
CHAPTER 6

Physical and Mental Health Issues

Mental health is influenced by biological, social, cultural and psychological factors. Some researchers believe many of the recent trends in adolescent health-compromising behaviors (e.g., increased alcohol and other drug use, suicide, and sexual behavior) mirror psychological and emotional difficulties teens today experience. Nationally, suicide is now the third leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year olds (Arenofsky, 1997). In New Hampshire, suicide is the second leading cause of death among those in the same age group. In 1994, there were 23 suicides in N.H. among those 15-24 years old. From 1992 to 1996 there were 10 suicides in Rockingham County among those 19 years old and younger (N.H. Bureau of Vital Records and Health Statistics, 1998).

Feelings of depression, loneliness and despair are often associated with attempted suicides (Koch, 1999, Arenofsky, 1997). The presence of a social support system, however, can help to buffer teens from such feelings and possible negative consequences. Similarly, teens with positive self-esteem may be better equipped to resist negative influences and pressures in the environment than teens who have low self-esteem (Arenofsky, 1997).

Teen Worries

What do local teens worry about? Their top concerns are: getting good grades at school; how they look; getting along with their parents at home; that they are too fat or too thin; how well their parents get along with each other; that a friend is considering suicide; not fitting in with the other kids at school; and that they might contract a sexually transmitted disease or AIDS; in that order. Figure 6-1 shows the top eight worries as indicated by the percentage of students responding "*quite a bit*" or "*very much*" and shows the differences between middle school and high school students. Middle school students are more concerned than high school students about how they look (middle school, 42%; high school, 36%), how well their parents get along (middle school, 24%; high school, 19%), that a friend is considering suicide (middle school, 20%; high school, 14%) and not fitting in (middle school, 21%; high school, 12%). High school students are more worried than middle school students about getting good grades (high school, 61%; middle school, 49%) and that they are too fat or too thin (high school, 25%;

middle school, 22%). For the other worries there are no major differences between middle school and high school students.

Figure 6-1: Teen Worries
 (Quite a Bit or Very Much, by School Level)

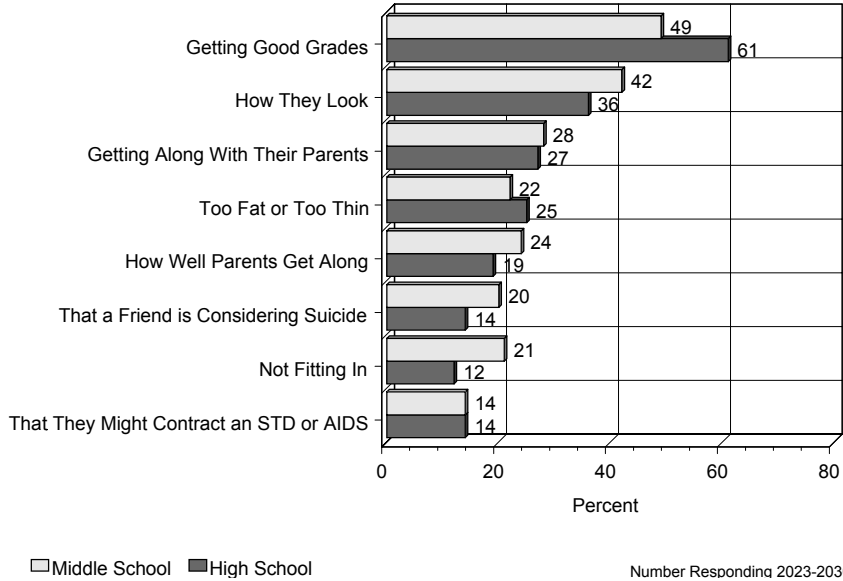
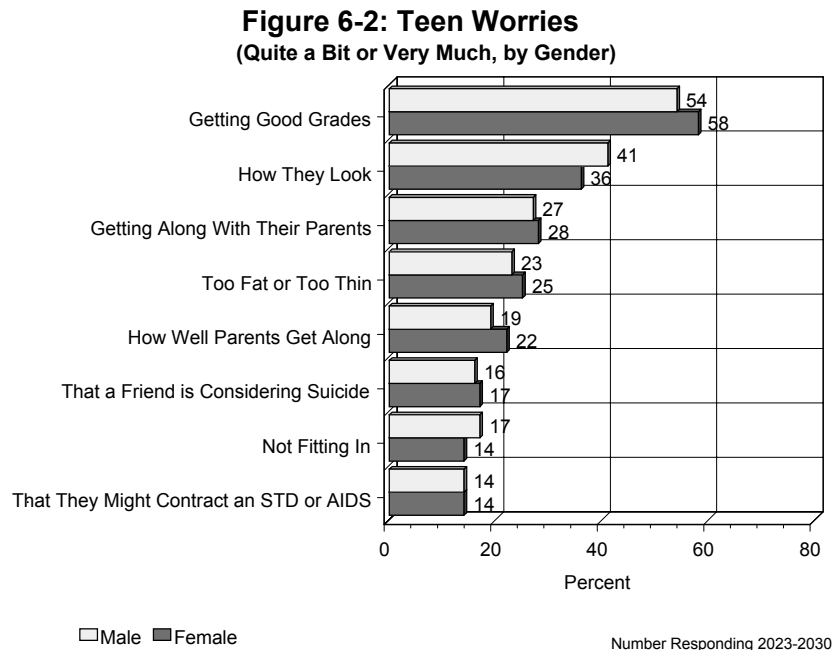


Figure 6-2 shows the same worries on the basis of gender. Females are slightly more worried than males about getting good grades, (females, 58%; males, 54%), and how well their parents get along (females, 22%; males, 19%). Males are more worried than females about how they look (males, 41%; females, 36%) and not fitting in with their friends (males, 17%; females, 14%).



Other teen concerns are:

- being picked on or hurt by another teen
(middle school, 13%; high school, 7%; males, 9%; females, 10%);
- that they might get pregnant or get someone else pregnant
(middle school, 8%; high school, 11%; males, 9%; females, 10%);
- being pressured into having sex
(middle school, 10%; high school, 7%; males, 7%; females, 9%);
- being pressured into drinking or using drugs
(middle school, 8%; high school, 5%; males, 5%; females 7%);
- whether they are "straight" or "gay"
(middle school, 6%; high school, 4%; males, 4% females, 6%);
- their parents drink too much or use drugs
(middle school, 4%; high school, 5%; males, 5%; females, 5%).

