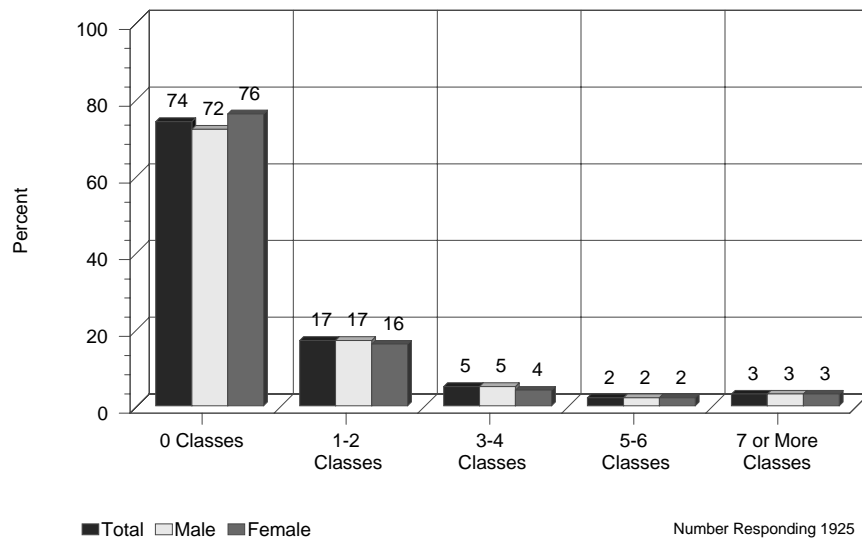


Figure 9-19: Classes Teens Cut or Missed Without an Approved Excuse
(In The Past Month, by Gender)



Local youth were also asked whether or not they had skipped school to help take care of someone in their family. Figure 9-20 shows that middle school students were no more likely to have done so than high school students (high school, 36%; middle school, 38%). Figure 9-21 indicates that slightly more females than males have skipped school in order to care for someone in their family (females, 38%; males, 35%).

Figure 9-20: Number of Times Teens Had to Skip School to Take Care of Family Member [By School Level]

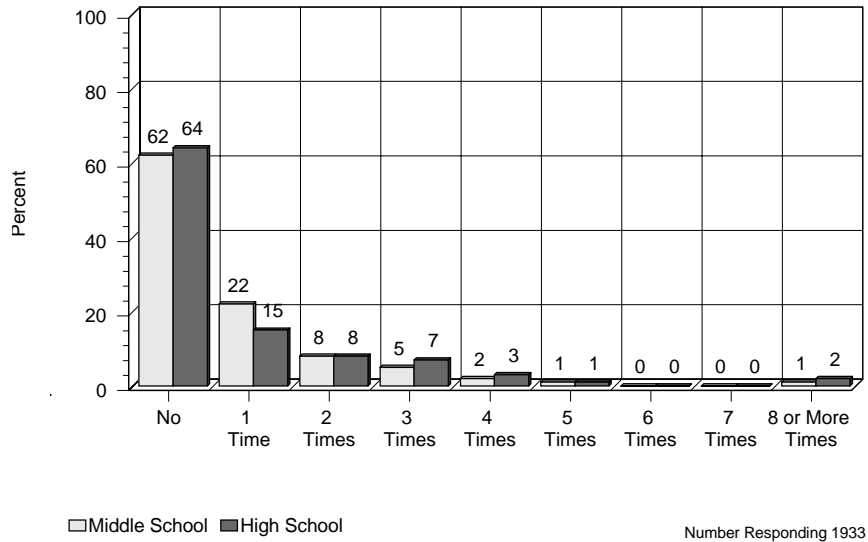
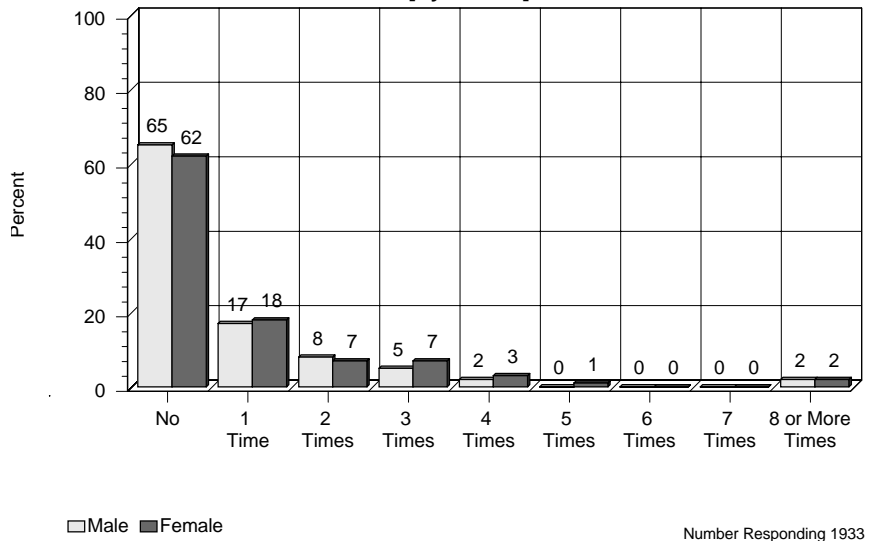


