
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."

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 Taveré, 1987; Mensch and Kandel, 1988).

Perceptions of School

We asked local students to respond to the statement "*I enjoy going to school.*" Forty-five percent (45%) of all local youth '*agreed*' or '*strongly agreed*' they enjoyed going to school. Overall, females reported more agreement with the statement than males (females, 51%; males, 38%). With regard to school level, middle school students reported they enjoyed school more than high school students (middle school, 49%; high school, 42%).

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

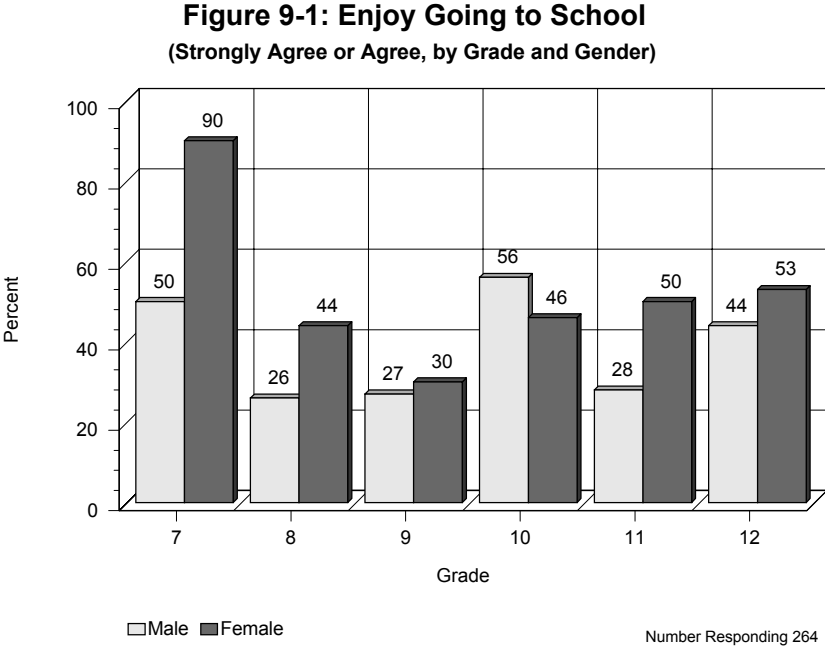
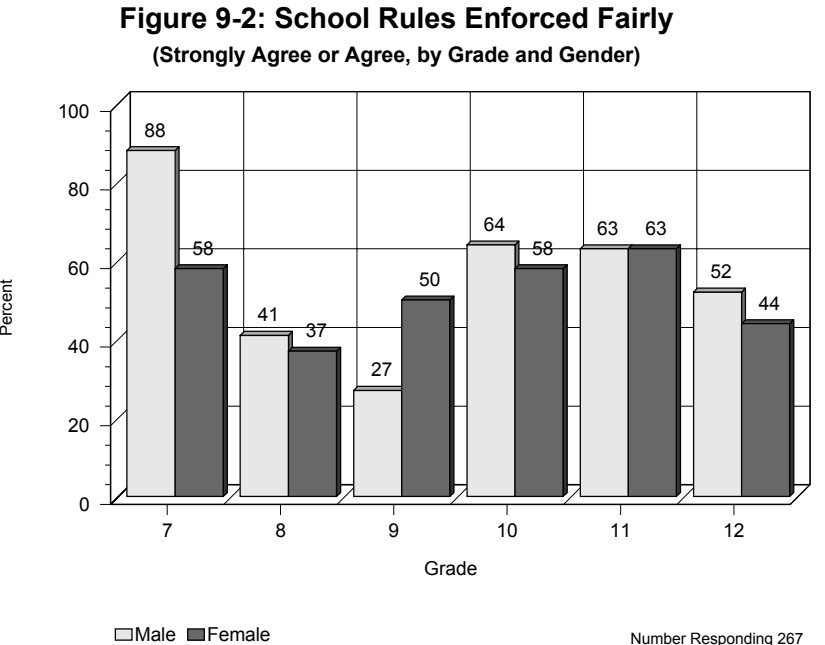
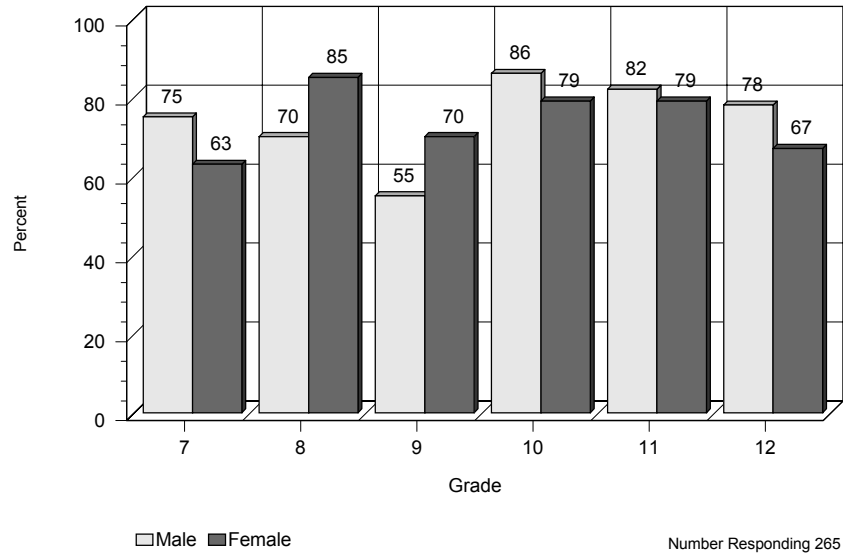


Figure 9-2 displays the percentage of students by grade and gender who "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement "The rules in my school are enforced fairly." Overall, 53% of students reported they felt the rules were enforced fairly. Middle school students (52%) and high school students (53%) were equally likely to feel this way.



Students were also asked whether or not they felt they were getting a "good, high quality education at their school." Seventy-five percent (75%) of students "agree" or "strongly agree" with that statement (middle school, 74%; high school, 75%; males, 74%; females, 75%). For both males and females, the level of agreement is only slightly different for middle school than high school (middle school males, 72%; high school males, 76%; middle school females 76%; high school females, 74%). 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)



We asked teens what adult in school they felt most comfortable talking to. More students (26%) chose their teachers than any other person as their response. About half of those surveyed (49%) responded, "No adult at school" to this question. Figure 9-4 shows the responses by school level.

Figure 9-4: Adult in School Teens Feel Most Comfortable Talking To (By School Level)

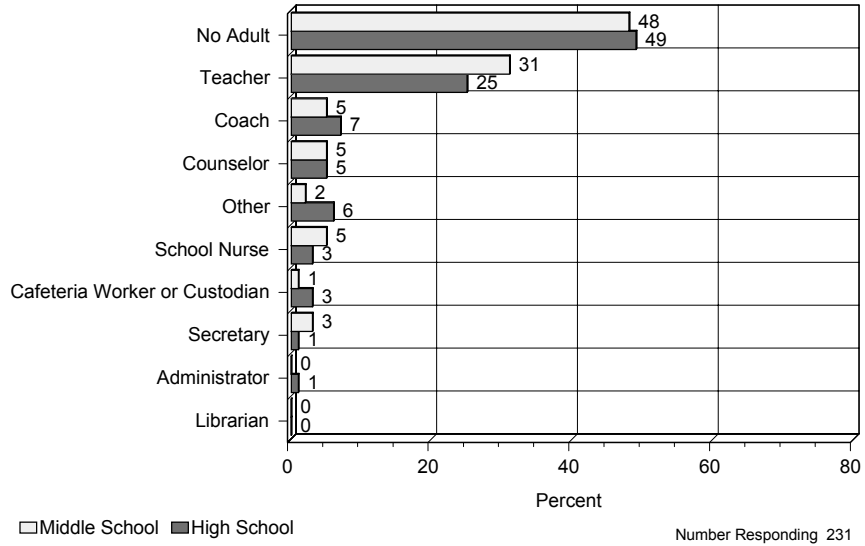
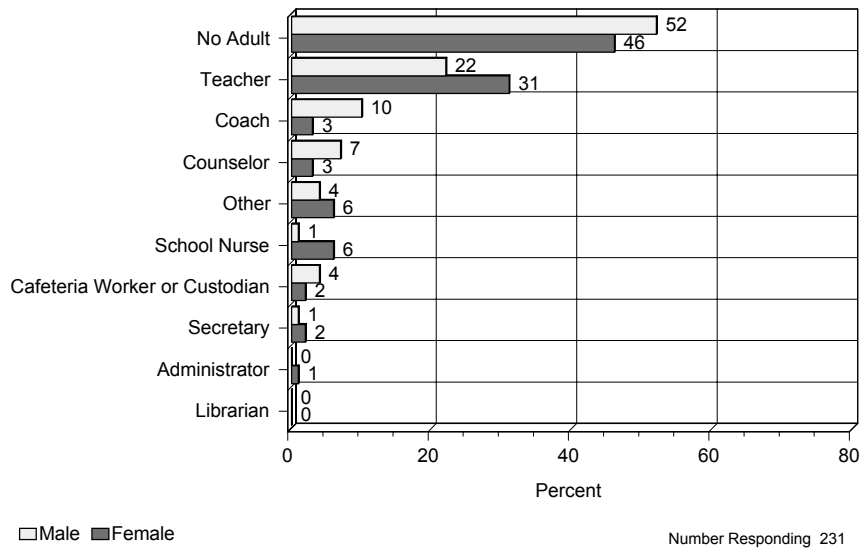


Figure 9-5 shows more females than males consider a teacher to be someone in school they feel most comfortable talking to (females, 31%; males, 22%). More males (10%) than females (3%) responded "Coach."