Who Teens Turn to for Support and Advice

When asked, "If you were having a personal problem and needed someone to talk to, to whom would you most likely go?," more teens (42%) responded "Boyfriend/girlfriend or one of my friends" than any other category. Teens' second choice was a parent or step-parent (35%) and their third choice was a brother or sister (10%). Figure 6-3 shows who students would talk to based on the school level of the students. Middle school students were more likely to talk to a parent or stepparent than anyone else. High school students were more likely to talk to a boyfriend/girlfriend or one of their friends. Four percent (4%) said they have no one to talk to.

Figure 6-3: Who Would Students Talk To
(By School Level)

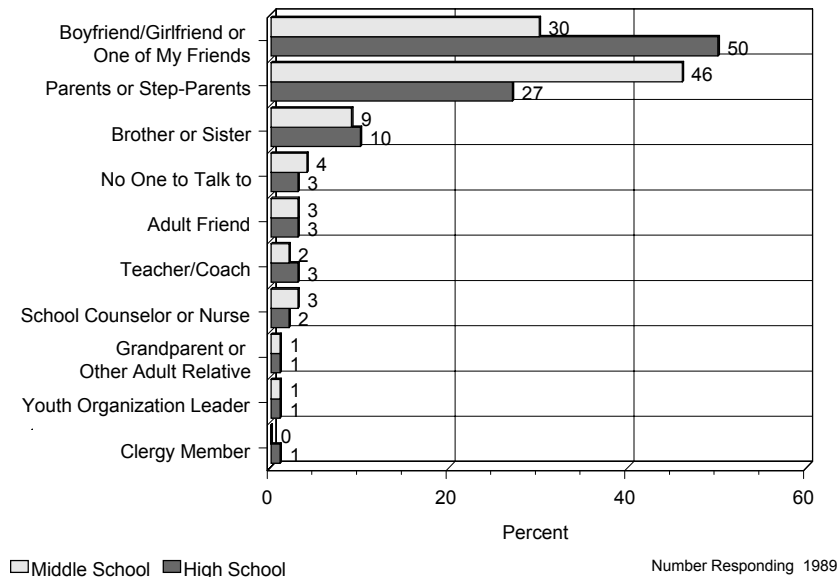
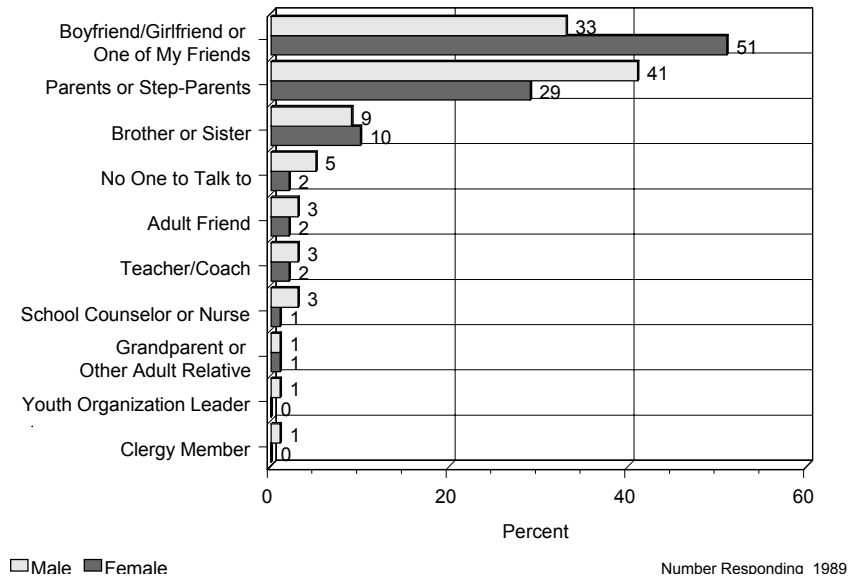


Figure 6-4 highlights the differences between males and females on the issue of whom local teens felt they would turn to with a personal problem. Females were more likely to turn to their friends than were males (females, 51%; males, 33%), while males were more likely to turn to their parents or step-parents than females (males, 41%; females, 29%). Slightly more males (5%) than females (2%) said they have no one to talk to. Other differences were slight.

**Figure 6-4: Who Would Students Talk To
(By Gender)**



We asked teens who they considered to be their most positive role model. More students (34%) chose their parents or step-parents as their most positive role model than any other response. Almost one quarter of those surveyed (24%) responded, "None of the above" to this question. Figure 6-5 shows only small differences between middle school and high school responses.

Figure 6-5: Who Teens Consider Their Most Positive Role Model (By School Level)

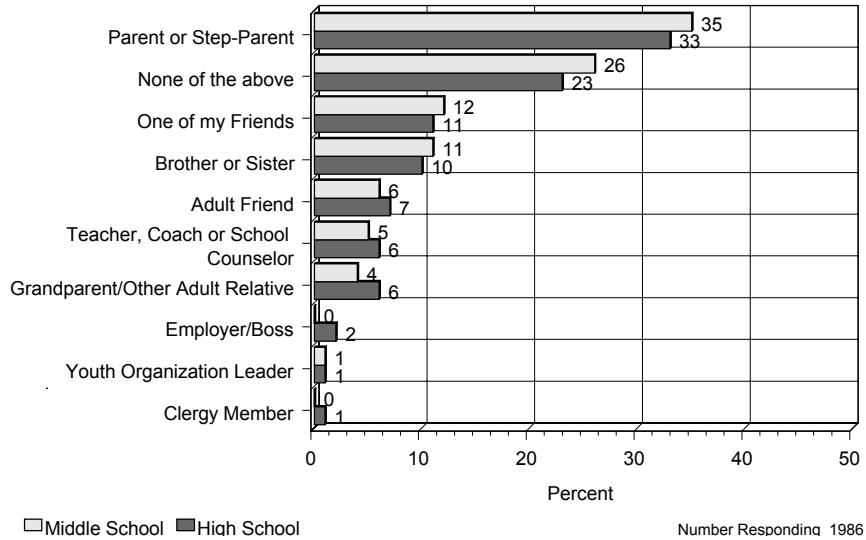
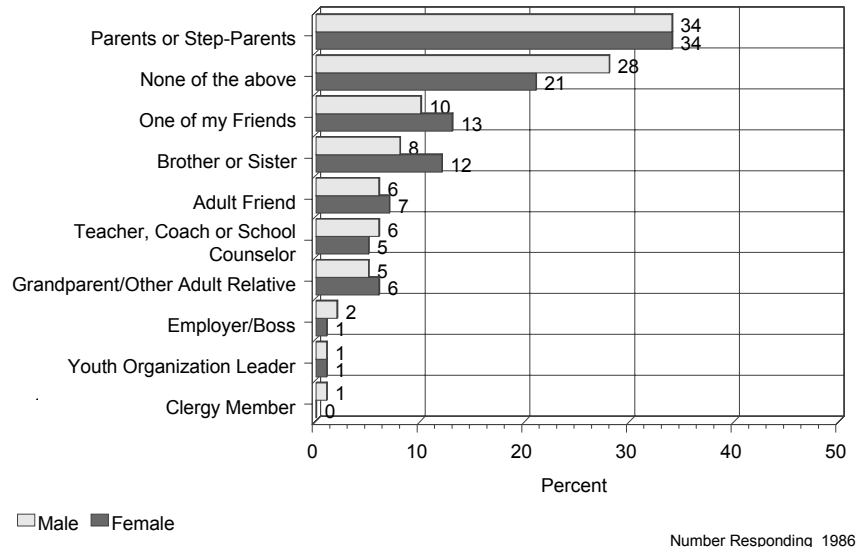