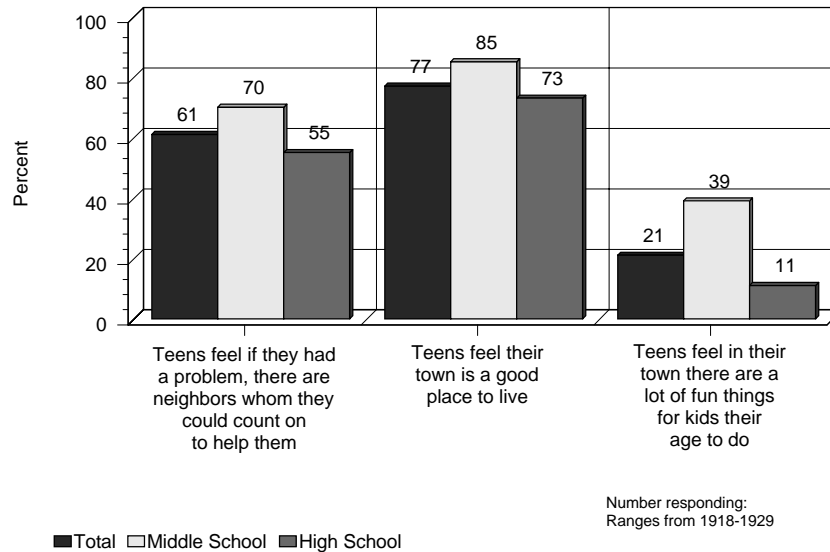
Figure 9-21: Number of Times Teens Had to Skip School to Take Care of Family Member [By Gender]



Perceptions of Community

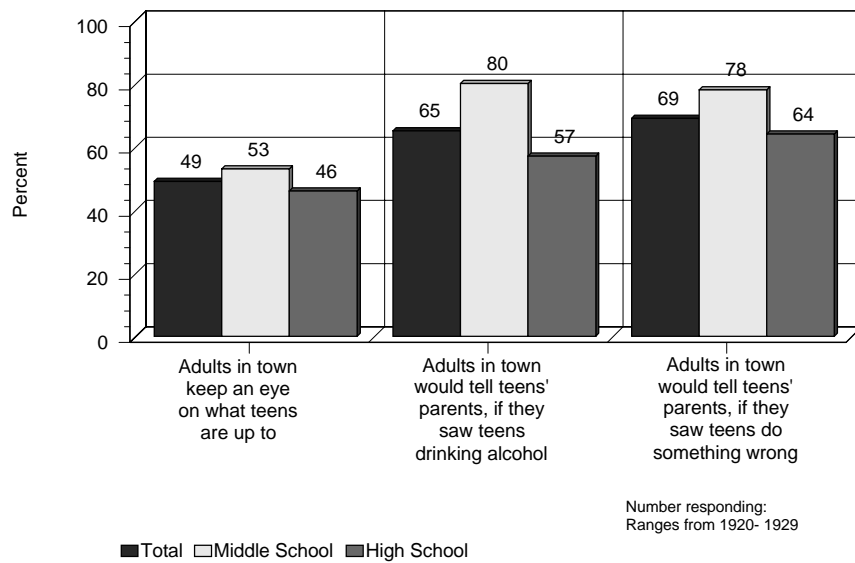
Neighborhood Support. Students told us they felt their community cared about them, and this is seen in Figure 9-22. Sixty-one percent (61%) reported there are neighbors they can count on if they are in trouble and need help. Although 77% felt their town is a good place to live, only 21% thought there are a lot of fun things for kids their age to do. More middle school students (39%) than high school students (11%) reported they felt there are fun things for kids their age to do.

Figure 9-22: Neighborhood Support
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by School Level)



Neighborhood Monitoring. As shown in figure 9-23, almost half of students surveyed (49%) "*strongly agree*" or "*agree*" the adults in their community keep an eye on what teens were up to (middle school, 53%; high school, 46%). Sixty-five percent (65%) said that adults in town would tell their parents if they saw teens drinking alcohol (middle school, 80%; high school, 57%) and 69% felt that if they were to do something wrong, adults in town would tell their parents (middle school, 78%; high school, 64%).