Figure 9-5: Adult in School Teens Feel Most Comfortable Talking To
(By Gender)



Teacher Expectations. Figure 9-6 and 9-7 show teens' perceptions of their teacher's expectations. The majority of students (58%) believe their teachers encourage them to do and be the best they can. More females feel this way than males.

Figure 9-6: Perceptions of Teacher Expectations (By School Level)

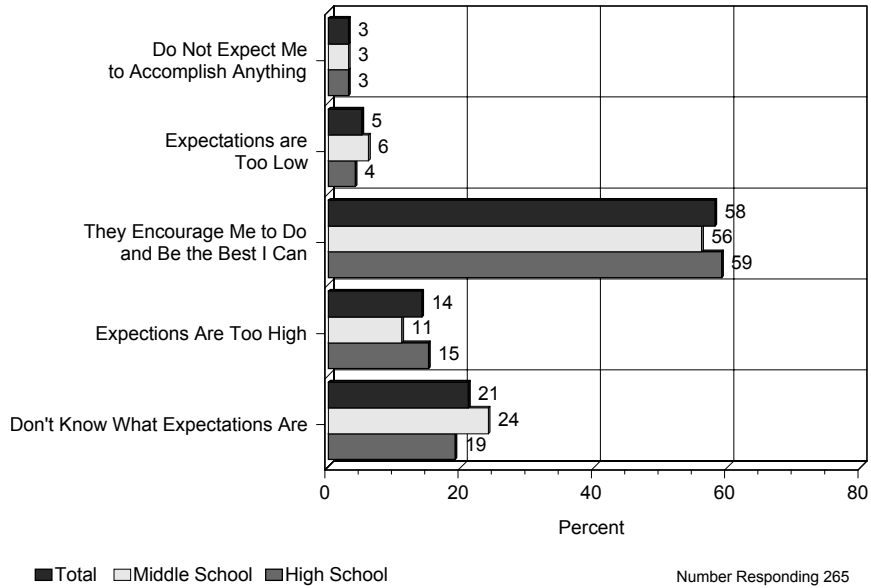
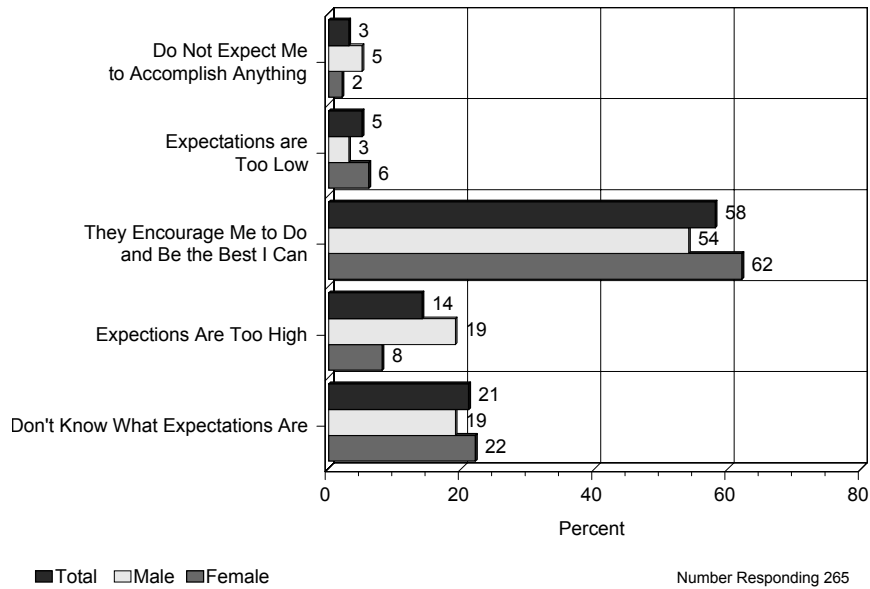
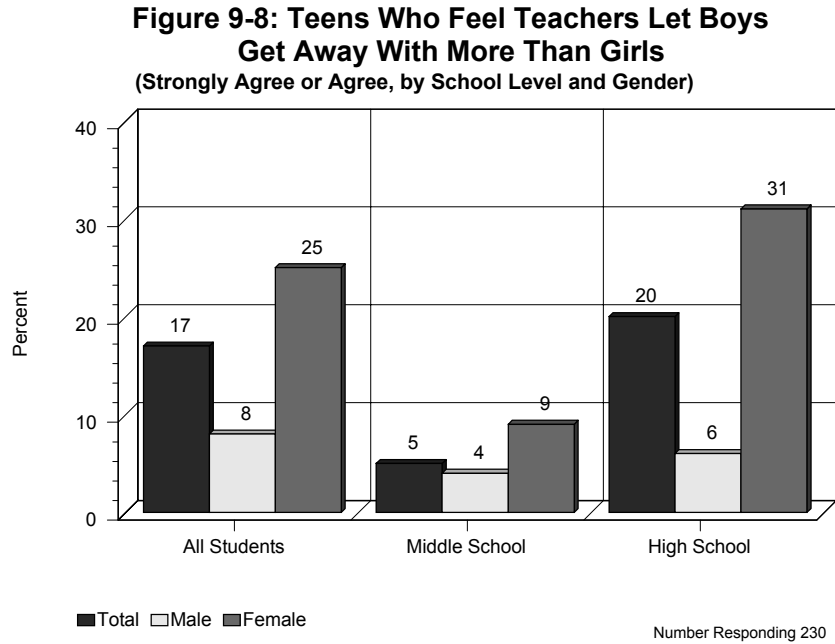


Figure 9-7: Perceptions of Teacher Expectations (By Gender)

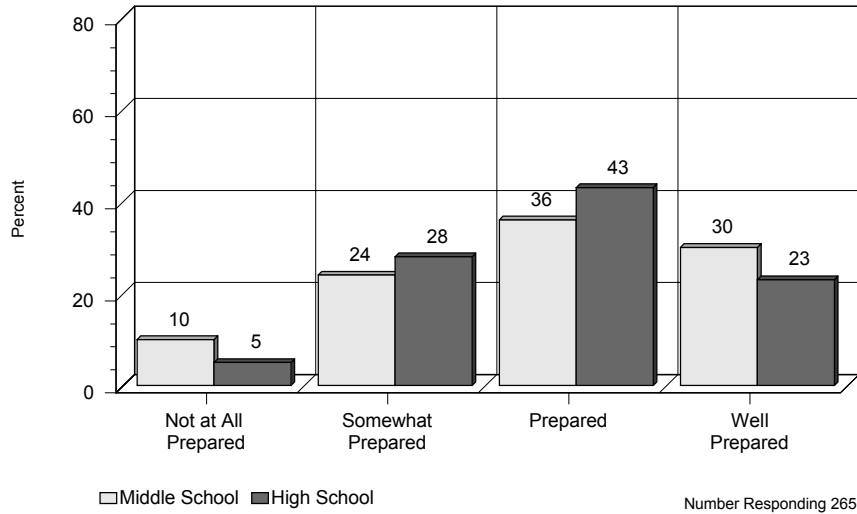


Local teens were asked if they felt teachers let boys get away with more than girls. One out of six students (17%) strongly agree or agreed with this statement. Over three times as many females (25%) than males (8%) strongly agree or agreed. Figure 9-8 shows the responses by school level and gender.



