

Less risky behavior by teens — except cyberbullying

By Dan Schneider | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | OCTOBER 13, 2013



YOON S. BYUN/GLOBE STAFF

Students posed for a group picture with their clown noses at Lexington High School's stress reduction day in May.

Smoking? Down. Drinking? Down. Bullying at school? Down.

Across area communities, high schoolers are engaging in risky behaviors in fewer and fewer numbers, according to the latest MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey. But climbing rates of cyberbullying — coupled with slight upticks in stress and mental health issues — have worried some administrators and youth health advocates.

Last fall, the MetroWest Health Foundation asked 24,459 students at 26 high schools and technical schools about their alcohol and drug consumption habits, as well as

information about mental health, violence, sexual behavior, and bullying.

Highlights of the report were released in May, and local school districts have begun discussing their individual results this fall. A presentation was made to the Natick School Committee last week by Karen Rufo and Bob Anniballi, the respective head nurse and director of wellness for the town's school district. For their talk, they broke down the district-specific and regional results of the survey.

High school students in 25 communities — from Franklin to Wellesley to Northborough — participated in the survey, which was conducted last October and November. All responses to the 40-minute survey were anonymous and voluntary, according to project manager Shari Kessel Schneider, and about 90 percent of the region's students responded.

Overall, the survey found that 21.5 percent of students had been the victim of cyberbullying during the preceding year. The figure has climbed steadily upward since the first time the survey was administered in 2006, and reports of cyberbullying remain higher in the region than in the state (17 percent) and the nation (16 percent).

This coincided, conversely, with a decline in the incidence of in-person bullying to 27 percent from a high of 31.8 percent in 2010 — although students in the MetroWest region were still bullying each other at rates higher than the state and national averages.

“Bullying in schools is easier to address because it's happening mostly on school property,” said Rebecca Donham, senior program officer at the MetroWest Health Foundation. “What's harder for schools is that cyberbullying can happen 24/7, and often not in school at all.”

On the topic of smoking, the survey found that in the last two years the number of high school students who reported ever smoking a cigarette fell by 3.9 percent to 22 percent, continuing a consistent downward trend since the 2000s. Similarly, fewer than one in 10 high schoolers admitted to having smoked a cigarette in the previous month, down from 12.1 percent in 2010.

The number of high school students that reported trying or regularly drinking alcohol has fallen as well, according to the survey. Just over 55 percent of students in the region's high schools have ever tried alcohol (down from 58 percent in 2010) and 33.4 percent had alcohol in the 30 days prior to taking the survey.

In comparison to their state and national counterparts, the region's high school students tend to drink less, smoke fewer cigarettes, and have tried marijuana less frequently, the survey found. Less than 9 percent of students reported having misused prescription drugs in their lifetime, compared with 15 percent statewide and 21 percent nationwide.

"This has been happening over a long enough period of time and across multiple indicators that we have very strong confidence in the data, that it represents a true decrease in all of those behaviors," Donham said.

Marijuana use has remained consistent since the survey was first administered, with just under one-third of high school students in the region admitting to having ever smoked pot.

Stark differences between young men and woman on the issue of mental health have continued over the last seven years, the survey found. Fewer than half as many male students reported that life was "very" stressful in the last month compared with females, while 22.3 percent of females reported having engaged in self-injury in the last year (compared with just 8.5 percent for males).

One in seven youths surveyed said that they had seriously considered committing suicide within the previous year, compared with one in 10 in 2006, and just over 1,100 students said that they had actually made an attempt to kill themselves. Females outpaced males in these categories as well.

The usual suspects have certainly made a contribution to these figures, according to Timothy O'Leary, deputy director of the Massachusetts Association for Mental Health. Academics, lingering questions about the future, and everyday social pressures cause students greater and greater stress as they progress through high school.

But the advent of cyberbullying can add another dimension to this stress, and have "just as devastating" of an effect on a teenager's development as traditional bullying.

"I just hope that the schools are paying attention to this," O'Leary said.

District by district, the survey's results were more mixed. Natick's high schoolers, for example, trail their regional counterparts in marijuana, prescription drug, alcohol, and cigarette use — the latter of which has fallen by half in Natick since 2006. Meanwhile, in Hudson 4.6 percent more students tried smoking cigarettes than the regional

average, and 6.3 percent more had tried marijuana.

Cyberbullying was also a bit less of a problem in Natick than in other school districts, with just 19 percent of students reporting being the victim of cyberbullying. Hudson, on the other hand, had a slightly higher prevalence of cyberbullying at 22.8 percent.

“We currently have semesterlong wellness courses with cyberbullying content in each class,” said Jenny Gormley, the Hudson school district’s director of health, nursing, and safety. “But given the nature of cellphone and computer use, there’s not a lot administrators and teachers can do.”

Individual districts also conducted a second survey of their middle schools students, and received responses from more than 12,000 students. According to the survey, middle school rates of marijuana, alcohol, and regular use have declined across the region since 2006.

Most strikingly, the rate of middle school students who have ever tried alcohol has fallen from 21.9 percent to 12.4 percent since the first survey was administered, with males and females drinking at nearly identical rates.

Dan Schneider can be reached at danieljoshuaschneider3@gmail.com.