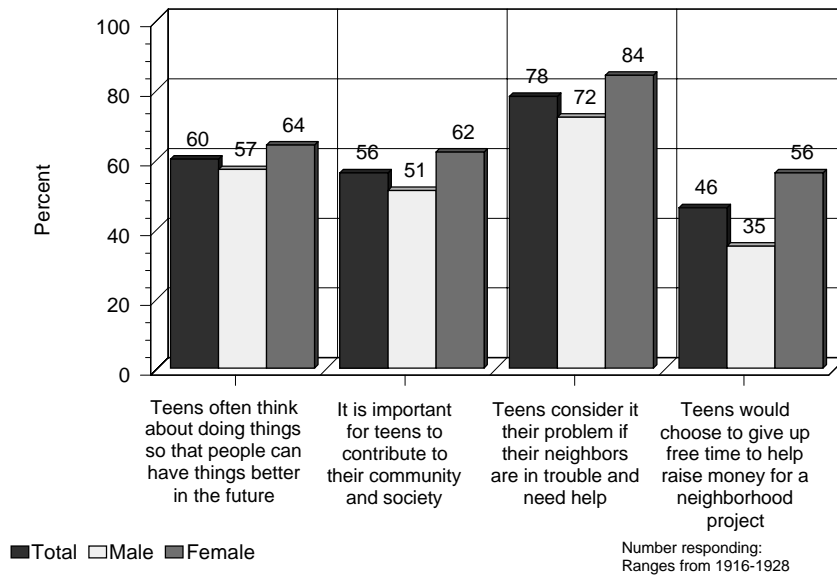
Figure 9-23: Neighborhood Monitoring
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by School Level)



Social Responsibility

Figure 9-24 shows many teens have a well-developed sense of social responsibility toward their community. Almost two-thirds (60%) reported they often think about doing things so that people "can have things better" in the future (males, 57%; females, 64%). Fifty-six percent (56%) said they feel it is important for teens to contribute to their community and society (males, 51%; females, 62%). Almost four out of five students (78%) said they consider it their problem if their neighbors are in trouble and need help (males, 72%; females, 84%). Forty-six percent (46%) would give up their own free time in order to help raise money for a neighborhood project (males, 35%; females, 56%).

Figure 9-24: Social Responsibility
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by Gender)

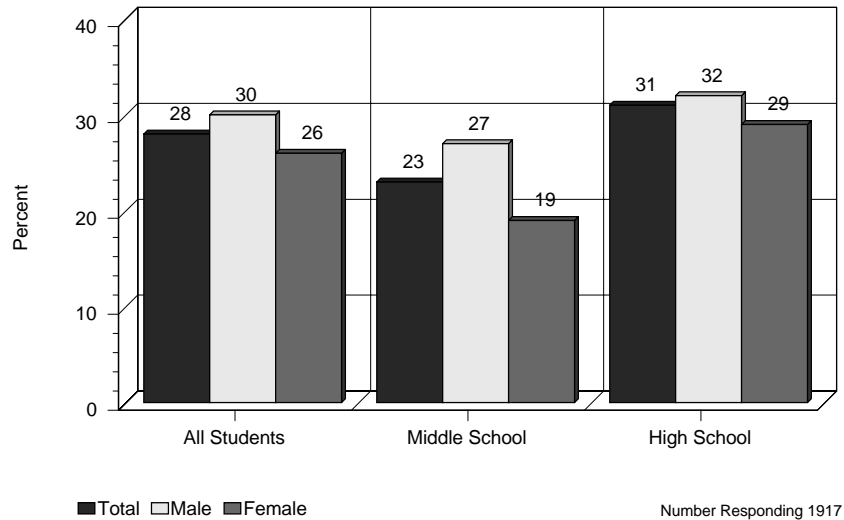


Racial, Ethnic and Sexual Slurs

We asked local youth to respond to the question *"In your school do students use racial, ethnic or sexual slurs to tease or harass other students?"* Overall, 28% of students responded *"always"* or *"a lot of the time."* Slightly more males than females reported they felt students harassed others in these ways (30% vs. 26%). More high school students than middle school students felt this way (31% vs. 23%). Figure 9-25 shows those who *"strongly agree"* or *"agree"* with this statement broken down by school level and gender.