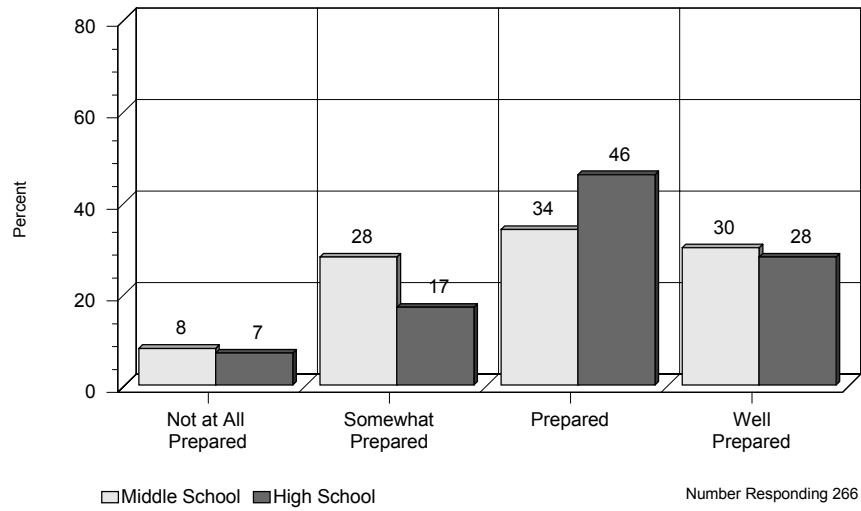
Preparation. Students were asked when they first started attending their present school, how prepared they felt in handling the classwork and homework, the new building and scheduling format, and the social changes. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of students felt that they were “*prepared*” or “*well-prepared*” to handle the classwork and homework when they started school. Figure 9-9 shows the responses broken down by school level.

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



Seventy-one percent (71%) of students felt prepared or well prepared to handle the social changes when they started attending their present school. Figure 9-10 reports the breakdown of data by school level.

Figure 9-10: How Prepared Teens Were to Handle Social Changes When They First Started Attending Their Present School (By School Level)



We asked local teens if they felt their school could be doing more to prepare them for the future. Over half (59%) of the students responded “yes”. Figure 9-11 shows the responses to this question by school level and Figure 9-12 show the responses by gender.

Figure 9-11: Teens Who Feel Their School Could Do More To Prepare Them (By School Level)

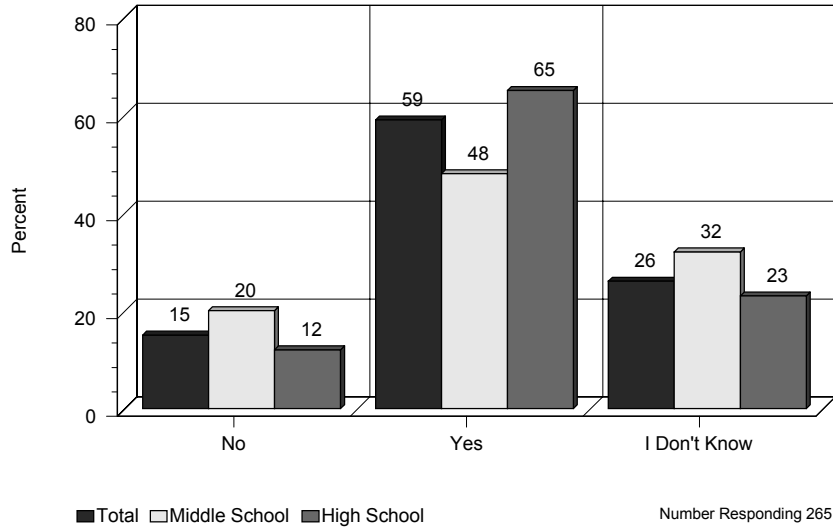
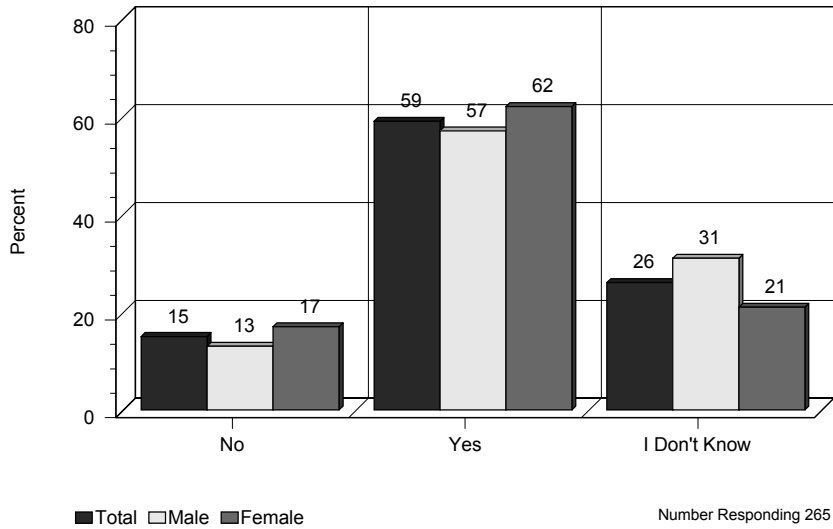


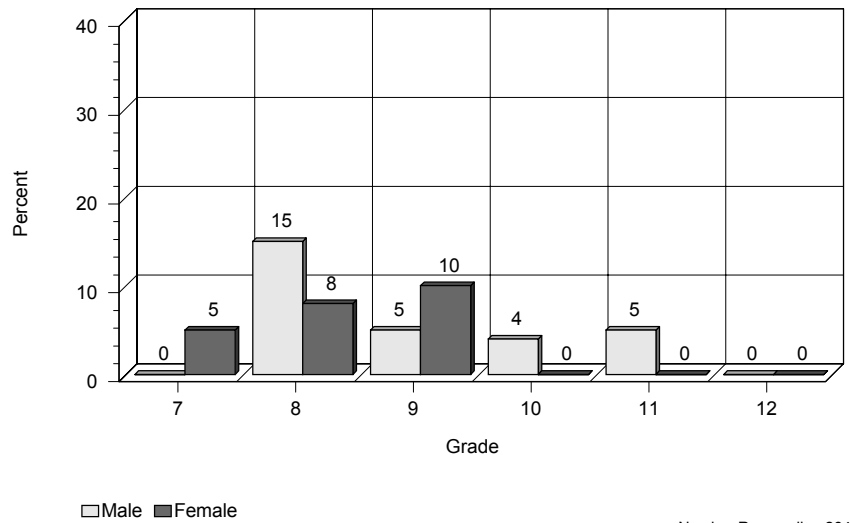
Figure 9-12: Teens Who Feel Their School Could Do More to Prepare Them (By Gender)



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, 8%; high school, 3%; males, 5%; females, 4%). Of course, those high school students who have already dropped out are not reflected in these percentages. Figure 9-13 shows those who "strongly agree" or "agree" they will drop out before they complete high school by grade and gender.

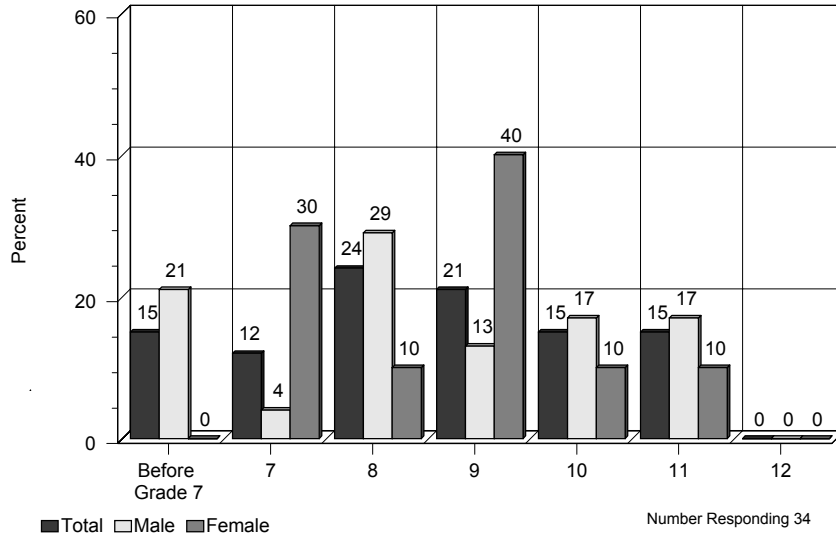
Figure 9-13: Teens Who Feel They Will Drop Out Before They Complete High School
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by Grade and Gender)



We also asked youth when they first felt like dropping out (if they ever seriously considered dropping out). Figure 9-14 shows this information broken down by gender.

Figure 9-14: At What Grade Teens First Considered Dropping Out

(Of Those Who Considered Dropping Out, by Gender)



Local teens were asked, “If you have seriously considered dropping out of school, who have you talked this over with?” The majority (52%) of youth did discuss this issue with someone. More females than males talked it over with someone (63% vs. 46%) and more high school students did so than middle school students (60% vs. 20%). Figure 9-14 shows this information by school level and 9-15 shows this information by gender.