Figure 6-6 shows slightly more females than males consider either a friend or a sibling to be their most positive role model (friend: females, 13%; males, 10%; sibling: females, 12%; and males, 8%). More males (28%) than females (21%) responded "None of the above."

Figure 6-6: Who Teens Consider Their Most Positive Role Model (By Gender)



Teen Depression and Suicide

National surveys of non-hospitalized youth have found between 35% and 40% of teens reported having feelings of sadness or worthlessness some of the time (Adams, Schoenborn, Moss, Warren, and Kann, 1995; Schichor, Bernstein and King, 1994). Feelings of sadness or mild depression are not uncommon and are often associated with feelings of loss. For example, losing an important romantic relationship can contribute to depressive feelings. Similarly, loss of self-esteem can follow experiences of failure or feelings of guilt.

Severe depression is distinguished from mild depression by the intensity and duration of symptoms. Symptoms of serious depression may include strong and persistent feelings of unhappiness, not feeling well, low self-worth, crying spells, or suicidal thoughts or attempts.

Overall, 60% of local youth surveyed reported having experienced depression or sadness at some time in the past month (middle school, 54%; high school, 64%; males, 50% and females 70%). Figure 6-7 shows the percentage of local teens who experienced depression or sadness in the past month, on the basis of gender and grade. The rate for females is much higher than the rate for males at every grade level.

Figure 6-7: Depression or Sadness Among Students
(At Any Time in the Past Month, by Grade and Gender)

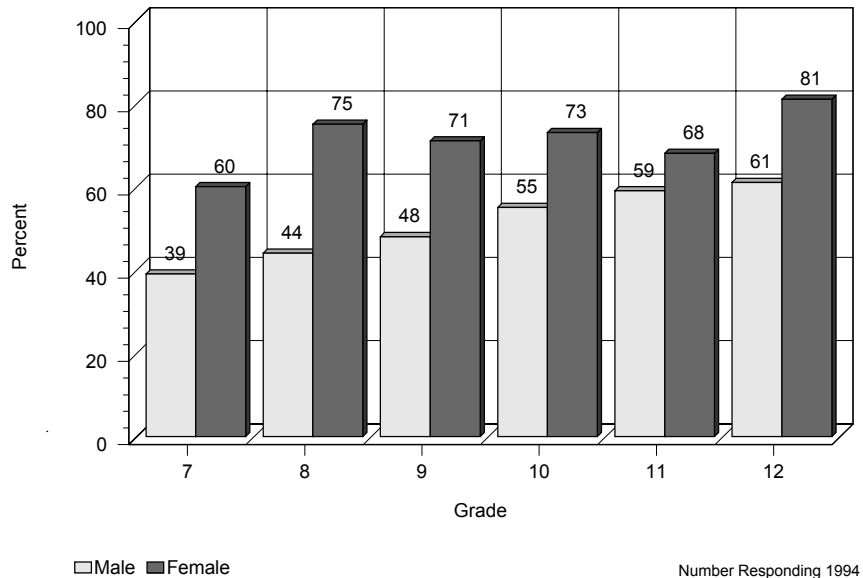
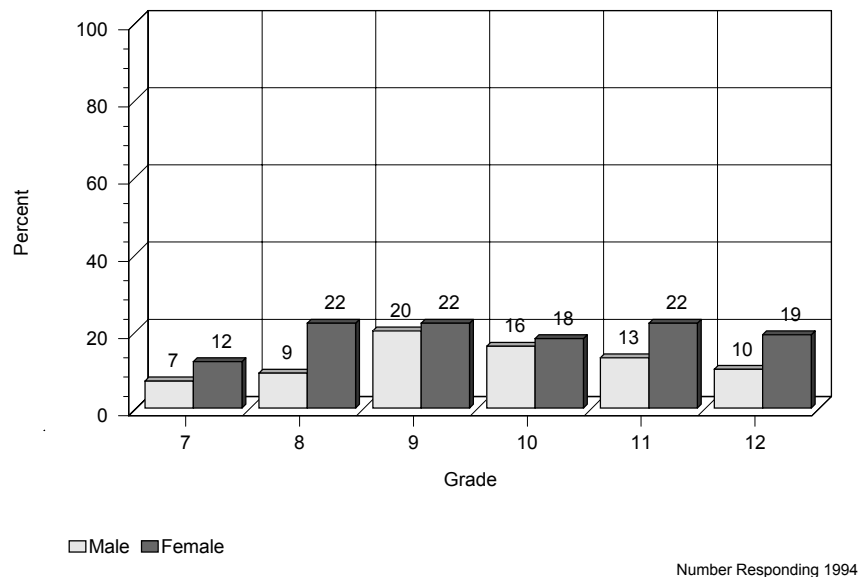


Figure 6-8 displays the percentages of local teens who reported they had *"seriously thought about killing themselves during the past month."* Overall, 16% of local youth had serious thoughts about suicide during the past month (males, 12% and females, 19%). Slightly more high school youth than middle school youth reported they had serious thoughts about killing themselves in the past month (high school, 18%; middle school, 13%).

