
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 one in ten 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."

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 & Tavere, 1987; Mensch & Kandel, 1988).

This chapter presents the findings of the Teen Assessment Project survey in the area of perceptions of school and community. It is divided into sections which include the Overview of Findings, a summary of key points; Presentation of Data, analysis of data presented in graphic form; and Presentation of Comparable Data, comparisons of TAP with Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Perceptions of School

The TAP survey asked teens how they felt about their school experiences. Fifty-six percent (56%) of the teens surveyed reported they enjoy going to school. Younger youth reported enjoying school more than older youth (middle school, 61%; high school, 53%) and females (61%) reported enjoying school more than males (51%). Fifty percent (50%) of the youth surveyed felt the rules were enforced fairly at their school. Again, the younger students were more likely to agree that rules were enforced fairly than older students. Seventy-one

percent (71%) of youth surveyed felt they get a good, high quality education at their school. Again, agreement on this issue decreases consistently as teens get older. Middle school students (80%) were more likely to agree that they get a good education than high school students (67%).

Future and Career Plans

The TAP survey questioned youth on their future plans. In response to whether youth felt they would drop out of school before completing, most youth (95%) reported they would not drop out. School level and gender differences were slight. Of course these results do not reflect those youth who have already dropped out of high school. The majority of youth surveyed reported they would go to a four year college or university after high school (middle school, 59%; high school, 63%). More females than males reported planning to attend a four year college, while more males than females reported planning to join the military.

Abuse and Violence in the School

School tragedies in the past few years have raised concerns regarding youth violence and our children's safety at school. Although multiple-victim homicide events at school have increased, homicides at school 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). The TAP survey asked teens how they handle anger and disagreements. Most youth reported they would use a non-violent method such as talking it out or just ignoring the person. Fourteen percent (14%) of the youth surveyed reported they would use violent means such as beating up the person or having someone else do it for them. High school youth were more likely than middle school youth to report they would talk it out (50% vs. 43%), while middle school youth were slightly more likely than high school youth to report that they would ignore the other person (22% vs. 17%). There were no school level differences in the violent methods of handling a disagreement. Females were more likely than males to report talking out problems (55% vs. 38%), while males were more likely than females to report they would beat up the other person (19% vs. 6%). The survey also asked New Hampshire youth how many physical fights they had been in during the year preceding the survey. Thirty-six percent (36%) of the students reported being in at least one fight. Middle school youth (40%) were more likely to have been in a physical fight than high school youth (33%), while males were more likely to have been in a fight than females (45% vs. 27%).

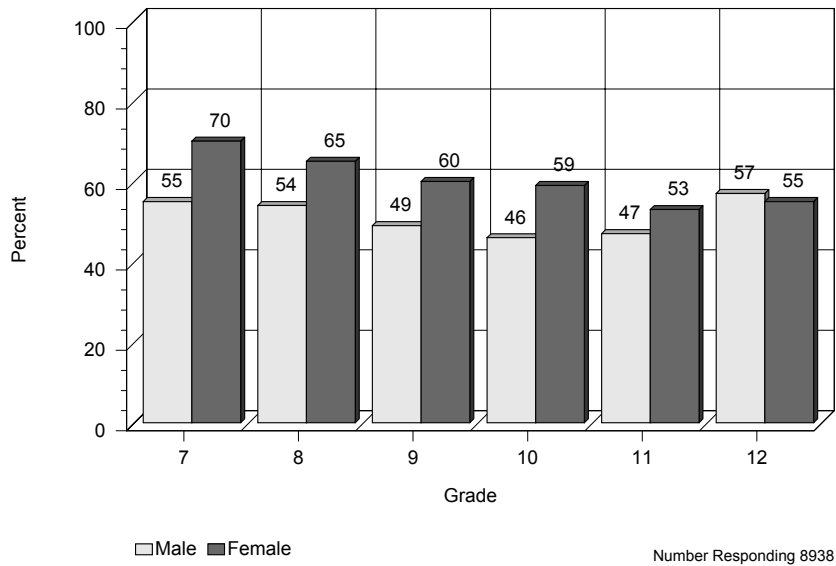
A few questions were asked of youth to assess how safe they felt in the school environment. One question was whether any of their property had been stolen or damaged. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of youth surveyed had property stolen or damaged at least once in the year preceding the survey. School level differences were slight. More males than females reported having this happen to them (41% vs. 32%). The survey also asked whether teens had missed school in the month preceding the survey because they felt unsafe. Seven percent (7%) of youth surveyed said they had missed school because of feeling unsafe. A greater percentage of males than females reported this. Nine percent (9%) of students surveyed reported carrying a weapon (defined as a *gun, knife, or club*) onto school property at least one time in the month preceding the survey. More high school students than middle school students reported carrying a weapon (10% vs. 7%), while more males than females reported the same (14% vs. 4%).