Figure 9-15: Who Teens Talked to About Dropping Out
(Of Those Who Considered Dropping Out, by School Level)

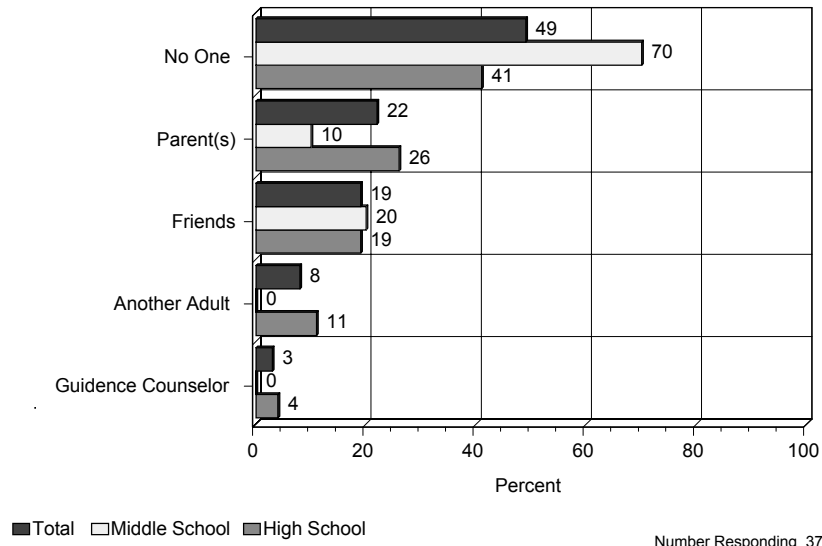


Figure 9-16: Who Teens Talked to About Dropping Out
(Of Those Who Considered Dropping Out, by Gender)

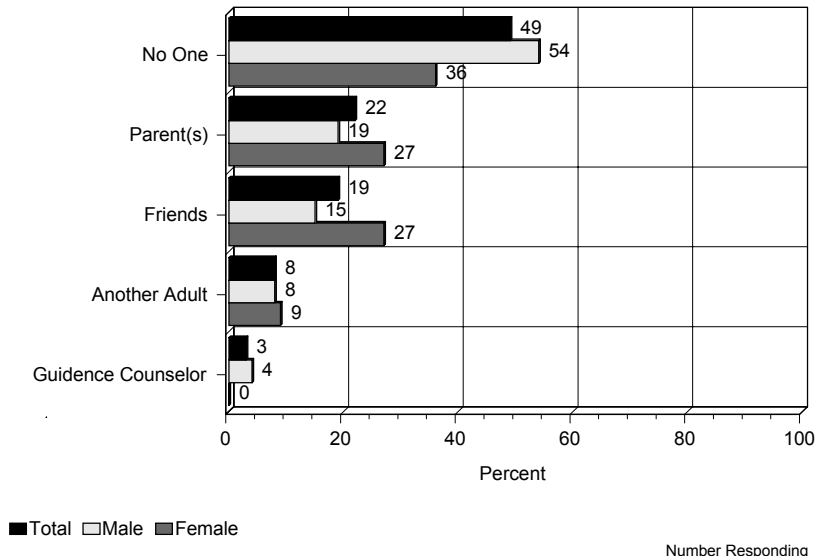


Figure 9-17 shows the future plans middle school students have for after high school graduation. Figure 9-18 shows the same plans for high school students. "Go to a 4-year college or university" was by far the most common response by both males and females at both school levels.

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

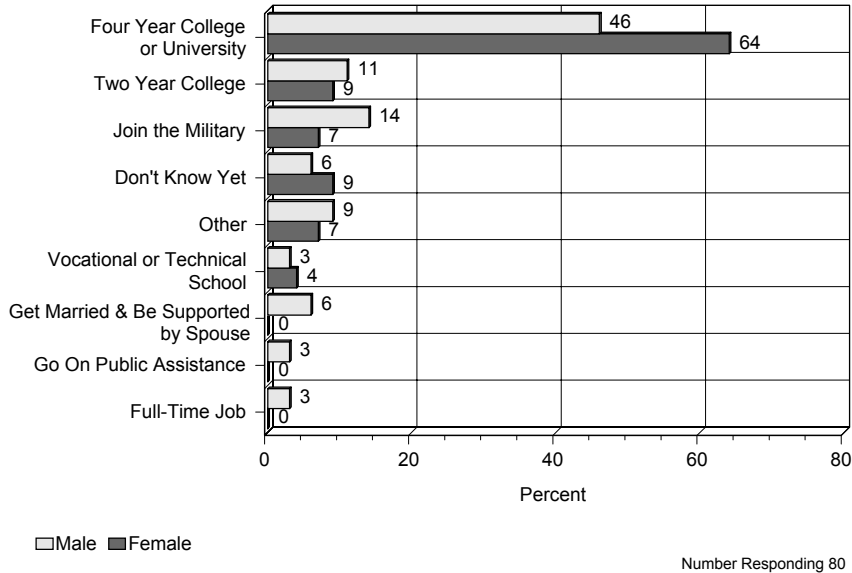
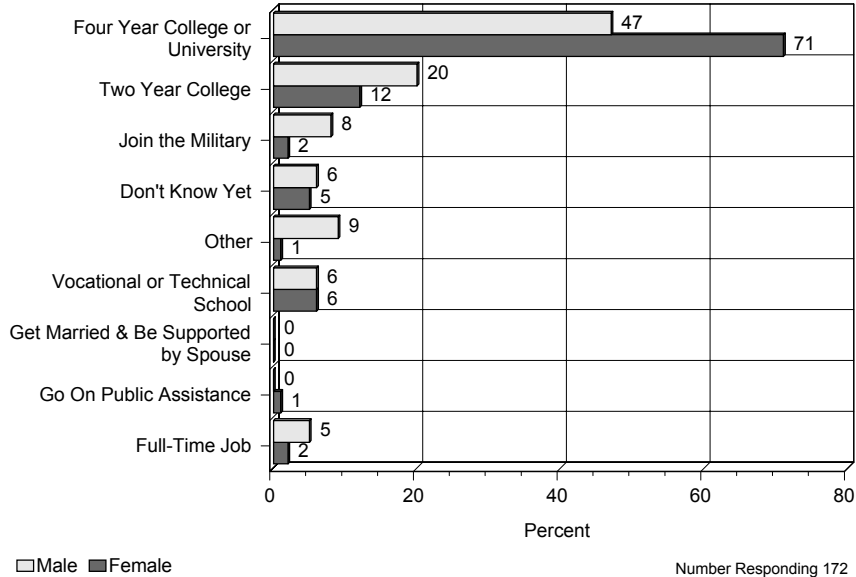


Figure 9-18: Future Plans After High School
(High School Students, by Gender)



Peer Relations. We asked teens to respond to the statement “*I trust my friends.*” Of all youth surveyed 68% responded “*always true*” or “*usually true*” to this statement and only 7% reported “*never true*” or “*almost never true*”. Figure 9-19 shows all responses broken down by school level.

**Figure 9-19: Teens Who Trust Their Friends
(By School Level)**

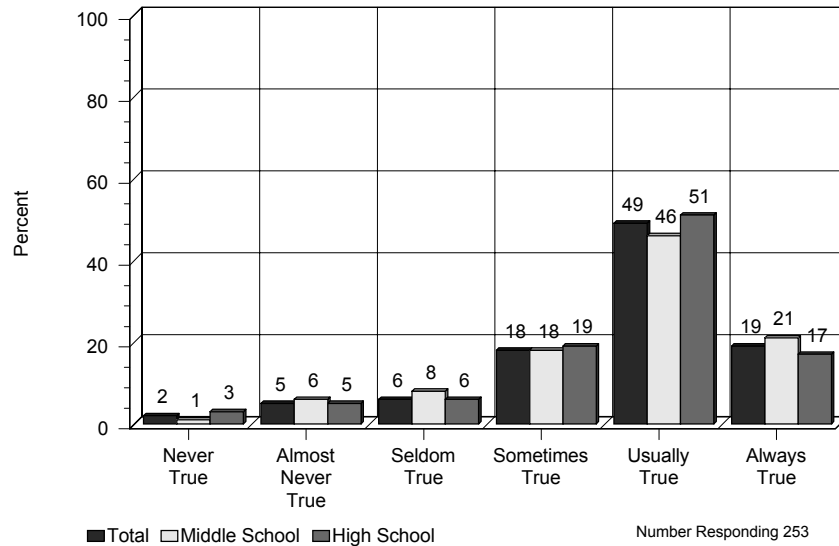
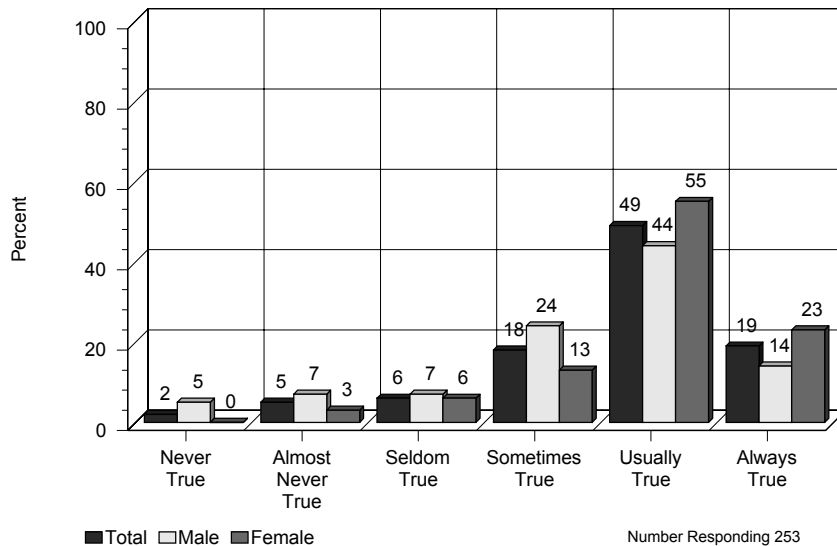