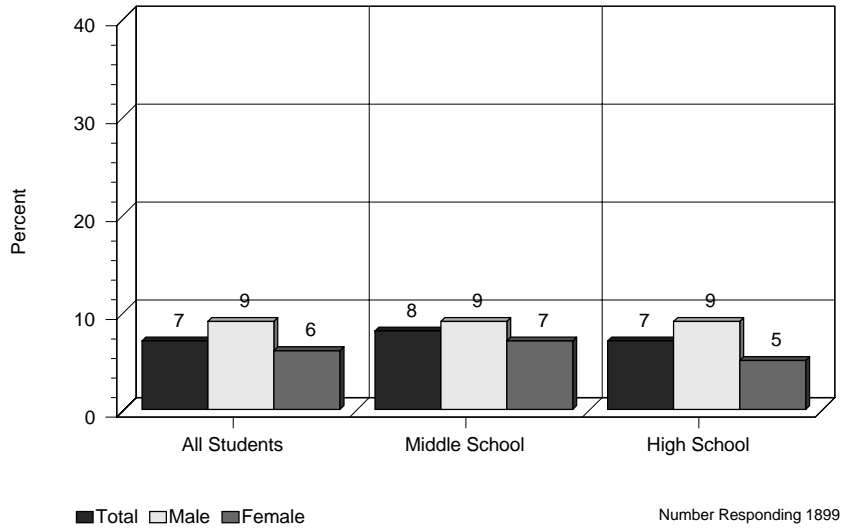
Figure 9-25: How Often Students Use Racial, Ethnic and Sexual Slurs to Tease or Harass Others

(Always or A Lot, by School Level and Gender)



We asked local teens if it was difficult to have friends who are of a different race than their own. Overall, only 7% responded they felt that it was. Differences between school levels and gender were negligible. Figure 9-26 shows the responses by school level and gender.

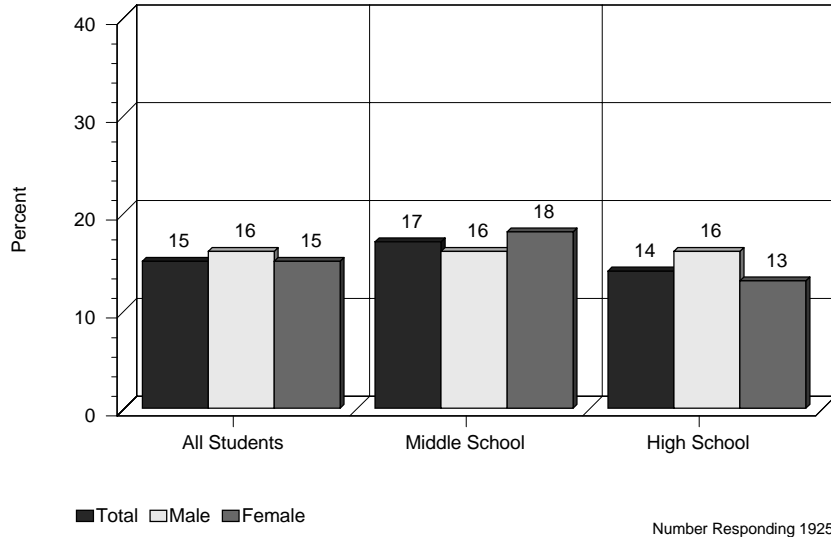
Figure 9-26: Teens Who Feel it is Difficult to Have Friends of a Different Race
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by School Level and Gender)



We asked local teens how often another student teased or embarrassed them. Of all youth surveyed, 56% responded "never" or "rarely" and only 15% reported "often" or "very often." Differences between school level and gender are slight. Figure 9-27 shows the responses by school level and gender.

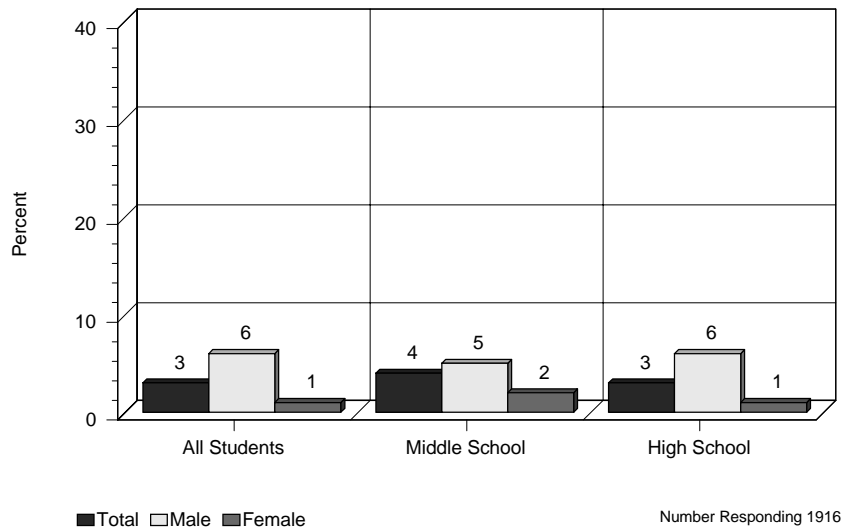
Figure 9-27: Teens Who Feel Teased or Harassed by Other Students