Perceptions of Community and Social Responsibility

The TAP survey found that most youth felt supported in their communities. Sixty-six percent (66%) of the youth surveyed agreed that if they had a problem, there are neighbors they can count on. Most youth (82%) also reported their town is a good place to live. However, only 33% reported there are fun things to do for kids their age in their town. Middle school youth were more likely to agree there are fun things to do in their town (52% vs. 24%). Fifty-two percent (52%) of youth surveyed felt adults in their town keep an eye on what teens are up to, while 68% felt adults in the town would tell their parents if they saw them drinking alcohol or doing something wrong. Middle school youth were more likely than high school youth to agree about these issues. The TAP survey also showed teens have a good sense of social responsibility. Sixty-five percent (65%) reported they often think about making the future better for others and 63% feel it is important for them to contribute to their community and society. Eighty percent (80%) of youth surveyed felt it is their problem if their neighbors are in trouble and need help. Forty-six percent (46%) of the youth surveyed would give up free time to raise money for a neighborhood project. A greater percentage of females than males reported agreeing with these statements.

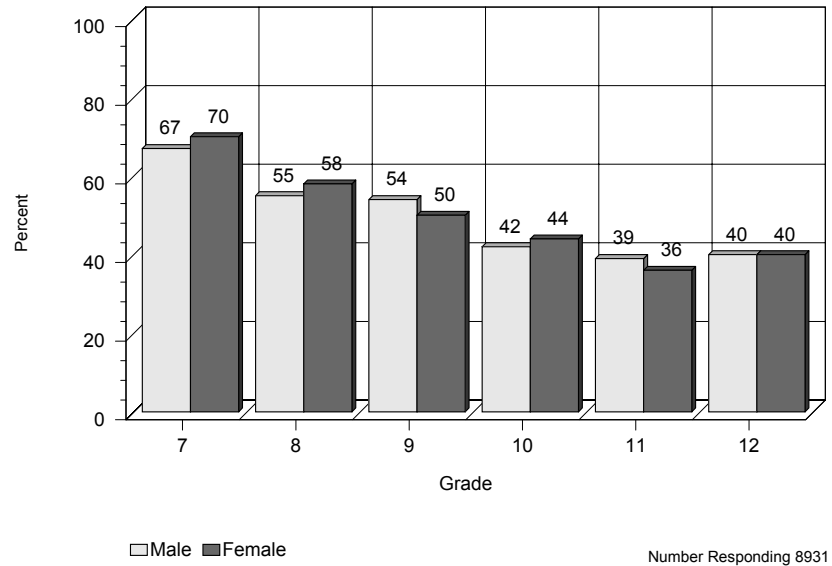
PRESENTATION OF DATA (Note: Due to rounding, some graphs may not total 100%.)

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



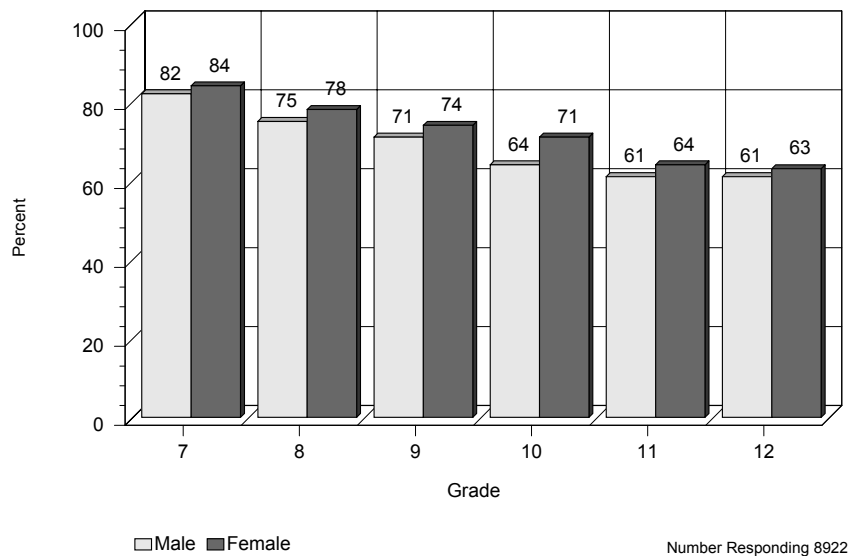
- Fifty-six percent (56%) of all local youth agreed or strongly agreed they enjoyed going to school.
- Overall, females reported more agreement with the statement than males (females, 61%; males, 51%).
- Middle school students reported they enjoyed school more than high school students (middle school, 61%; high school, 53%).