Figure 9-20 shows responses to this statement by gender.

**Figure 9-20: Teens Who Trust Their Friends
(By Gender)**



We also asked teens to respond to the statement “*My friends care about me.*” Of all youth surveyed 67% responded “*always true*” or “*usually true*” to this statement and only 7% reported “*never true*” or “*almost never true*”. Figure 9-21 shows all responses broken down by school level.

Figure 9-21: Teens Who Have Friends That Care About Them (By School Level)

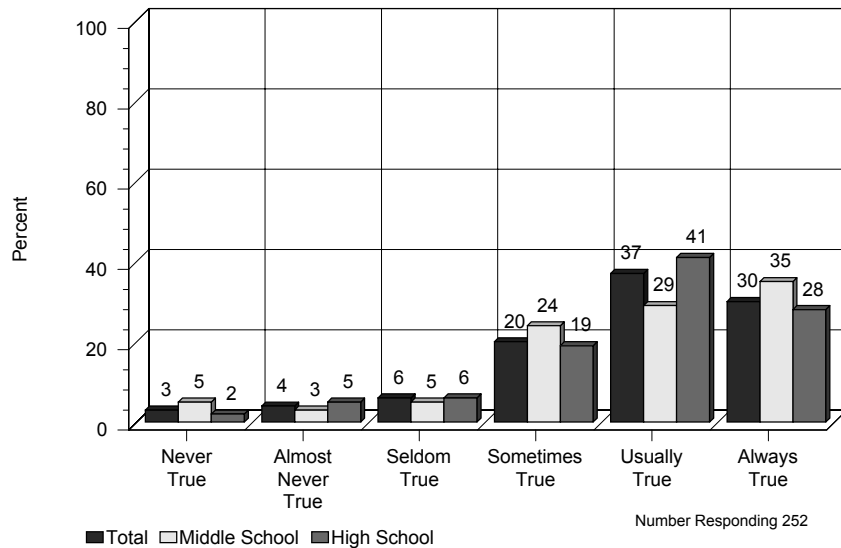
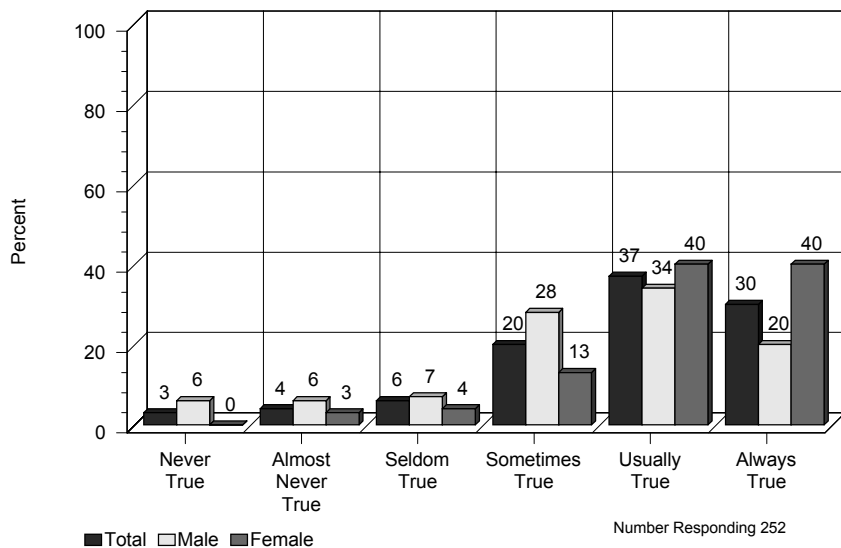


Figure 9-22 shows responses to this statement by gender.

Figure 9-22: Teens Who Have Friends That Care About Them (By Gender)



Finally teens were asked to respond to the statement “*My friends are there when I need them.*” Of all youth surveyed 66% responded “*always true*” or “*usually true*” to this statement and only 7% reported “*never true*” or “*almost never true*”. Figure 9-23 shows all responses broken down by school level.

Figure 9-23: Teens Who Feel Friends Are There For Them (By School Level)

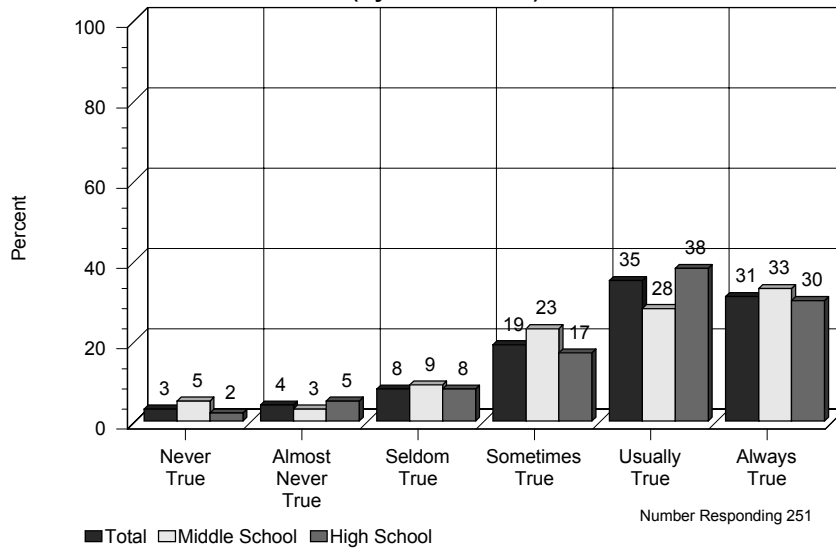
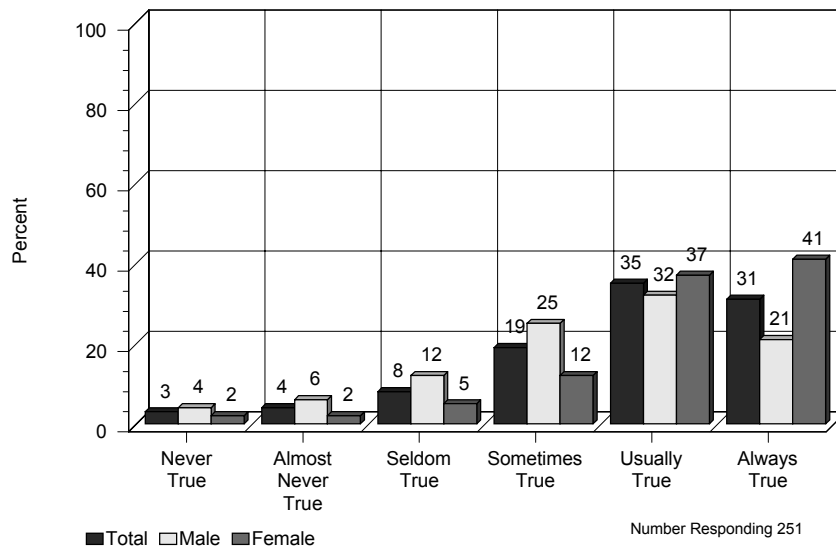


Figure 9-24 shows responses to this statement by gender.