(Often or Very Often, by School Level and Gender)



We also asked local teens "How often have you been teased or harassed about being gay or lesbian?" Ninety-two percent (92%) responded "never" or "rarely" to this question, but 3% reported "often" or "very often." Differences between school level are slight, but males reported more teasing and harassment about being gay than females (males, 6%; females, 1%). Figure 9-28 shows the responses to this question by school level and gender.

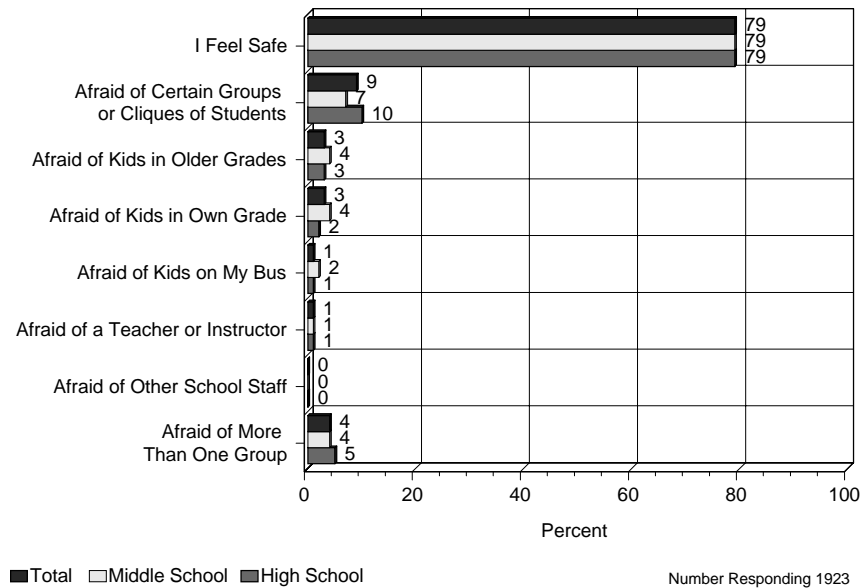
Figure 9-28: Teens Who Feel Teased or Harassed About Being Gay or Lesbian
(Often or Very Often, by School Level and Gender)



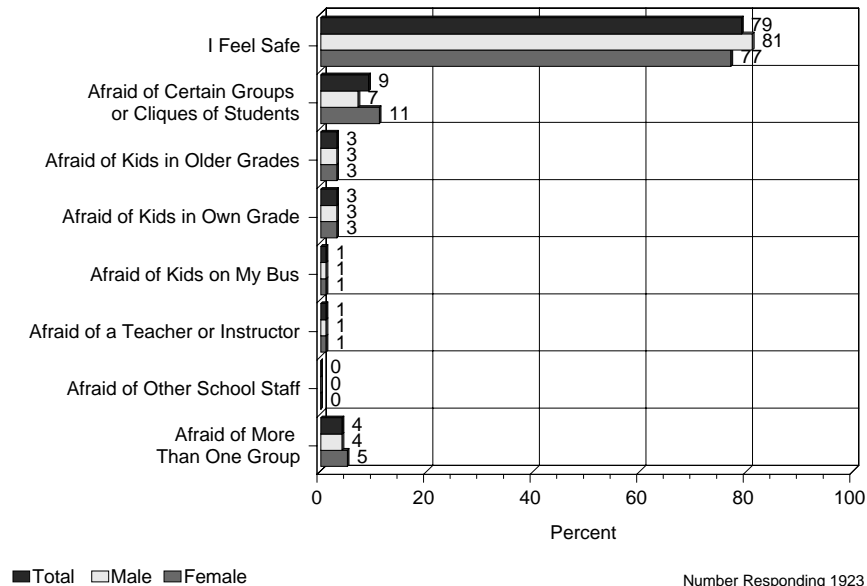
School Safety and Youth Violence

Recent school tragedies the past few years have raised concerns regarding youth violence and our children's safety at school. Although sometimes it may appear otherwise, the majority of our schools are safe and school crime has actually decreased in recent years (Annual Report on School Safety, 1998). Figure 9-29 shows the majority of youth surveyed (79%) report they feel safe in school. Figure 9-30 shows fewer females report feeling safe than do males (males, 81%; females, 77%).