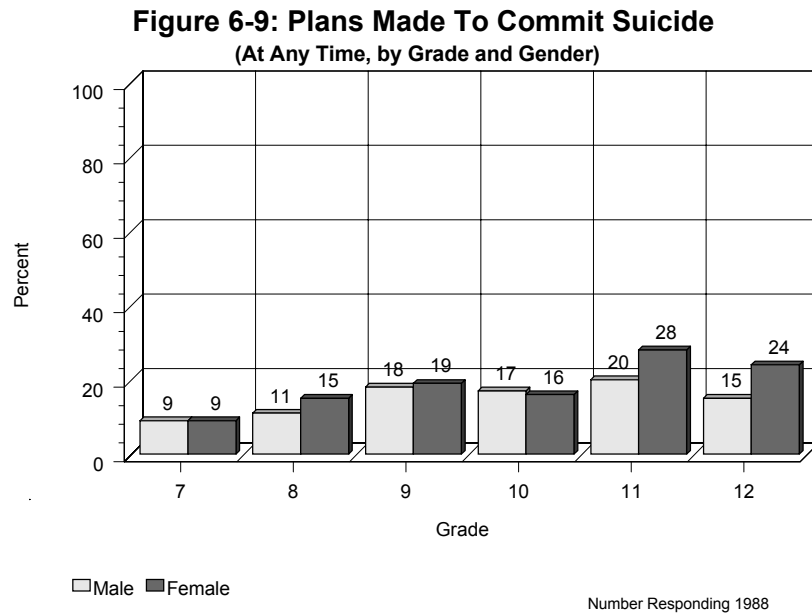
The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey found that 20.5% (N.H., 24.5%) of high school youth (*grades 9-12*) had seriously considered suicide in the 12 months prior to the survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1998). New Hampshire ranks 4th out of all the states surveyed.

Figure 6-8: Serious Thoughts About Killing Themselves
(At Any Time in the Past Month, by Grade and Gender)



Thoughts about suicide are fairly common during the teen years. Fortunately, not many teens act on these thoughts. However, the fact they are having such thoughts may be an indication of several things, including a current disappointment or frustration, depression, feeling alienated or detached from others, as well as an unrealistic conception about suicide and death.

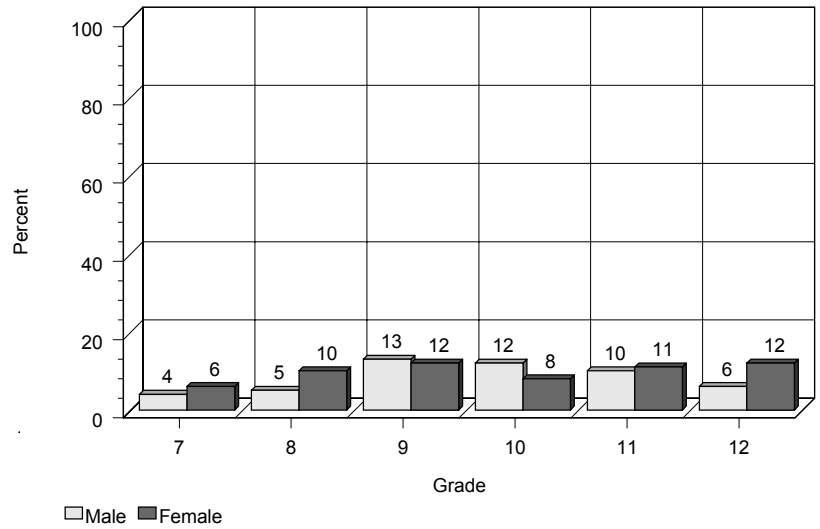
Figure 6-9 shows the number of teens who have ever made a plan to commit suicide. Overall, 16% of local youth reported "making a plan to commit suicide" at some time in the past (middle school, 11%; high school, 19%; males, 15%; and females, 18%).



During the past year, 9% of local youth reported making a plan to kill themselves (middle school, 6%; high school, 11%; males, 8%; females, 10%). Figure 6-10 shows the breakdown of responses by grade and gender.

The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey found 15.7% (N.H., 20.1%) of high school youth (*grades 9-12*) had made a plan to commit suicide in the 12 months prior to the survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1998). New Hampshire ranks 3rd out of the 32 states surveyed by the CDC.

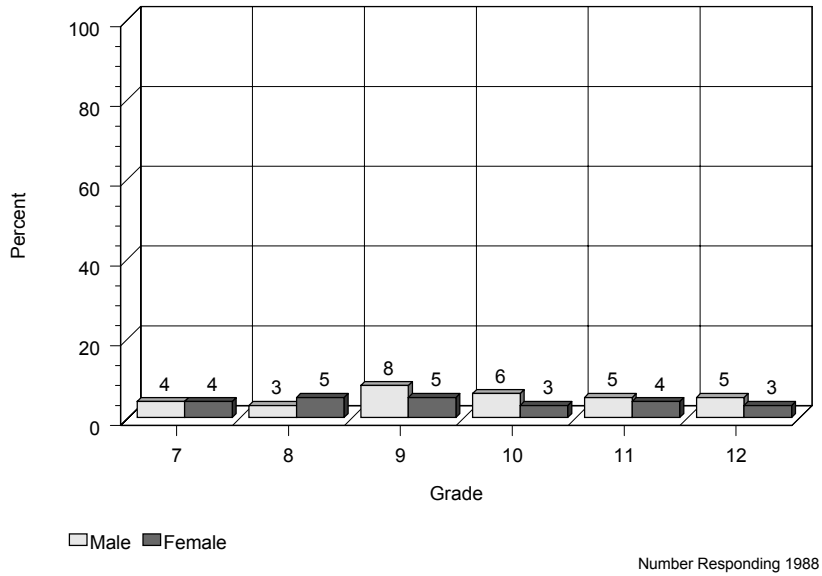
Figure 6-10: Plans Made To Commit Suicide
(In the Past Year, by Grade and Gender)



Number Responding 1988

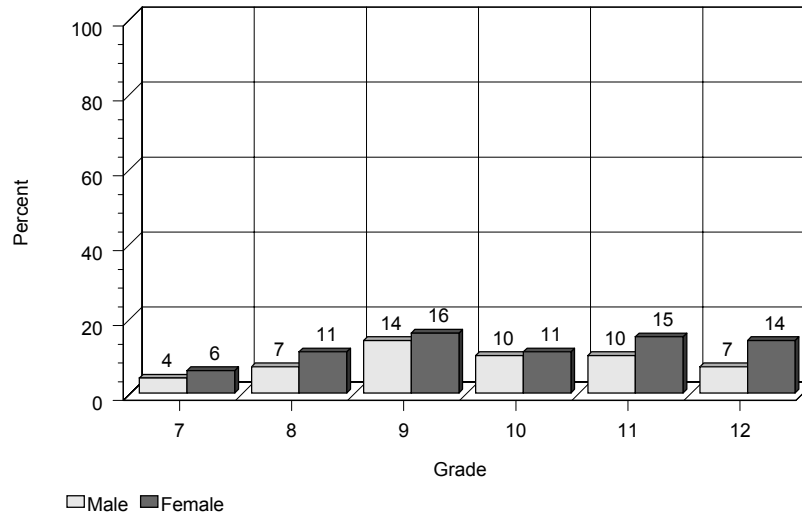
Figure 6-11 shows the percentages of local students who reported they had made a plan to kill themselves during the past month. Overall, 5% of local youth reported having made a plan to commit suicide at some time during the past month (middle school, 4%; high school, 5% males, 5%; females, 4%).