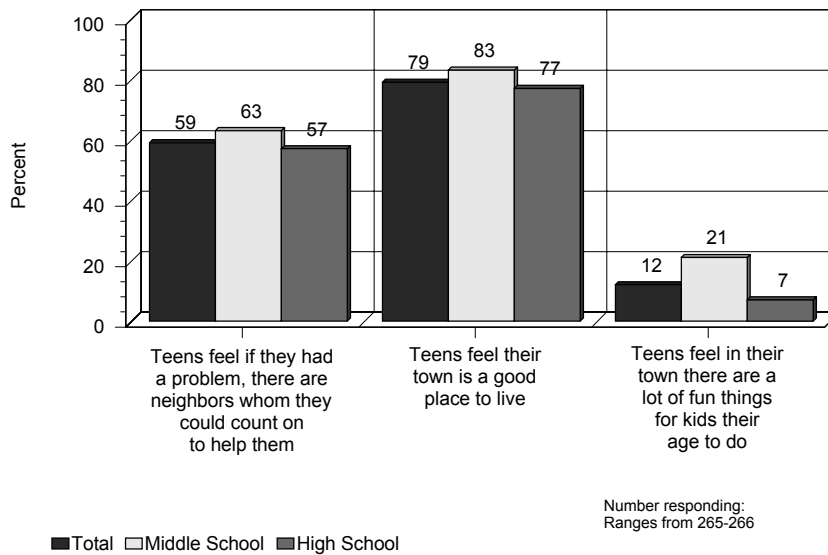
Figure 9-24: Teens Who Feel Friends Are There For Them (By Gender)



Perceptions of Community

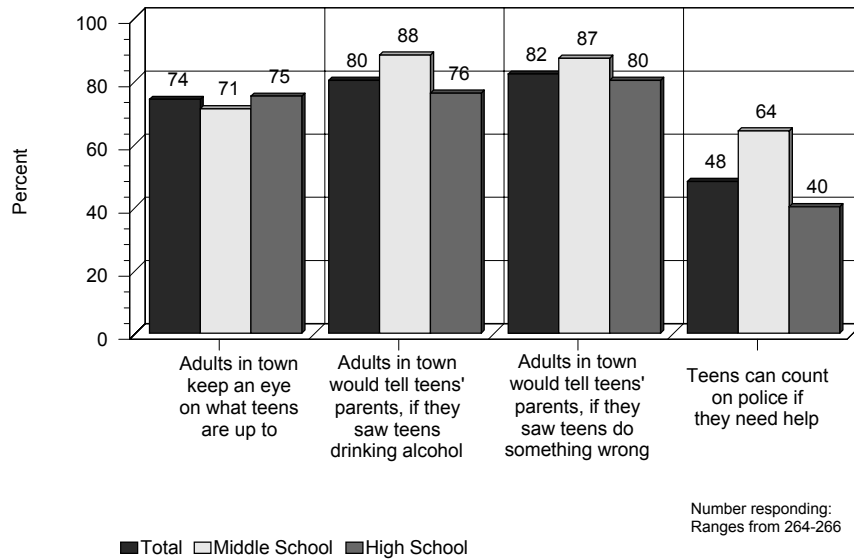
Neighborhood Support. Students told us they felt their community cared about them, and this is seen in Figure 9-25. Fifty-nine percent (59%) reported there are neighbors they can count on if they are in trouble and need help. Although 79% felt their town is a good place to live, only 12% thought there are a lot of fun things for kids their age to do. More middle school students (21%) than high school students (7%) reported they felt there are fun things for kids their age to do.

Figure 9-25: Neighborhood Support
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by School Level)



Neighborhood Monitoring. As shown in Figure 9-26, over half of students surveyed (74%) "strongly agree" or "agree" the adults in their community keep an eye on what teens are up to (middle school, 71%; high school, 75%). Eighty percent (80%) said that adults in town would tell their parents if they saw teens drinking alcohol (middle school, 88%; high school, 76%) and 82% felt that if they were to do something wrong, adults in town would tell their parents (middle school, 87%; high school, 80%). Furthermore, 48% of teens believed they could count on police if they needed help (middle school, 64%; high school, 40%).

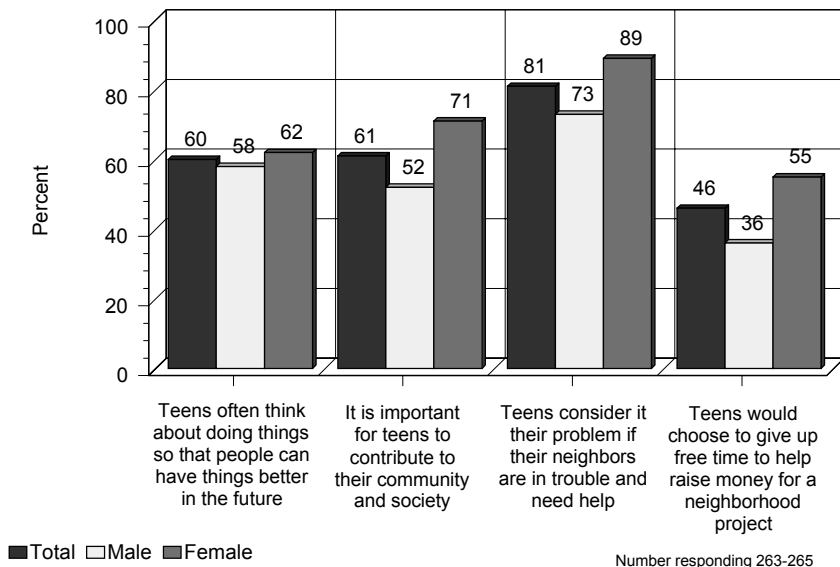
Figure 9-26: Neighborhood Monitoring
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by School Level)



Social Responsibility

Figure 9-27 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, 58%; females, 62%). Sixty-one percent (61%) said they feel it is important for teens to contribute to their community and society (males, 52%; females, 71%). Four out of five students (81%) said they consider it their problem if their neighbors are in trouble and need help (males, 73%; females, 89%). Forty-six percent (46%) would give up their own free time in order to help raise money for a neighborhood project (males, 36%; females, 55%).

Figure 9-27: Social Responsibility
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by Gender)



Criminal Activity. Almost half (47%) of all students report having shoplifted at some time in the past. Figure 9-28 shows the breakdown by school level.

**Figure 9-28: Teens Who Have Shoplifted
(By School Level)**

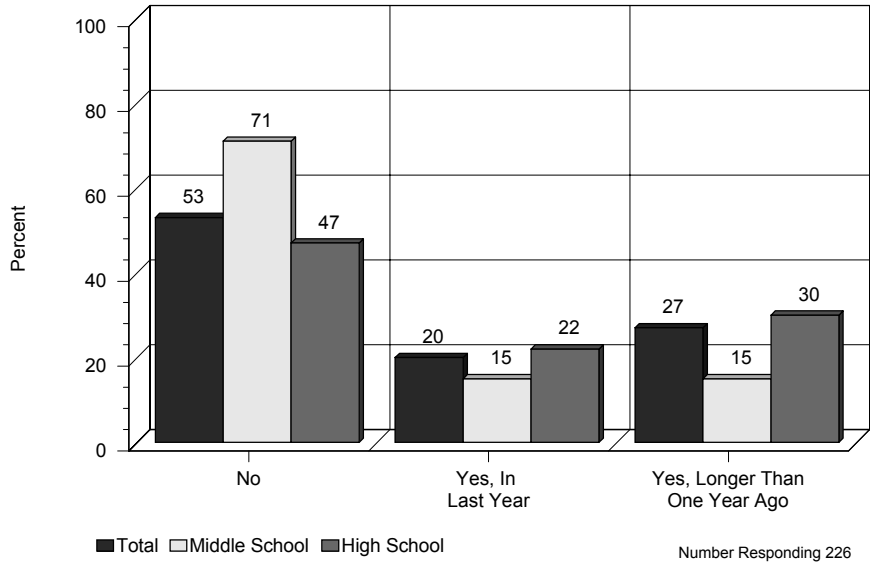
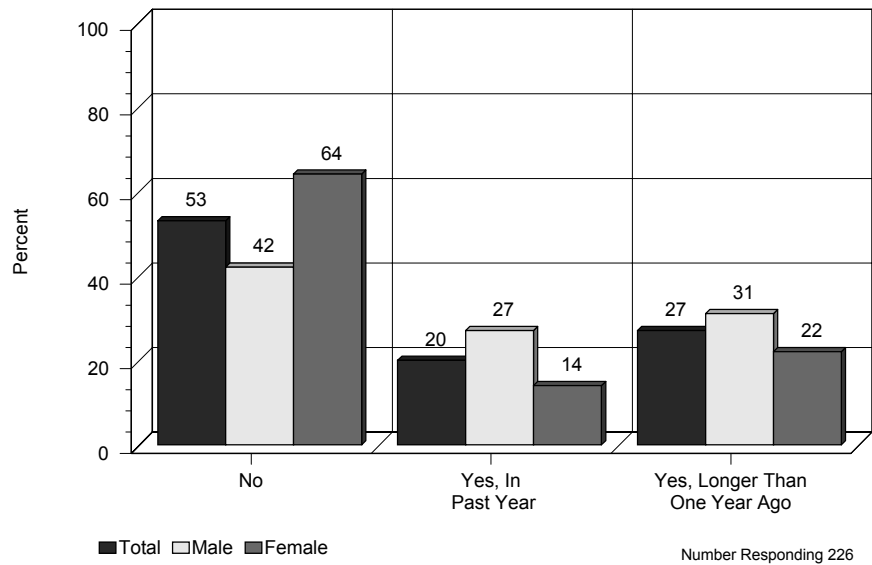


Figure 9-29 shows the breakdown by gender. More males (58%) than females (36%) report being having shoplifted.