**Figure 9-29: Perceived School Safety
(By School Level)**

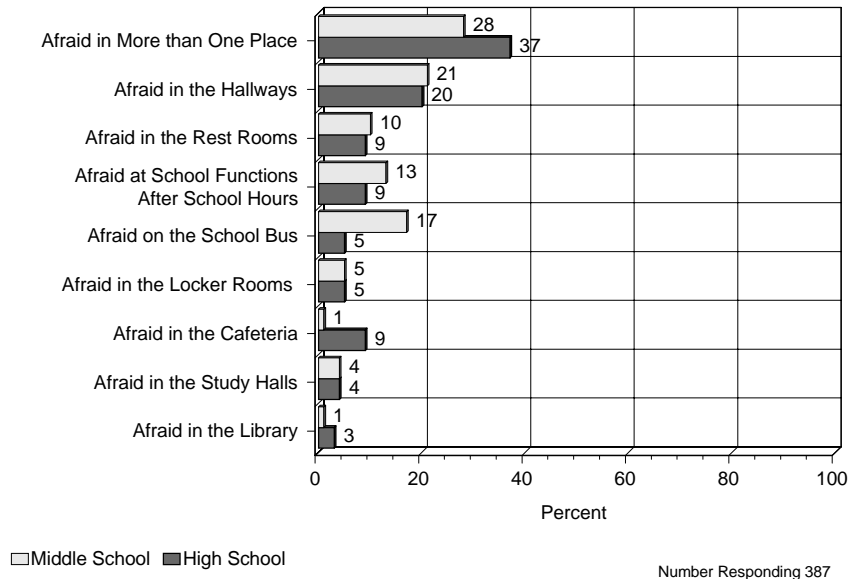


**Figure 9-30: Perceived School Safety
(By Gender)**



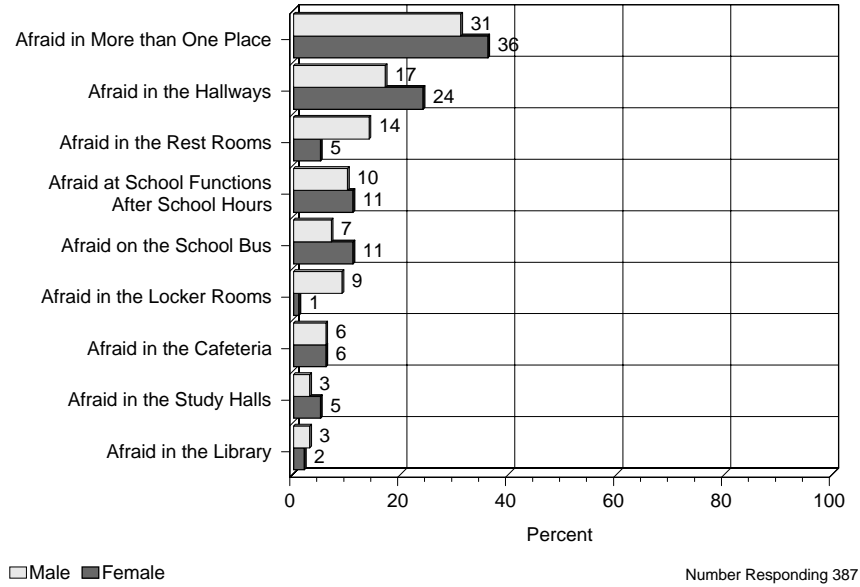
We asked students "Where at school do you feel unsafe?" Of all students surveyed, 21% reported they feel unsafe in at least one place at school. Of those who reported they feel afraid, 34% feel afraid in more than one place (middle school, 28%; high school, 37%; males, 31%; females, 36%). Figure 9-31 shows more middle school students than high school students are afraid at school functions after school hours and on the bus. More high school students than middle school students are afraid in the cafeteria.