Figure 6-11: Plans Made To Commit Suicide
(In the Past Month, by Grade and Gender)



When asked, "Have you ever actually tried to kill yourself?", 10% of teens responded "yes" (middle school, 7%; high school, 12%; males, 8%; females, 12%). Figure 6-12 shows these responses by grade level and gender. It is difficult to know what these attempts consisted of or how life threatening they were. However, they should all be taken seriously.

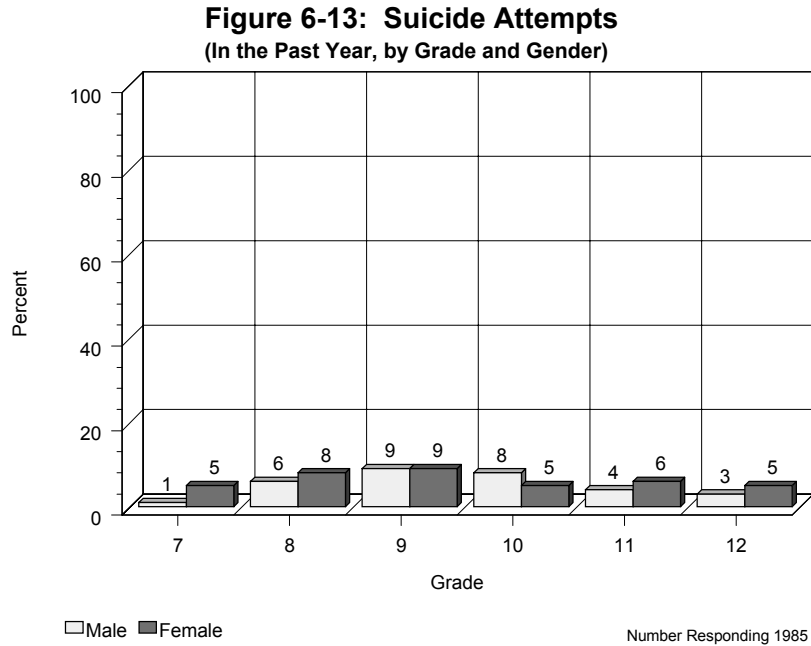
Figure 6-12: Suicide Attempts
(At Any Time, by Grade and Gender)



Number Responding 1985

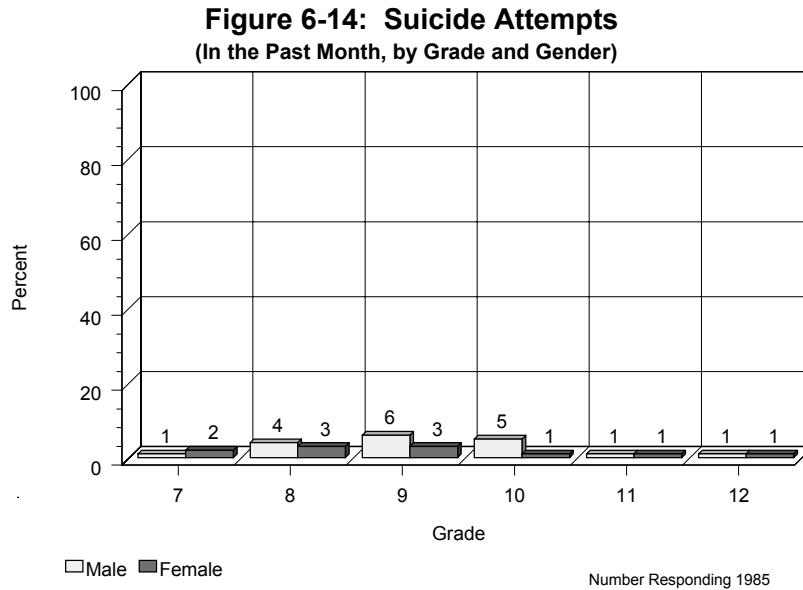
According to the National Institute of Mental Health (1999), there are an estimated 25 attempted suicides to one completion. Also, more females than males report a history of attempted suicide. However, more males die by suicide than females. This is often because males choose a more lethal method, such as using a firearm, whereas females are more likely to take pills or cut their wrists. The strongest risk factors for attempted suicide in youth are depression, alcohol or other drug use disorder, and aggressive or disruptive behaviors (National Institute of Mental Health, 1999).

Of all students surveyed, 6% reported they had actually tried to kill themselves in the past year (middle school, 5%; high school, 7%; males, 5% and females, 6%). Figure 6-13 shows the data broken down by grade and gender.



On a national level, the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey found that 7.7% (N.H., 9.8%) of high school youth (*grades 9-12*) attempted suicide in the past year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1998). New Hampshire ranks 8th out of 32 states surveyed by the CDC.

Three percent (3%) of students surveyed reported they actually tried to kill themselves in the past month (middle school, 3%; high school, 3%; males, 3%; females, 2%). Figure 6-14 shows suicide attempts in the month prior to the survey by grade and gender.