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



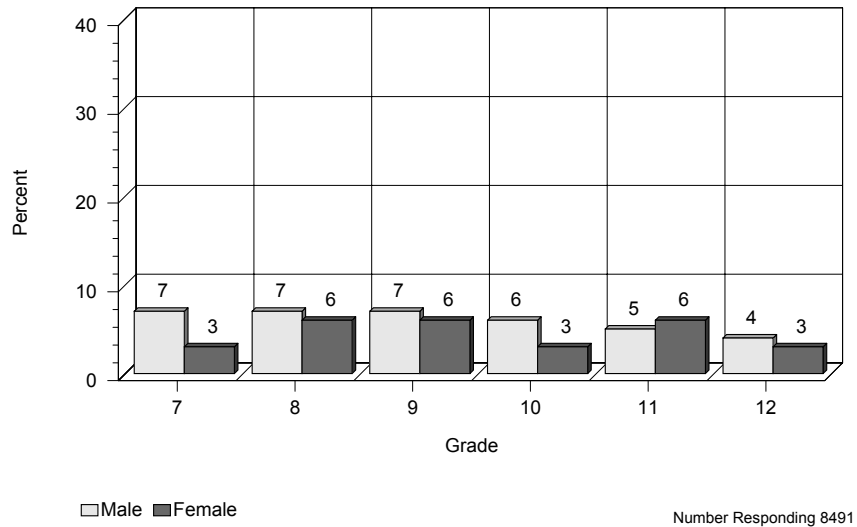
- Overall, 50% of students reported they felt school rules were enforced fairly.
- More middle school students (62%) than high school students (44%) reported they felt this way.

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



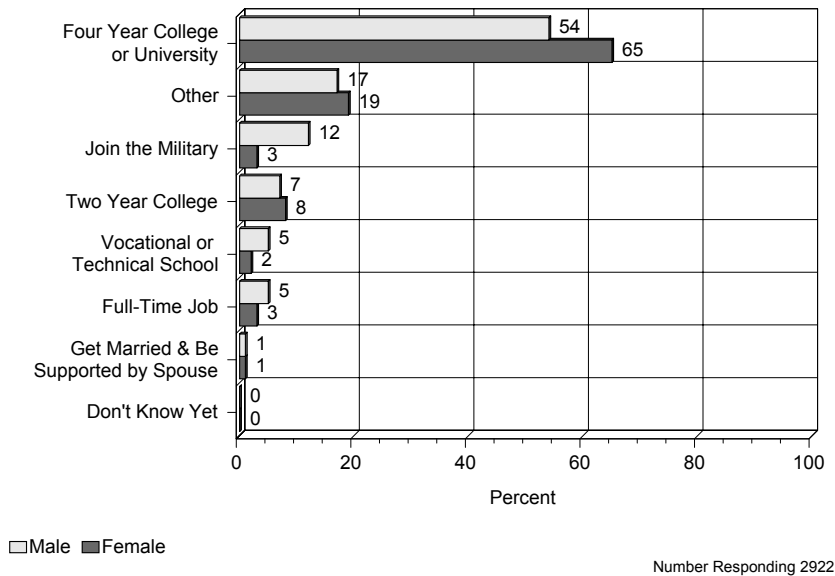
- Seventy-one percent (71%) of students agreed they are getting a good education.
- Middle school students were more likely to agree that they are getting a quality education (middle school, 80%; high school 67%).

Figure 9-4: Teens Who Feel They Will Drop Out Before They Complete High School
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by Grade and Gender)



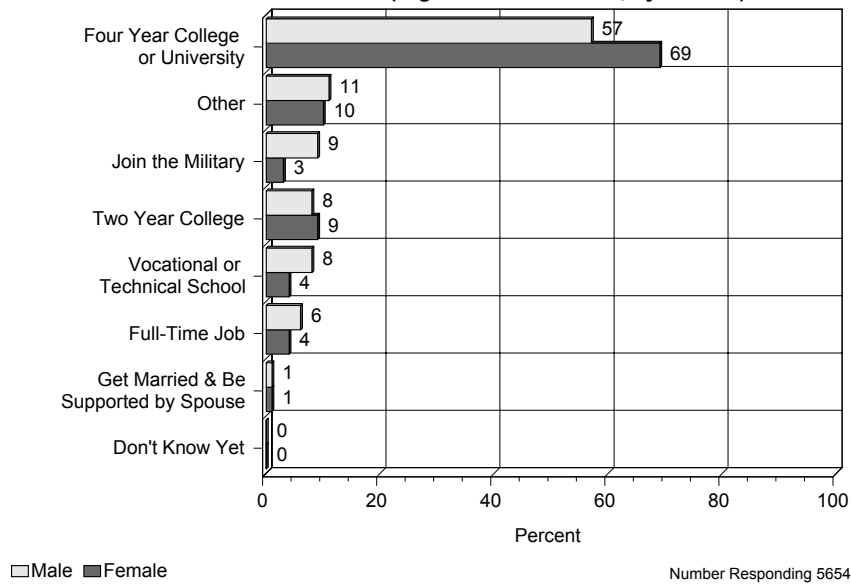
- Overall, 5% of students indicated they would drop out before finishing school.