Figure 9-31: Where at School Teens Feel Unsafe
(Of Those Who Feel Unsafe, by School Level)



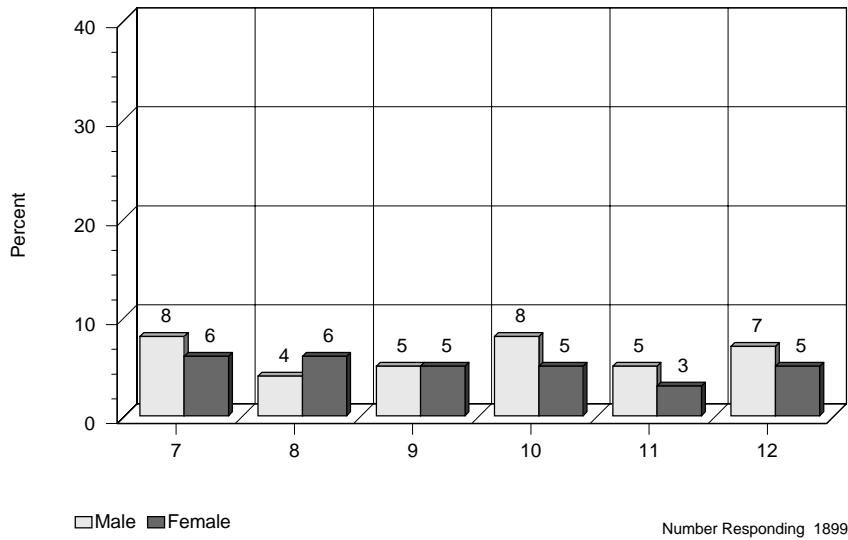
More females (24%) than males (17%) reported feeling afraid in the hallways; more males than females reported feeling afraid in the rest rooms and in the locker rooms. Figure 9-32 shows all responses of those who reported they feel afraid in at least one place at school by gender.

**Figure 9-32: Where at School Teens Feel Unsafe
(Of Those Who Feel Unsafe, by Gender)**



We also asked local youth how many days in the past month they did not go to school because they felt unsafe. Six percent (6%) answered they missed school on one or more days in the past month because they felt unsafe (middle school, 6%; high school, 5%; males, 6%; females, 5%). Figure 9-33 shows the breakdown by grade and gender.

Figure 9-33: 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 how they usually tried to solve a problem if they were angry with someone or disagreed with them. The majority of students (55%) would try to solve the problem by talking and trying to work it out, either alone or with the aid of a neutral friend or an adult. Figure 9-34 shows more middle school students (18%) than high school students (12%) would try to solve the problem by violent means (hitting or beating the person up, or having friends or relatives beat someone up).

Figure 9-34: How Teens Handle Anger and Disagreements (By School Level)

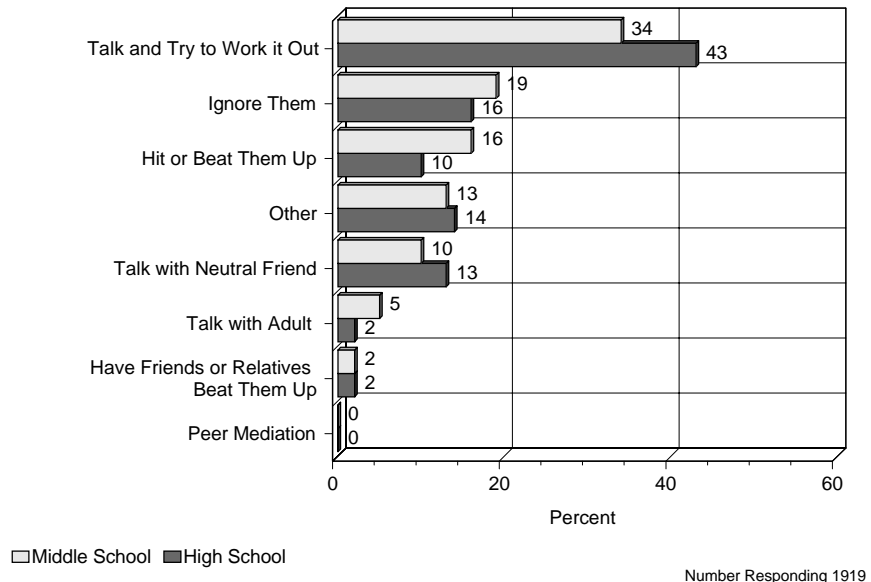
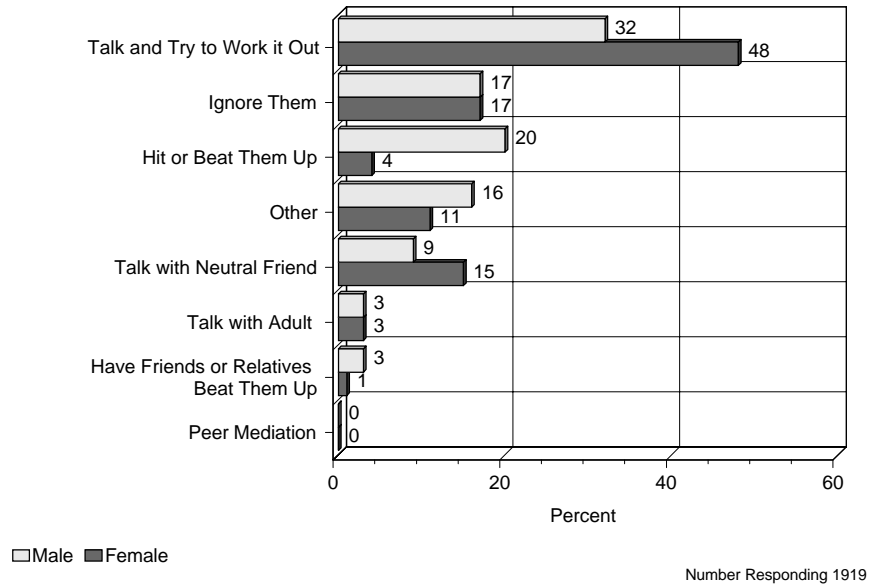