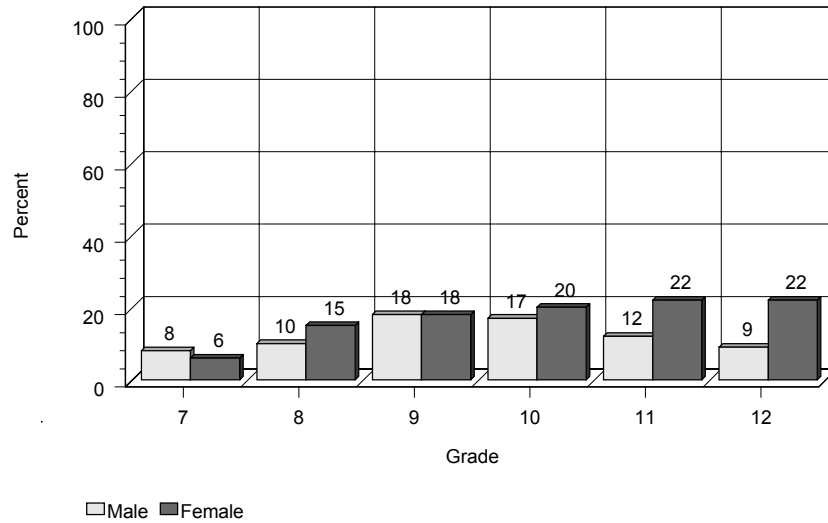


One group of teens at more risk for suicidal behavior is gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered teens. These teens are often very confused about their sexual identity and may feel they must hide it. The fact that being gay or lesbian may not be acceptable within their religion, family, or culture is another difficult issue. In addition to these concerns, is the fear of HIV infection, especially among gay males. Gay and lesbian youth may experience pain and stress leading to suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, or completed suicides (Hunter & Scheacher, 1987). Gay youth are more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual young people (National Institute of Mental Health, 1999).

Intentional Bodily Harm

TAP asked local youth, "Have you ever *intentionally* caused yourself bodily harm?" A total of 12% responded they have at some time in the past (middle school, 10%; high school, 17%; males, 12%; females, 17%). Figure 6-15 shows the frequency of intentional harm by grade and gender.

Figure 6-15: Teens Who Intentionally Harmed Themselves
(At Any Time, by Grade and Gender)



Number Responding 1990

Figure 6-16 shows the frequency of intentional harm broken down by school level and Figure 6-17 shows the data by gender.

Figure 6-16: Frequency of Intentional Harm (By School Level)

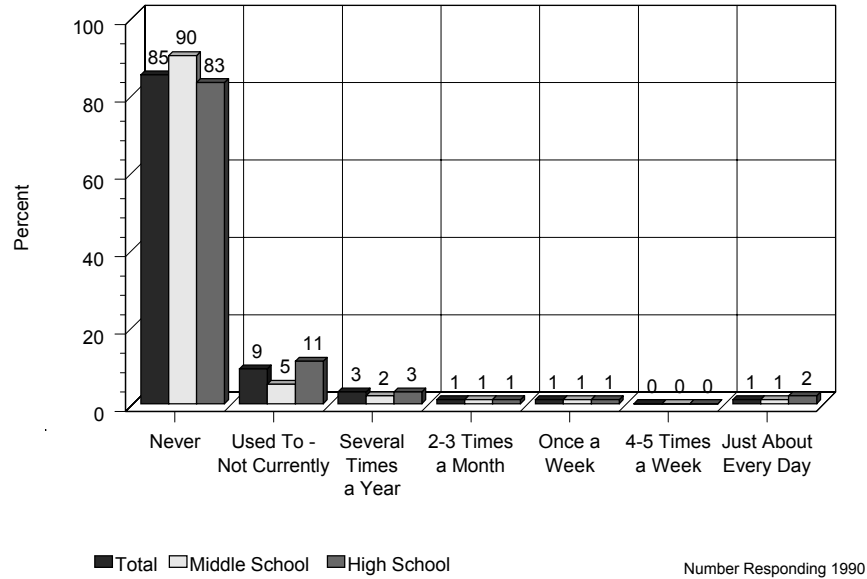
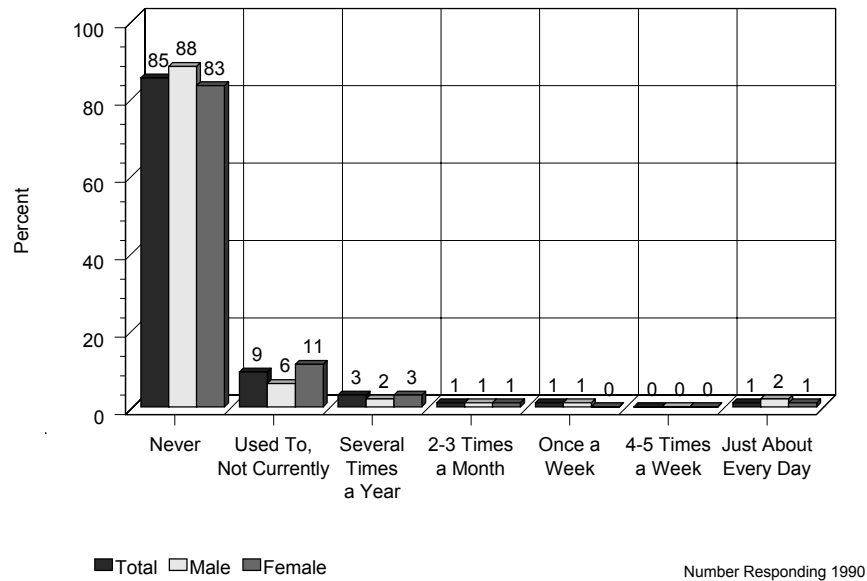


Figure 6-17: Frequency of Intentional Harm (By Gender)

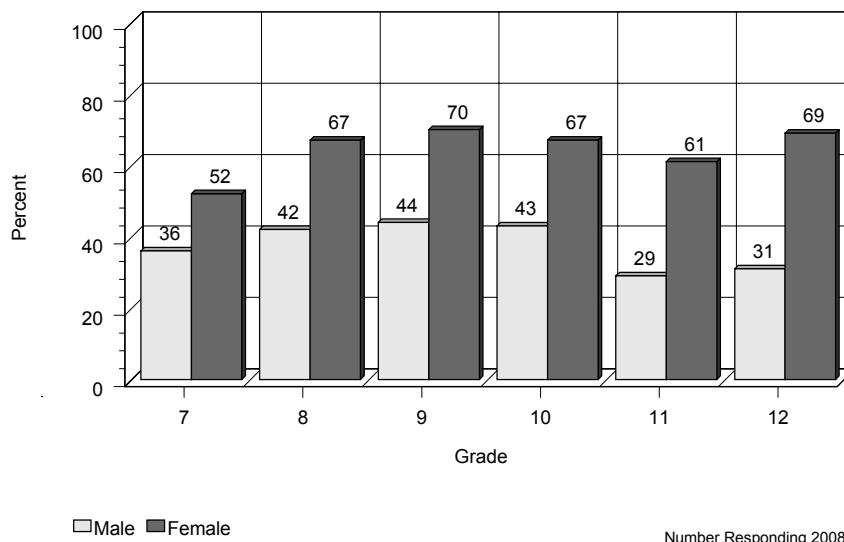


Dieting

American society is obsessed with body image. Specialists treating eating disorders report seeing children as young as 6 years old obsessed with dieting and weight. Dieting in high school is now the norm, involving 61-77% of the females and 28-42% of the males (Emmons, 1992).

