



Teen Assessment Project Executive Summary For the Community of Merrimack

Concerns about local youth issues prompted the community of Merrimack to adopt the University of New Hampshire Teen Assessment Project (TAP) survey for use with youth in the Merrimack 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 worries, concerns, and future aspirations; and their activities, both positive and problematic. The survey was administered to 7th through 12th grade students in the Merrimack School District in January of 2000. A total of 1,940 surveys were used for data analysis. This represents approximately 86% of the total student population in the Merrimack 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 (68%). Other reported living situations include living with a single parent (12%), and living with a blended family or step-family (17%).

The majority of youth reported that each of their parents have a high school diploma, Bachelor's Degree, or higher (fathers, 81% and mothers, 85%). Twenty percent (20%) of fathers and 25% of mothers have a high school diploma. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of fathers and 36% of mothers have a Bachelor's Degree or higher. Only 3% of all fathers and 2% 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 that many local youth use alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

- Fifty-five percent (55%) of all youth have used alcohol at some time (middle school, 36% and high school, 66%). Thirty percent (30%) of all youth reported using alcohol once a month or more often (middle school, 16%; high school, 39%) and 12% reported using it weekly or more often (middle school, 7% and high school, 14%).
- Twenty-two percent (22%) of all middle school youth and 40% of all high school youth reported binge drinking ("*5 or more alcoholic drinks in a row*") at least once in the past month with 52% of all seniors reporting binge drinking in the last month.
- Forty percent (40%) of all youth have smoked tobacco at some time (middle school, 29% and high school, 47%). Nineteen percent (19%) reported smoking monthly or more often (middle school, 11%; high school, 23%) and 12% reported weekly or more often use (middle school, 6% and high school, 16%). Weekly smoking habits increase with each grade level and peak in the 12th grade for both genders.
- Twenty-nine percent (29%) of all youth have used marijuana at some time (middle school, 15% and high school, 35%). Thirteen percent (13%) reported monthly or more often use of marijuana (middle school, 7%; high school, 17%), and 7% reported weekly or more often use (middle school, 4% and high school, 9%).
- Seventy percent (70%) of all youth believe it is either "*easy*" or "*very easy*" to get beer/wine/liquor. Forty-three percent (43%) believe it is "*easy*" or "*very easy*" to get marijuana.
- Nine percent (9%) of all youth have used inhalants at some time (middle school, 11% and high school, 8%). One percent (1%) of all youth have used inhalants monthly or more often (middle school, 2% and high school, 1%). Sixteen percent (16%) of local youth feel that using inhalants carries "*no*" or "*slight risk*" (middle school, 22% and high school, 13%).

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, 27% of all youth reported they have had sexual intercourse (middle school, 16% and high school, 34%). Fifty-three percent (53%) of 12th graders have had sexual intercourse. Only 48% of sexually active teens always use some form of birth control (middle school, 47%; high school, 48%).

A high percentage of local teens do not talk with their parents about sexuality issues. Within the past year, 56% either "*never*" or "*rarely*" talked to their mothers and 72% "*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 73% who either "*never*" or "*rarely*" talked to their mothers and 85% 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, 3% and females, 8%). One percent (1%) reported current sexual abuse by an adult and 5% reported previous sexual abuse.

Emotional Health Issues

Overall, 72% of all local teens reported feeling depressed or sad at some time during the past month (81% for females and 62% for males). Twenty-three percent (23%) of local youth reported having serious thoughts of suicide during the past month (18% for males and 28% for females). Twenty-four percent (24%) of local youth had made plans at some time to kill themselves (17% for males and 30% for females) and 15% reported they had actually attempted suicide at some time in the past (11% for males and 19% for females).

Worries of local youth, listed from greatest to least are: getting good grades at school (64%); how they look (51%); being accepted into college (45%); getting along with parents at home (41%); how well their parents get along with each other (35%); that a friend is considering suicide (32%); not fitting in with the other kids at school (28%); and that they might get pregnant or get someone else pregnant (21%). Other concerns include being picked on or hurt by another teen (12%); being pressured into having sex (7%); that their parents drink too much or use drugs (7%); and whether they are "straight" or "gay" (4%).

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.

Forty-two percent (42%) of all teens reported they worried either "*very much*" or "*quite a bit*" about getting along with their parents at home (middle school, 43%; high school, 40%). A high percentage of teens felt their parents either "*often*" or "*very often*" cared about them; 90% felt

this way about their mothers and 83% for their fathers. Sixty percent (60%) 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) watching TV (56%). The other activities that occupy 5 or more hours per week for local youth include staying at home alone with no adults present (50%); doing homework or studying (45%), in participating extra-curricular school sports or activities (36%); working for pay (35%); and engaging in non-school activities (22%).

Perceptions of School and Community

Sixty percent (60%) of local youth felt they were getting a good, high quality education, 52% indicated they enjoyed going to school, and another 52% felt school rules were enforced fairly.

Sixty percent (60%) of the youth often think about doing things so that people can have things better in the future, 56% 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 46% of teens would choose to give up their free time to help raise money for a neighborhood project. Seventy-seven percent (77%) feel their community is a good place to live, but only 21% feel there are a lot of fun things in town for kids their age to do.

Six percent (6%) of students have missed school at least once in the past month because they felt unsafe. Nine percent (9%) of students have carried a weapon onto school property in the past month. Well over half of the students plan to continue their education after graduating from high school, but 5% of students indicated plans to drop out of school before graduating.

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.