Figure 9-35 shows more males than females would use physical force to try to solve a problem when they are angry with someone or disagree with them (males, 23%; females, 5%).

**Figure 9-35: How Teens Handle Anger and Disagreements
(By Gender)**



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, 9% 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. Figure 9-36 shows there was no difference between school levels on this question.

Figure 9-36: Days Teens Carried Weapons On to School Property
(In the Past Month, by School Level)

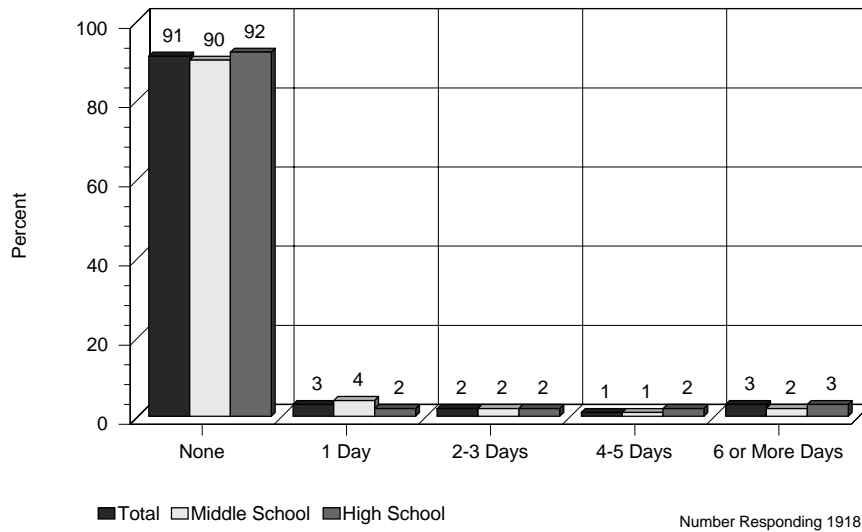
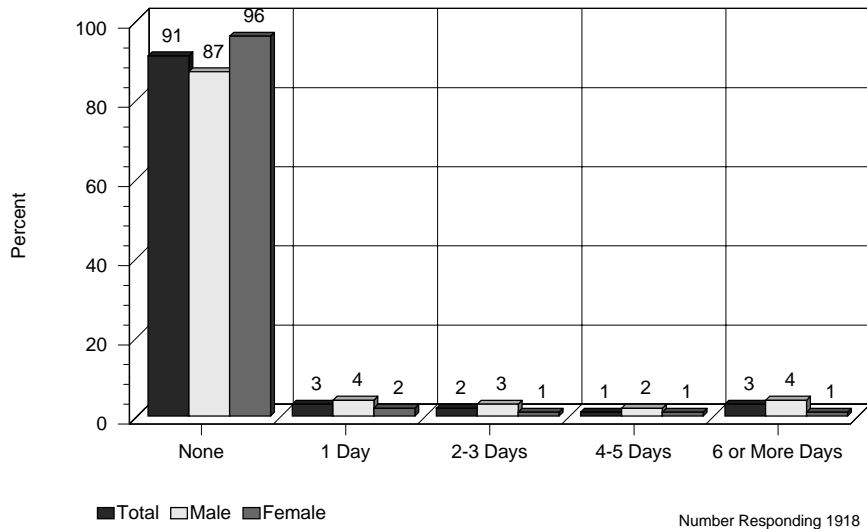


Figure 9-37 shows the days teens carried weapons onto school property by gender. While 13% of the males carried a weapon onto school property at some time in the past month, only 4% of females did so.

Figure 9-37: Days Teens Carried Weapons On to School Property (In the Past Month, by Gender)



Nationally, 8.5% (N.H., 7.4%) of 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.