Figure 9-5: Future Plans After High School
(Middle School Students, by Gender)



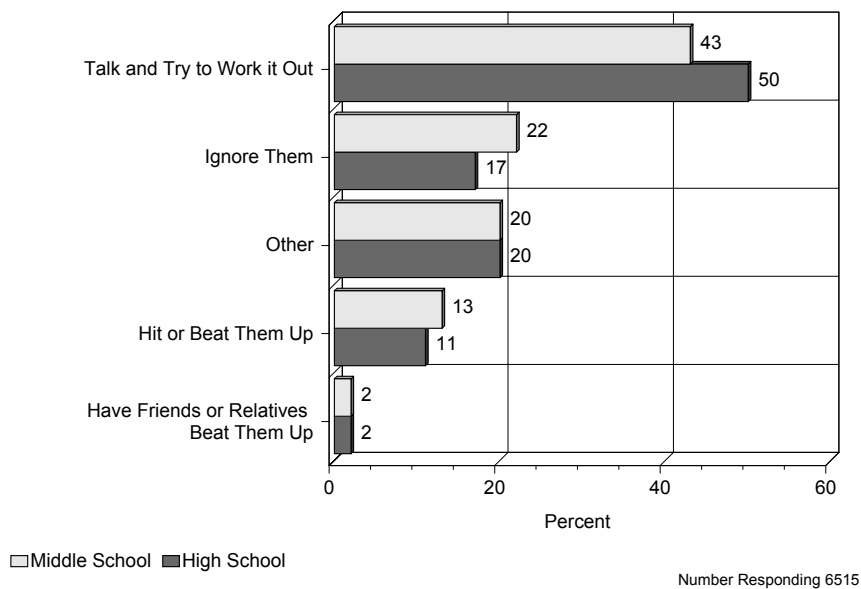
- Over half of middle school youth reported they plan on going to a four year college.
- About 10% of middle school males report plans for vocational-technical school or full time job; 5% of middle school females do.

**Figure 9-6: Future Plans After High School
(High School Students, by Gender)**



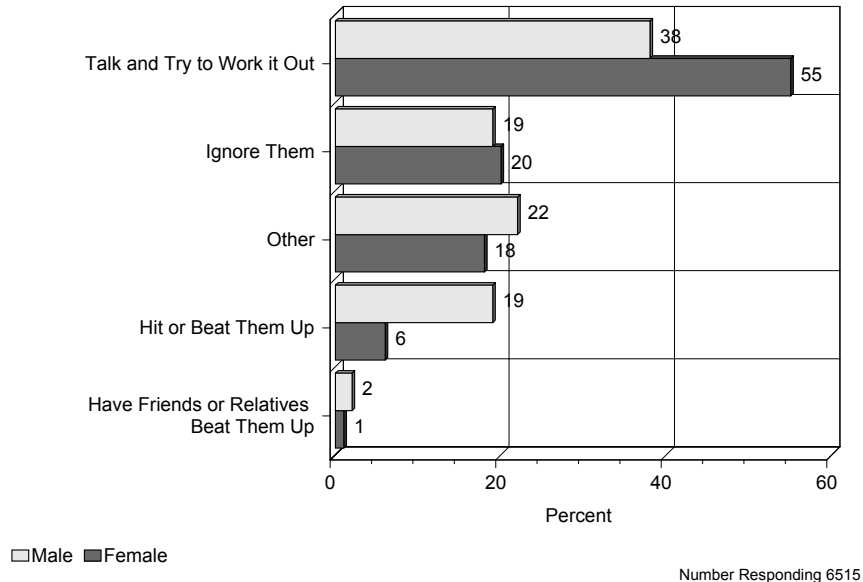
- 12% more high school females than males report plans to attend a 4 year college.
- 6% more high school males than females report plans to join the military.