**Figure 9-29: Teens Who Have Shoplifted
(By Gender)**



Racial, Ethnic and Sexual Identity Issues. This section examines student experiences with racial, ethnic or sexual slurs and with student attitudes towards racial, ethnic, and sexual differences. We asked local youth "In your school, do students use racial, ethnic, or sexual slurs?" About 2 out of 5 students (40%) of all students say that this happens "often" or "very often" in their school. Figure 9-30 shows a considerable difference between school levels. Fifteen percent (15%) of middle school students versus 49% of high school students believe that students in their school use racial, ethnic, or sexual slurs "often" or "very often." Figure 9-31 shows a slight difference exists between how males and females feel on this issue (males, 43% and females, 38%).

Figure 9-30: Teens Who Feel That Students in Their School Use Racial, Ethnic or Sexual Slurs (By School Level)

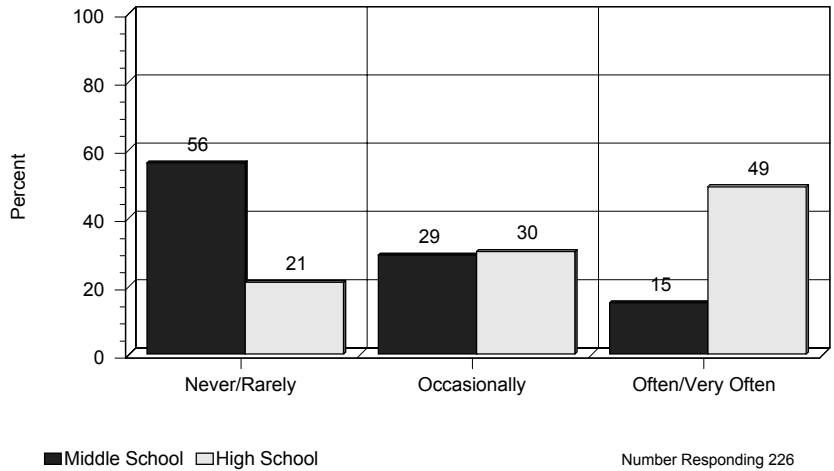
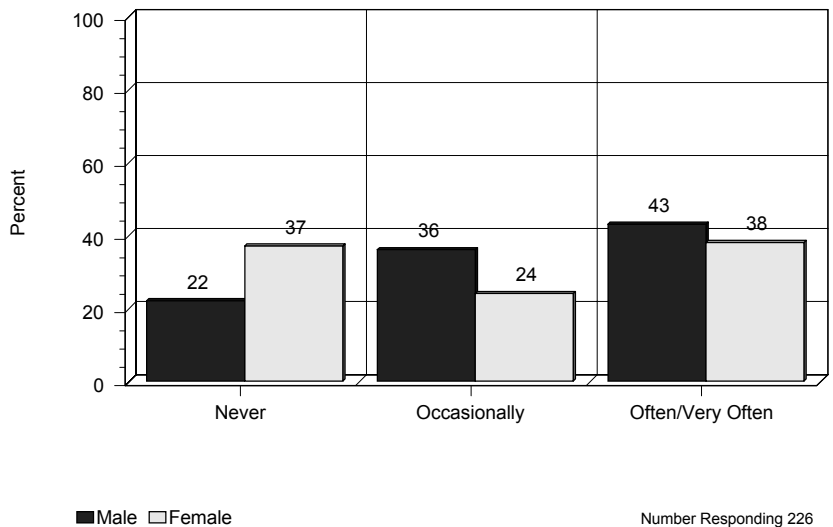


Figure 9-31: Teens Who Feel That Students in Their School Use Racial, Ethnic or Sexual Slurs (By Gender)



A number of students report being teased or harassed about being gay or lesbian. Overall, 29% report being harassed about sexual identity. Figure 9-32 shows the breakdown by school level.

Figure 9-32: Teens Who Feel Teased or Harassed About Being Gay or Lesbian (By School Level)

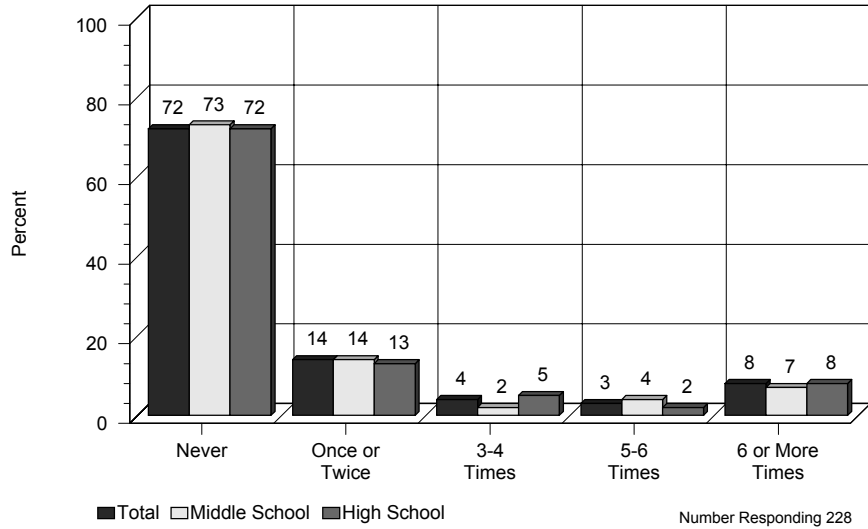
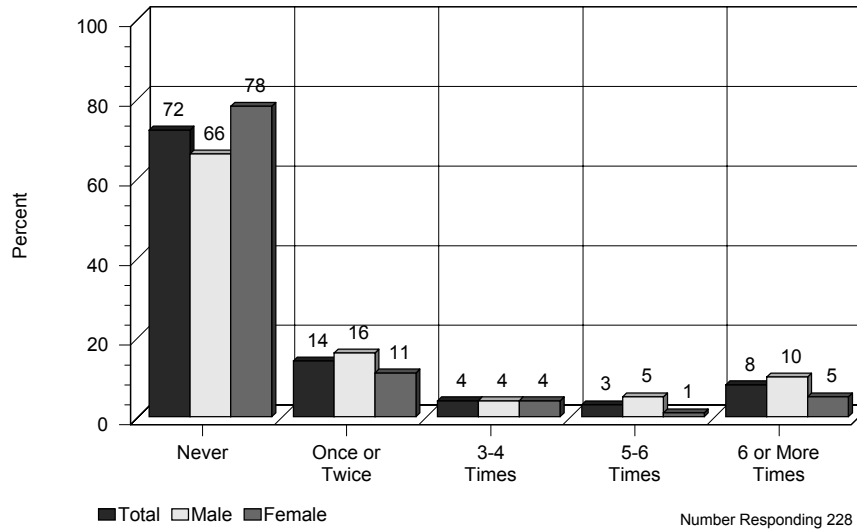


Figure 9-33 shows the breakdown by gender. More males (35%) than females (21%) report being teased or harassed.