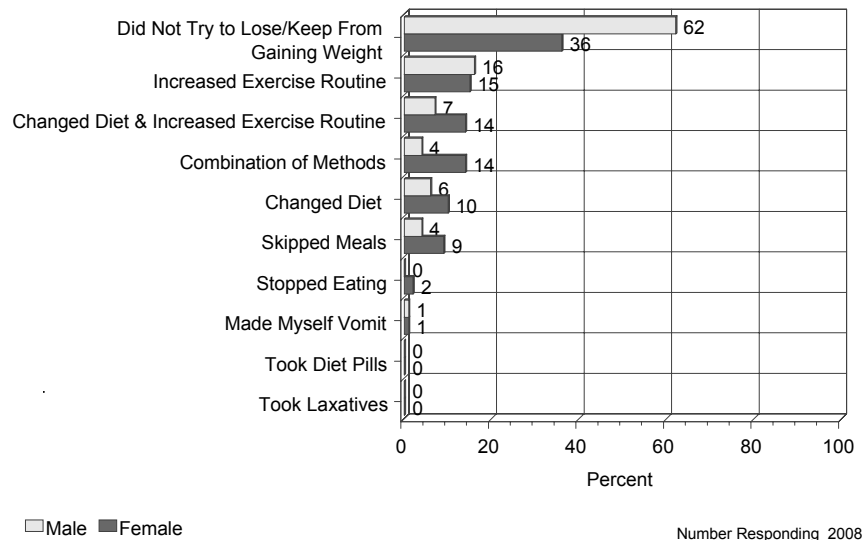
Adolescents are particularly sensitive about their appearance (Teens At Risk, 1996; Emmons, 1994). Dissatisfaction with body shape and size is prevalent, with female students less satisfied than male students (Emmons, 1994). One study of 14-16 year old girls showed 77% wanted to lose weight and 51% had tried in the past month (Coleman, 1995). Nationally and in New Hampshire, more female high school students considered themselves overweight than male high school students (nationally - females, 33.5% and males, 22.2%; New Hampshire - females, 37.6% and males, 21.9%) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1998). Overall, TAP found 51% of all youth surveyed reported having attempted to lose weight or keep from gaining it in the past month. Figure 6-18 shows how many students surveyed reported having attempted to lose weight or keep from gaining it in the past month on the basis of gender and grade.

Figure 6-18: Teens Who Tried To Lose Weight Or Keep From Gaining It
(In The Past Month, by Grade and Gender)



Nationwide, over 40% of adolescents are trying to lose weight, even though the majority are not overweight (Teens At Risk, 1996). It is easy to see from Figure 6-19 that females were far more likely to have attempted to lose weight than were males (females, 64%; males, 38%). The two most common responses were increasing their exercise routine (16%); and both changing their diet (by eating foods lower in calories, fat and/or smaller portions) *and* increasing their exercise routine (11%). Slightly fewer middle school students (49%) than high school students (53%) reported they tried to lose weight the past month.

Figure 6-19: What Teens Did in the Past Month To Lose Weight or Keep From Gaining It (By Gender)



Student Curfews

We asked local youth what time they usually had to be home on a school night. Most middle school youth had to be home before 7 pm (27%), while most high school students had to be home by 9 pm (26%). Figure 6-20 shows the responses broken down by school level.

**Figure 6-20: What Time Teens Have To Be Home On a School Night
(By School Level)**

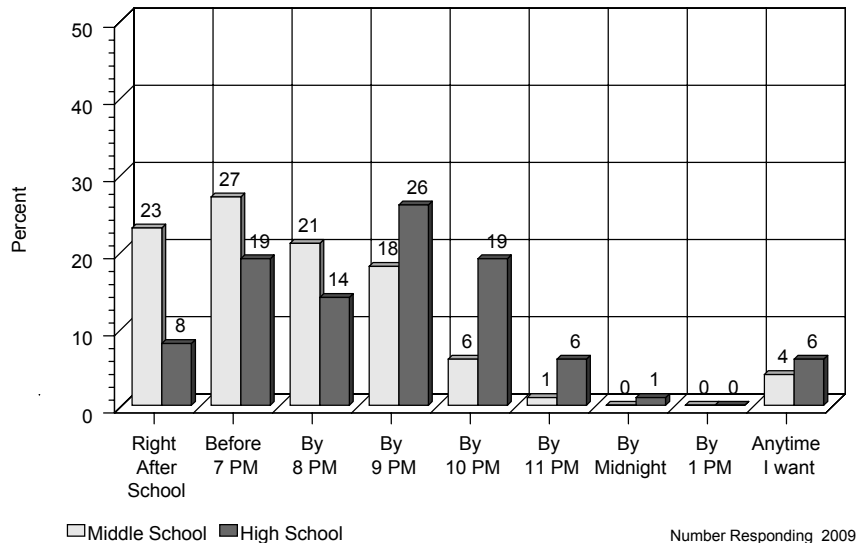
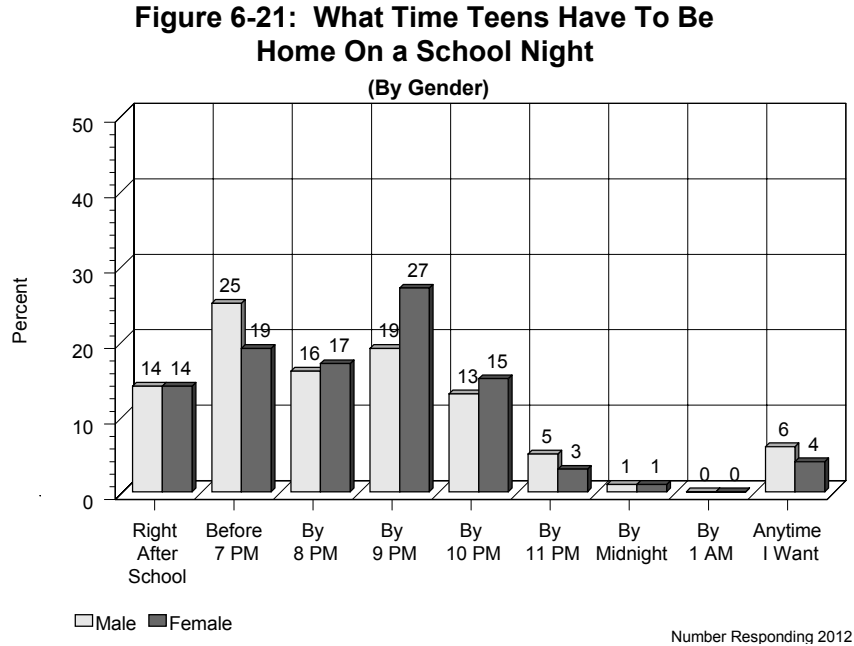


Figure 6-21 shows what time teens usually had to be home by gender. More males than females had to be home before 7 pm (males, 25%; females, 19%). Twenty-seven percent (27%) of females had a curfew of 9 pm, while 19% of males had the same curfew.