**Figure 9-7: How Teens Handle Anger and Disagreements
(By School Level)**



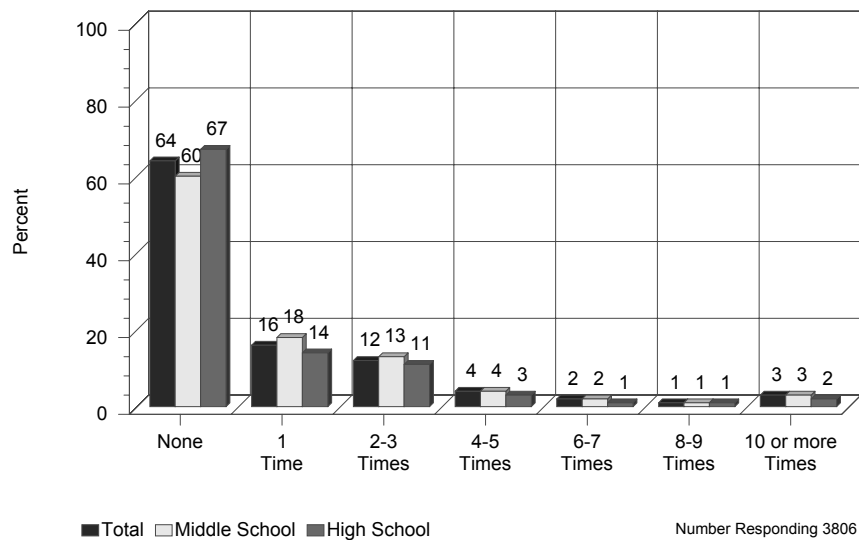
- Forty-seven percent (47%) of students would try to solve their problems by talking and trying to work it out.
- More high school students than middle school students reported they would talk it out; more middle schoolers than high schoolers reported they would ignore the other person.

**Figure 9-8: How Teens Handle Anger and Disagreements
(By Gender)**



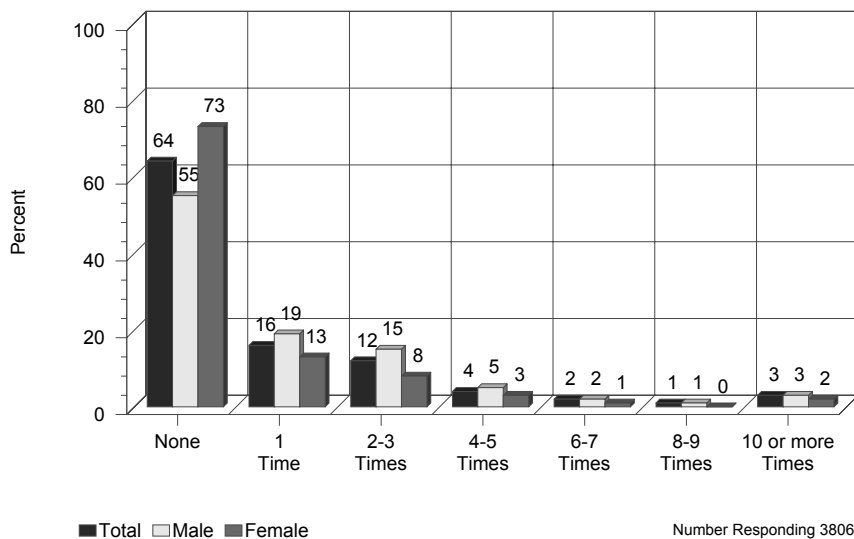
- 17% more females than males reported they would handle disagreements by talking out their problems; 13% more males than females indicated they would hit or beat them up.

**Figure 9-9: Number of Fights Teens Were In
(In The Past Year, by School Level)**



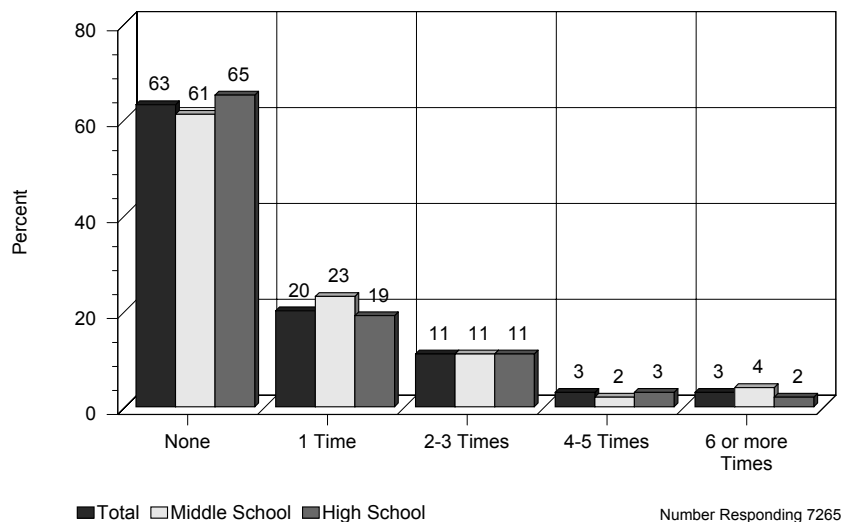
- Thirty-six percent (36%) of students surveyed had been in at least one fight in the year preceding the survey (middle school, 40%; high school, 33%).
- Of those reporting being in a fight, the greatest percentage of middle school and high students reported being in one fight.

