



Pennsylvania Youth Survey 2001 Fact Sheet

PA's Survey of Student Drug Use and Risk Factors

April 2002

What is the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS 2001)?

From 1989 to 1997, Pennsylvania conducted biannual surveys of school students to assess their attitudes and behaviors involving alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. Administered to approximately 60,000 6th, 7th, 9th and 12th graders every other year, these *Generation at Risk* surveys were a valuable tool for professionals and policy makers, providing an important benchmark of alcohol, tobacco, and drug use among young Pennsylvanians and offering feedback on whether prevention and treatment programs were achieving their intended results.

PAYS 2001 builds on the traditional *Generation at Risk* survey by offering additional information on risk and protective factors associated with delinquency and substance abuse. These factors were measured through the nationally recognized *Communities That Care*[®] *Youth Survey (CTCYS)*, which was blended into the past survey format.¹

In addition to new resources, *PAYS 2001* also provides prevention planners and policy makers with a range of data that is more comparable to national studies and findings. Through a simple shift in sampling population (i.e., 6th, 8th, 10th and 12th graders), *PAYS 2001* is able to better benchmark our trends and practices against the nation – as well as establishing a solid baseline against which future prevention and intervention efforts can be assessed.

PAYS 2001 Ten Major Findings

More Protective Factors, Less Risk Factors. Perhaps more important than knowing what kids are up to, is knowing what influences their attitudes and behaviors. *PAYS 2001* incorporates tested and validated risk and protective factor scales developed for the *Communities That Care*[®] *Youth Survey*. An understanding of **risk factors** (i.e., the conditions that increase the likelihood of a young person becoming involved in drug use, delinquency, school dropout and/or violence) and **protective factors** (i.e., the conditions that buffer youth from exposure to risk by either reducing the impact of the risks or changing the way that young people respond to risks) is essential to designing successful prevention programs for young people.²

Overall, *PAYS 2001* found that Pennsylvania students report more protective factors and less risk factors in their lives than a matched comparison sample that was drawn from six other states and other national studies. In particular, Pennsylvania students have stronger ties to religiosity (i.e., religious institutions develop social norms about antisocial behavior); have the perception that it's tough to get drugs or firearms; and are more knowledgeable of the risks associated with drug use.

Many Children Try Drugs, But Few Become Regular Users. During adolescence, teens often engage in risky behaviors. It's often considered "cool" to experiment with alcohol or drugs or engage in rebellious behavior. Such experimentation, however, does not necessarily lead to regular use or behavior.

PAYS 2001 confirms that trend. For example, for alcohol use, 61.3% of surveyed students indicated they had tried alcohol in their lifetimes, but only 25.6% reported "current" use – or use within the 30-days prior to the survey. Cigarette use, too, mirrors this trend: 32.9% of surveyed students indicated they had tried cigarettes in their lifetimes, but only 15.4% indicate current use.

Alcohol Still Remains the Drug of Choice. Of Pennsylvania's 6th, 8th, 10th and 12th graders, alcohol is still the most frequently used substance. The reported willingness of PA students to try or use alcohol, however, has declined steadily from 60.2% in 1989 to 17.5% in 2001. Reports of drinking and driving have also declined, from 14.5% in 1989 to 6.7% in 2001.

Cigarette Smoking Has Declined. Smoking rates among all surveyed students has declined since the mid-1990s, with just 15.4% reporting current use. Among high school seniors, current use of cigarettes has dropped from a peak of 40.4% in 1997 to 31.9% in 2001. In addition, 86.1% of all surveyed students agreed that nicotine is an addictive drug.

Low Current Rates of Use for Certain Drugs. Current use rates of inhalants, methamphetamines, club drugs, cocaine, crack, hallucinogens, heroin and steroids are very low among all PA students (1.9% and lower).

Club Drug, Stimulants and Depressant Use on the Rise. Stimulant, depressant and club drug use rates – although still low – have increased since the mid-1990s. In the past five years, current club drug use among seniors has increased 2.7 percentage points to a high of 4.0% -- or one in 25 seniors.

Marijuana Use is on the Rise in PA – Mirroring National Trends. 21.1% of all surveyed students reported that they had used marijuana in their lifetime, and 11.4% reported current use. These rates are a part of a marked increase, both in Pennsylvania and across the nation, in marijuana use since the early 1990s. In addition, the prevalence of marijuana use while driving has increased, from 7.5% of Pennsylvania high school seniors in 1989 to 16.0% in 2001. Willingness to try or use marijuana has also increased, from 26.0% of 12th graders in 1989 to 40.5% in 2001.

Gang Membership is Declining. In comparison to the 1997 *Generation at Risk* study, reports of gang membership

have declined, particularly among 6th graders (from 12.4% in 1997 to 5.2% in 2001). Among high school seniors the percentage reporting gang membership dropped 1.7 percentage points to 4.6%, and the percentage with friends in gangs dropped 1.8 percentage points to 5.8%.

Carrying a Knife is the Most Prevalent Anti-Social Behavior. Overall, nearly one in six (16.4%) of surveyed students reported having carried a knife in the past year, making it the most prevalent antisocial behavior for students in Pennsylvania. Males are more likely to carry (26.9%) than females (6.4%).

Students Report on Other Antisocial Behaviors. Of the surveyed students, approximately one-third reported having “been threatened to be hit or beaten up,” and nearly 10% reported having attacked someone with intent to cause harm in the past year. Males in particular are more inclined to attack (12.9% reported) as opposed to females (6.3%).

Conclusion

While sharing many of the characteristics of youth around the rest of the United States, Pennsylvania’s youth are, in many aspects, unique. By capturing this information, *PAYS 2001* provides state and local communities the knowledge they need to maintain and develop existing strengths – and to target key problem areas for improvement.

For a full copy of the *Pennsylvania Youth Survey 2001*, please go to <http://www.pccd.state.pa.us/stats/pays2001.pdf> on PCCD’s website or contact PCCD, Center for Evaluation, Research, & Statistical Analysis at P.O. Box 1167, Harrisburg, PA 17108-1167 or phone 717-787-5152.

References

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¹The *Communities That Care*[®] Youth Survey was developed from research (the *Six-State Study*) funded by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Normative survey data were collected in five states: Kansas, Maine, Oregon, South Carolina and Washington. The survey, its uses, and its ongoing development have been described in two recent articles (Pollard, Hawkins and Arthur, 1999; Arthur, Hawkins, Pollard, Catalano and Baglioni, 2001).

² There is a substantial amount of research showing that adolescents’ exposure to a greater number of risk factors is associated with more drug use and delinquency. There is also evidence that exposure to a number of protective factors is associated with lower prevalence of these problem behaviors (Bry, McKeon and Pandina, 1982; Newcomb, Maddahian and Skager, 1987; Newcomb and Felix-Ortiz, 1992; Newcomb, 1995; Pollard et al., 1999).