How Much Sleep Teens Get

We asked local youth what time they go to sleep on a school night. Most youth (87%) go to sleep by 11:00 PM or earlier (middle school, 96%; high school, 82%). Figure 6-22 shows middle school youth get to sleep earlier than do high school youth.

Figure 6-22: What Time Teens Get to Sleep On a School Night (By School Level)

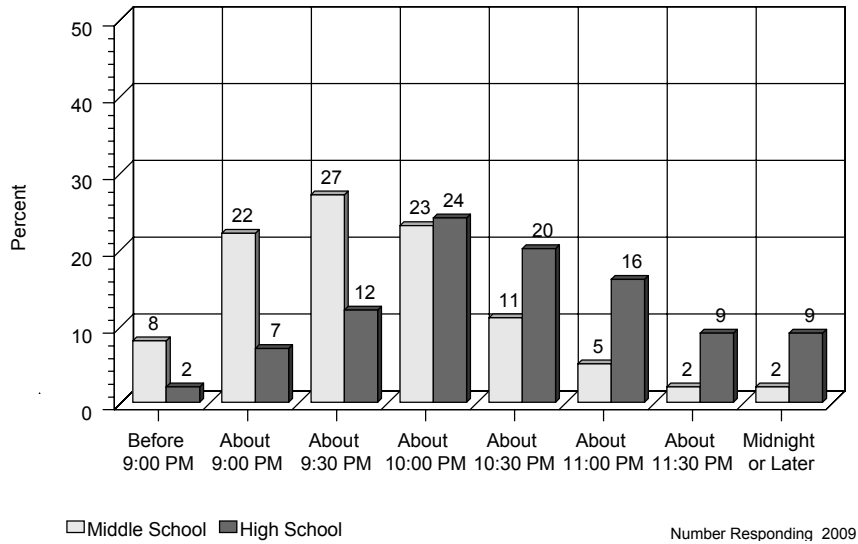
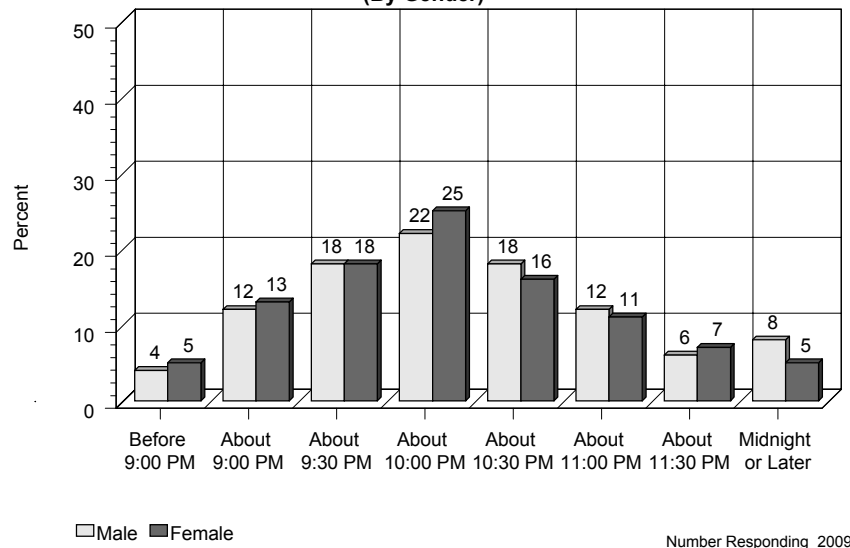


Figure 6-23 shows little difference between males and females as to when they get to sleep on a school night.

Figure 6-23: What Time Teens Get to Sleep On a School Night (By Gender)



Seat Belt Use

We asked students how often they wore seat belts when driving or riding in a motor vehicle. Over half of students responding (55%) reported they "Always" did. Figure 6-24 shows more middle school students (57%) than high school (53%) always use seat belts.

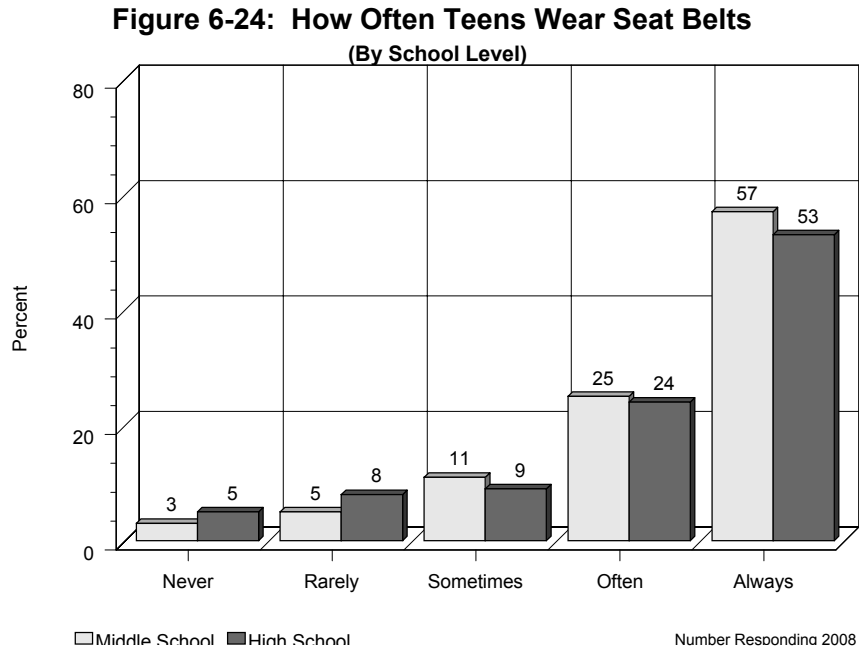


Figure 6-25 shows more females (59%) than males (50%) said they always use seat belts.