Figure 9-10: Number of Fights Teens Were In
(In The Past Year, by Gender)



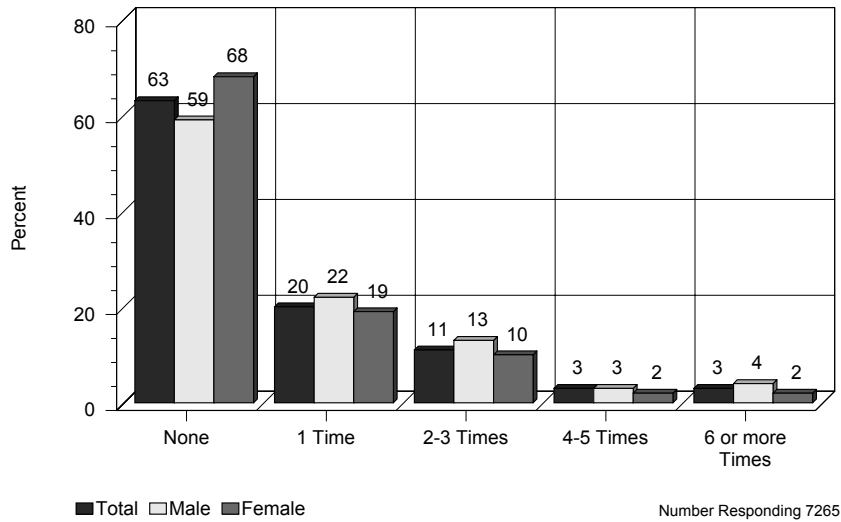
- 18% more males than females reported being in at least one fight in the year preceding the survey (45% vs. 27%).

Figure 9-11: Number of Times Students Have Had Property Stolen or Damaged
(In the Past Year, by School Level)



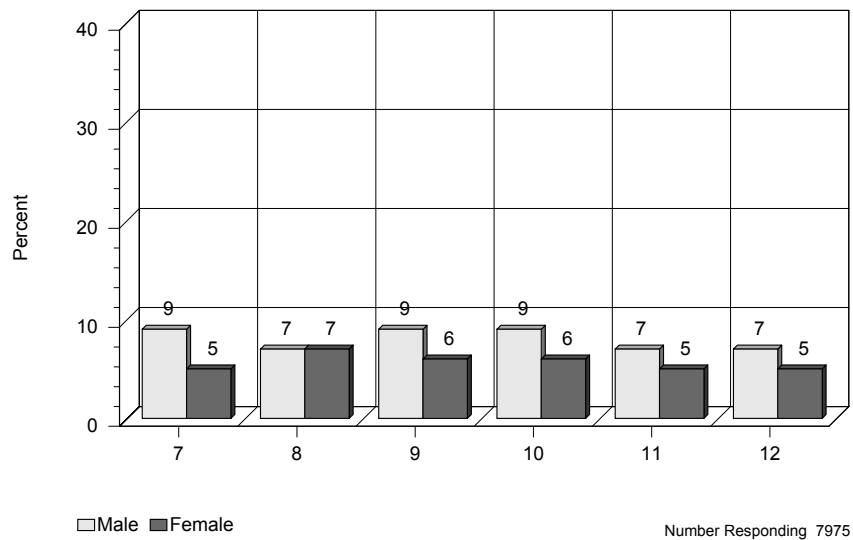
- Thirty-seven percent (37%) of youth reported having had property stolen or damaged at least once in the past year.
- Percentage rates of reported stolen or damaged property were similar at both school levels (middle school, 39%; high school, 35%).

Figure 9-12: Number of Times Students Have Had Property Stolen or Damaged
(In the Past Year, by Gender)



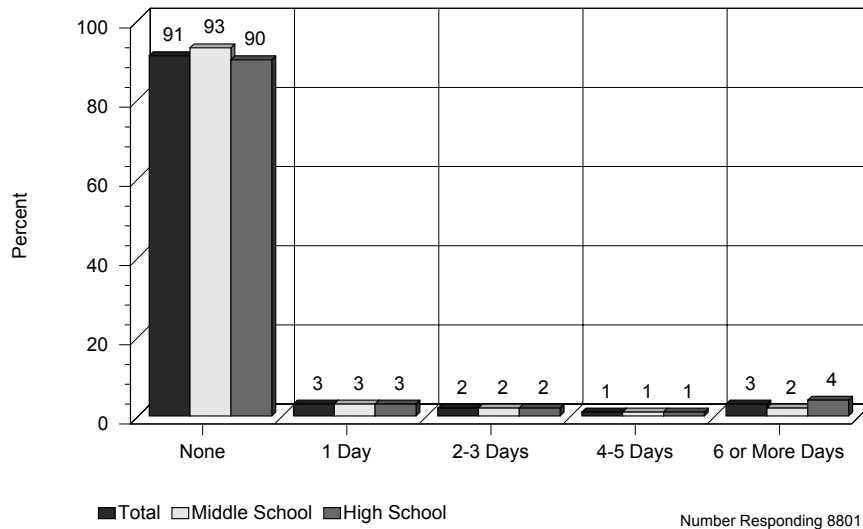
- 9% more males than females reported having property stolen or damaged in the year preceding the survey (41% vs. 32%).