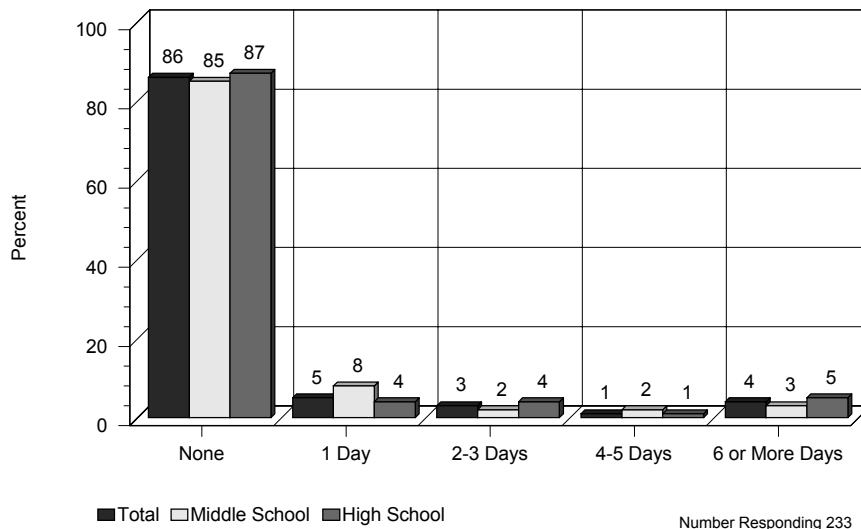
Figure 9-33: Teens Who Feel Teased or Harassed About Being Gay or Lesbian (By Gender)



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 multiple-victim homicide events at schools have increased, homicides at schools remain extremely rare. There has been a steady decline of student victimization and the number of students carrying weapons and engaging in physical fights on school grounds (U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, 1999). 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, 13% of local youth reported they carried a weapon (e.g., a gun, knife, club,) on to school property. Figure 9-34 shows no difference between middle school and high school students (middle school, 15%; high school 14%).

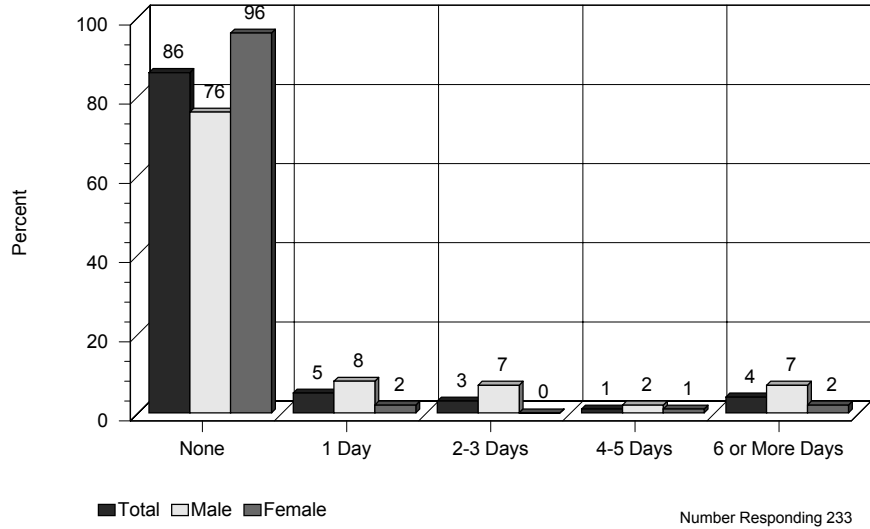
Figure 9-34: Days Teens Carried Weapons on to School Property
(In the Past Month, by School Level)



Nationally, 6.9% (N.H., 7.5%) 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, 2000). New Hampshire ranks 14th out of 33 states surveyed by the CDC.

Figure 9-35 shows the days teens carried weapons on to school property by gender. While 24% of the males carried a weapon onto school property at some time in the past month, only 5% of females did so.

Figure 9-35: Days Teens Carried Weapons on to School Property (In the Past Month, by Gender)



When asked if they had carried a weapon on to school property, most teens (90%) said “no”. Of those who said “yes”, 8% said it was to defend themselves, while 2% said it was to harm someone. Figure 9-36 and 9-37 show responses by school level and gender.

Figure 9-36: Teens Who Have Carried a Weapon on to School Property (By School Level)

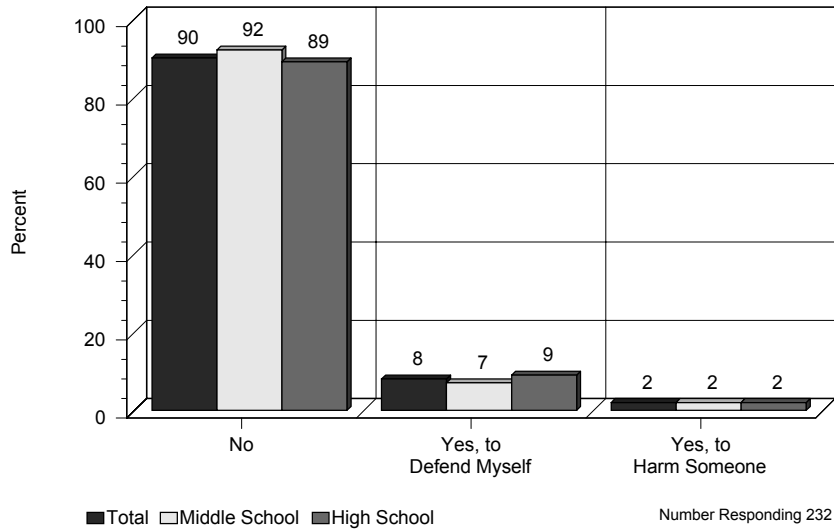
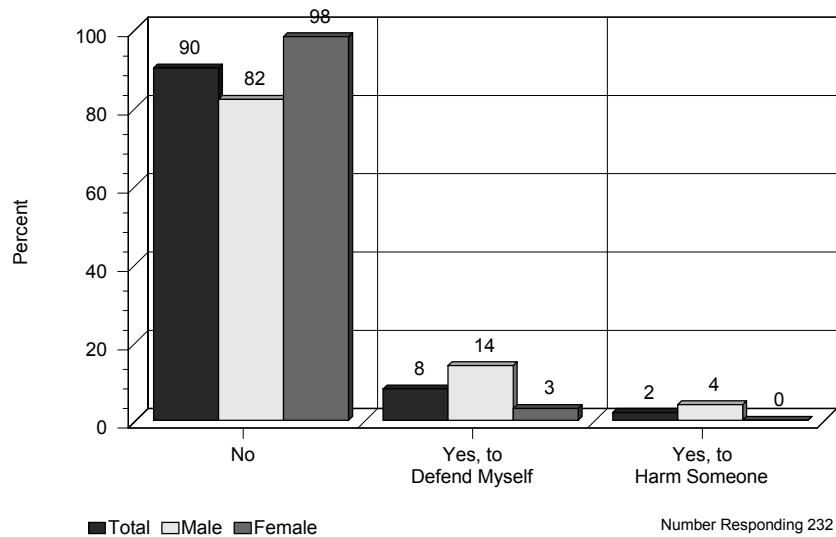
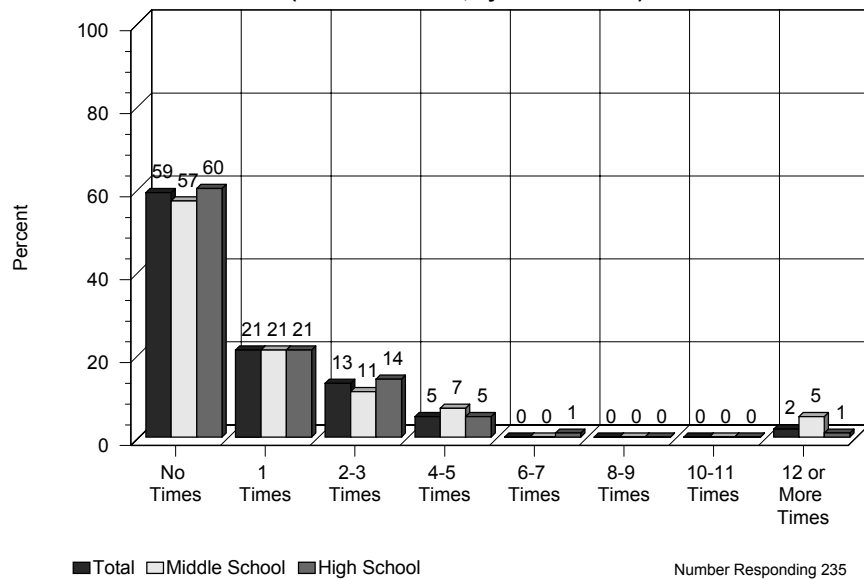


Figure 9-37: Teens Who Have Carried a Weapon on to School Property (By Gender)



Students were also asked about the number of physical fights they had been in during the past year. Forty-one percent (41%) 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, 66%; high school males, 53%). Incidence of fighting increases to a slight degree for females from middle to high school (middle school females, 24%; high school females, 28%). Figure 9-38 shows 44% of middle school students and 42% of high school students were involved in one or more fights in the past year.

Figure 9-38: Number of Times Teens Were in a Physical Fight
(In The Past Year, by School Level)



On the national level, 35.7% (N.H., 32%) 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, 2000). New Hampshire ranks 30th out of the 33 states surveyed by the CDC.