

PROTECTING OUR YOUTH—RESILIENCY & COMMUNITY

Reasons for celebration and concern – A snapshot review of the 2013 YRBS Survey

Every two years prevention professionals, educators, legislators, and state and health agency departments await the results of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS); a bi-annual youth survey sponsored by the Vermont Department of Health, Division of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs, and the Department of Education Student Health and Learning Team. The survey measures the prevalence of behaviors that contribute to the leading causes of death, disease, and injury among youth and the prevalence of protective factors and developmental assets available. The YRBS is part of a larger effort to help communities increase the “resiliency” of young people by reducing high risk behaviors and promoting healthy behaviors.

The statewide report is based on student responses from almost every high school and middle school in Vermont, and is weighted to reflect all public school students in six through twelfth grades. The reports by local education agency are the results for students who took the survey in each participating supervisory union, school district, or public/private institution. The reports by county are results based on students’ counties of residence.

Resiliency is provided by the support of the common protective factors and developmental assets thought to help youth resist pressures to engage in dangerous activities, and develop healthy lifestyles. Protective factors such as a significant relationship with a parent/guardian, relationship with an adult member of the school community, involvement in community service, and academic achievement are associated with lower rates of risky behaviors including emotional distress, suicidal ideation and behavior, violence, substance abuse and sexual intention.

The recently released results of the 2013 YRBS tell a story; one with reasons for celebration and reasons for concern. In the following paragraphs I will provide a snapshot from the 2013 Windham Southeast Supervisory Union High School (WSESU) YRBS results. I encourage you to visit the Vermont Department of Health website to digest the full survey at your leisure. (<http://1.usa.gov/Lopjc3>)

REASONS FOR CELEBRATION: Seventy-one percent of WSESU high school students have never smoked a whole cigarette. At the time of the survey, eighty-three percent had not smoked a cigarette in the past thirty days; nearly half of those who reported smoking tobacco have tried to quit smoking in the past twelve months. On the subject of prescription drugs, eight out of ten reported having never misused a prescription stimulant or pain reliever and of these students, ninety percent had not misused these medications within the past thirty days. Ninety-seven percent reported having never used heroin. Eight out of ten students report their grades are mostly A’s and B’s and nearly three quarters say they speak with their parents at least weekly about school. More than half of the students volunteer one or more hours on an average week.

REASONS FOR CONCERN: Seventy-one percent of high school students think it's wrong for someone their age to smoke cigarettes, yet, only forty-two percent think it's wrong for someone their age to drink alcohol or smoke marijuana. More than two thirds of students think people their age risk harming themselves if they smoke a pack of cigarettes a day, yet, less than half believe binge drinking on weekends is harmful and less than one quarter believe smoking marijuana regularly to be harmful. Nearly eighty percent of high school students report thinking it is easy to get cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana, which is statistically higher, when compared to the state results. Less than half of high school students feel like they matter to people in their community and just one third agree that students help decide what goes on in their school. Almost one third of high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless for more than two weeks in a row in the past twelve months. Twenty-one percent reported having driven a vehicle when smoking marijuana within thirty days of the survey—that's one hundred and forty-nine teenagers who drove high, within a thirty day period, in our community.

So there you have it folks; the good, the bad and the concerning.

Future Matters of Substance columns will dive deeper into 2013 YRBS middle school and high school data via guest columnists from throughout the WSESU community including educators, youth counselors, mental health practitioners, prevention professionals, youth and parents. One thing is for certain, when it comes to ensuring the safety, health, well-being of our youth—it takes a village. There is much to celebrate about our youth, however, clearly there is much work to be done. I encourage you to read the entire survey and share your thoughts in a constructive and thoughtful manner. Perhaps it is time for a community conversation around what's working, what isn't working, and what can be done, to provide those protective factors and develop resiliency in our youth. After all, using the old cliché, these children are our future!

Shannon Albritton is the communications coordinator for Brattleboro Area Prevention Coalition (BAPC), a local nonprofit that organizes community efforts to be involved in the ongoing prevention and reduction of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse in the Windham Southeast area. The coalition meets at noon on the second Friday of the month, from September through June; lunch is provided and all are welcome. Visit www.BrattleboroAreaPreventionCoalition.org or call [802.257.2175](tel:802.257.2175) to learn more about their prevention efforts and to get involved.