Figure 9-13: Teens Who Missed School on One or More Days Because They Felt Unsafe
(In the Past Month, by Grade and Gender)



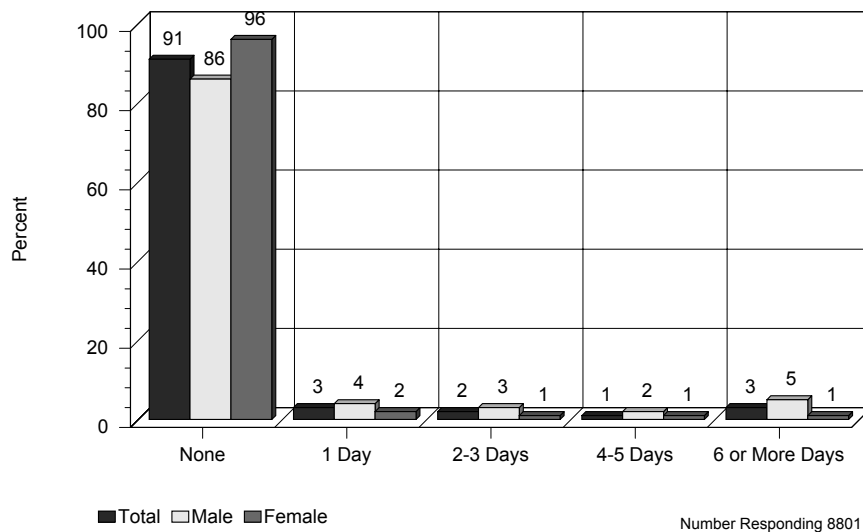
- Seven percent (7%) reported they missed school at least once in the past month because they felt unsafe.
- Similar percentages of school absence due to safety concerns were reported by school level and gender (middle school, 7%, high school, 7%; males, 8%, females, 6%).

Figure 9-14: Days Teens Carried Weapons On to School Property
(In the Past Month, by School Level)



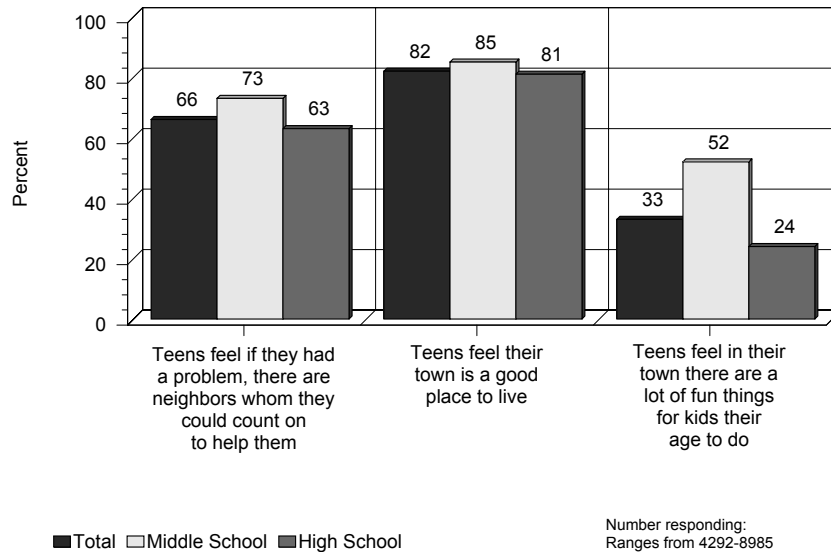
- Overall, 9% of New Hampshire youth surveyed reported they carried a weapon (e.g., a gun, knife, or club) onto school property.
- More high school students (10%) than middle school students (7%) reported carrying a weapon onto school property.

Figure 9-15: Days Teens Carried Weapons On to School Property
(In the Past Month, by Gender)



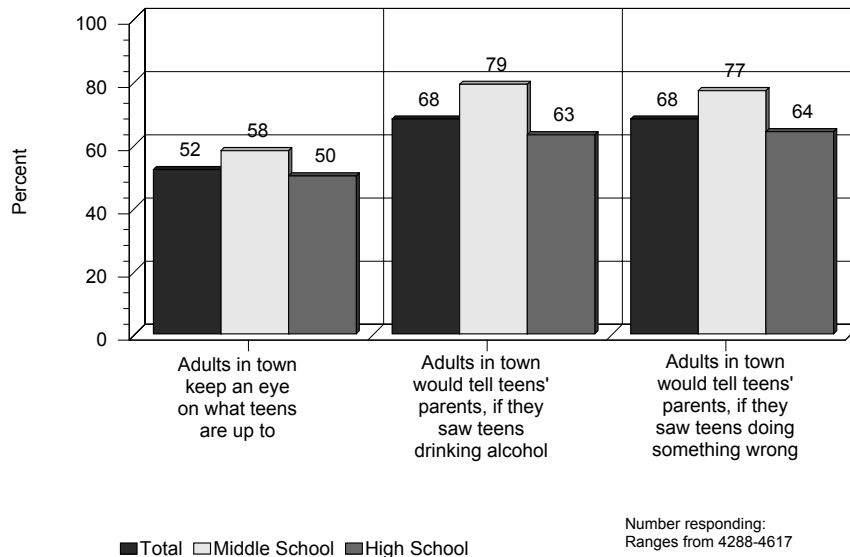
- 10% more males than females reported carrying a weapon onto school property in the month preceding the survey (14% vs. 4%).

Figure 9-16: Neighborhood Support
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by School Level)



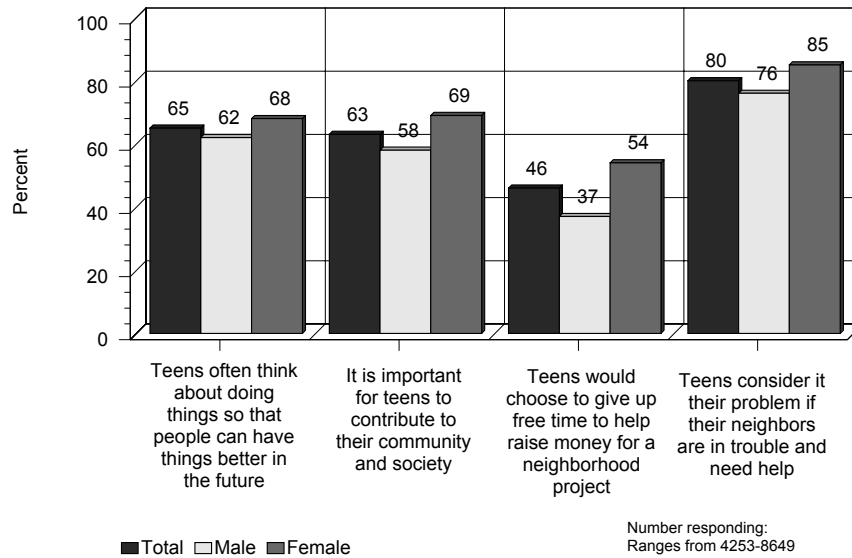
- Sixty-six percent (66%) reported there are neighbors they can count on if they are in trouble and need help. Although 82% felt their town is a good place to live, only 33% thought there are a lot of fun things for kids their age to do.

Figure 9-17: Neighborhood Monitoring
(Strongly Agree or Agree, by School Level)



- Over half of all students felt monitored by adults. A greater percentage of middle school students than high school students reported feeling monitored by adults in their neighborhood.

Figure 9-18: Social Responsibility
 (Strongly Agree or Agree, by Gender)



- Teens surveyed have a well-developed sense of social responsibility. The majority feel it is important to contribute to their community and society by helping others and making things better for the future.
- A greater percentage of females than males agreed with these statements.

PRESENTATION OF COMPARABLE DATA

In this section, TAP data are compared with national and New Hampshire statistics from the *1999 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey* (YRBS). This survey is published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2000). It monitors six categories of priority health-risk behaviors among youth and adults - behaviors that contribute to unintentional and intentional injuries; tobacco use; alcohol and other drug use; sexual behaviors that contribute to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs); unhealthy dietary behaviors; and physical inactivity. It is administered every other year and includes a national school-based survey conducted by the CDC as well as state, territorial, and local school-based surveys conducted by education and health agencies. Although the goal is to obtain representative samples, due to a lower than expected response rate in New Hampshire, the results from the 1999 survey for New Hampshire should not be generalized to other students in the state.

**Table 9-1: School Violence and Safety Comparison
(grades 9-12 only)**

Question	YRBS¹ National %	YRBS N.H. % (ranking)	TAP² %
YRBS: During the past 12 months, how many times were you in a physical fight? TAP: During the past year, how many times were you in a physical fight?	35.7	32.0 (20 th of 33)	- 33
YRBS: During the past 30 days, on how many days did you not go to school because you felt you would be unsafe at school or on your way to or from school? TAP: During the past month, how many days did you not go to school because you felt you would be unsafe at school or on your way to or from school?	5.2	4.1 (26 th of 33)	- 7
YRBS: During the past 30 days, on how many days did you carry a weapon such as a gun, knife, or a club? TAP: During the past month, on how many days did you carry a weapon such as a gun, knife, or club onto school property?	6.9	7.5 (14 th of 33)	- 10

¹(Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey - CDC, 2000)

²(Teen Assessment Project, 2000)

Note: Because of question wording differences, the results of YRBS and TAP are not directly comparable.