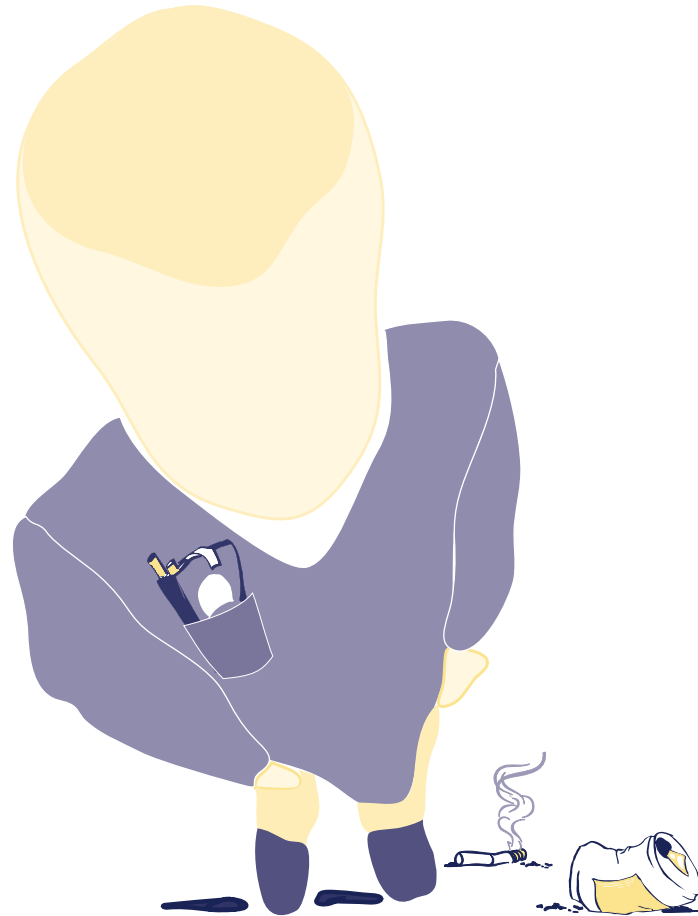


Health Risks

Youth Risk Behavior Survey





*Children have never been very good at listening to their elders,
but they have never failed to imitate them.*

*James Baldwin,
American writer*

Youth Risk Behavior Survey in Alaska

Since 1990, the federal Center for Disease Control and Prevention has sponsored several Youth Risk Behavior Surveys. These are national and state surveys of high school and middle school students, asking them how much they smoke, drink, carry weapons, and do other things that endanger their health and even their lives.

The first time Alaska schools took part in the survey was in 1995. The Alaska departments of Health and Social Services and Education and Early Development administered the survey to 1,634 students at 31 high schools and 1,265 students at 32 middle schools statewide. The adjacent table shows characteristics of the students surveyed and response rates.

The survey was conducted again in 1999, with 23 Alaska school districts taking part. Results of that survey are not yet available. But the Anchorage school district (Alaska's largest district, with more than a third of the state's high-school students) did not take part in 1999. Parents objected to some of the questions, feeling that they infringed on students' and families' rights to privacy. So unlike the 1995 survey, the 1999 survey will not be a statewide sample.

Data from 1995 Youth Risk Behavior Survey in Alaska, a joint project of the departments of Health and Social Services and Education and Early Development

Youth Risk Behavior Survey in Alaska, 1995

	High Schools		Middle Schools	
Number of Participating Schools	31		32	
Response Rate from Sample of Schools	82%		80%	
Total Respondents	1,634*		1,265*	
Boys	821		651	
Girls	807		608	
Grade				
	9	497	7	636
	10	383	8	606
	11	477		
	12	269		
	Unknown	8		
Race/Ethnicity			(No question about race/ethnicity)	
	White	1,147		
	Black	87		
	Hispanic or Latino	53		
	Alaska Native	184		
	Asian/Pacific Isl.	75		
	Other	62		

* Numbers may differ slightly because not all respondents answered every question.

Source: Alaska Departments of Health and Social Services and Education and Early Development

Although information from the 1995 survey is now several years old, it is the best information available, as reported by the teenagers themselves. Many of the survey findings are worrisome—but on the brighter side, the survey also shows that most of Alaska's teenagers don't bring guns to school or drive drunk or do other things that make the headlines.

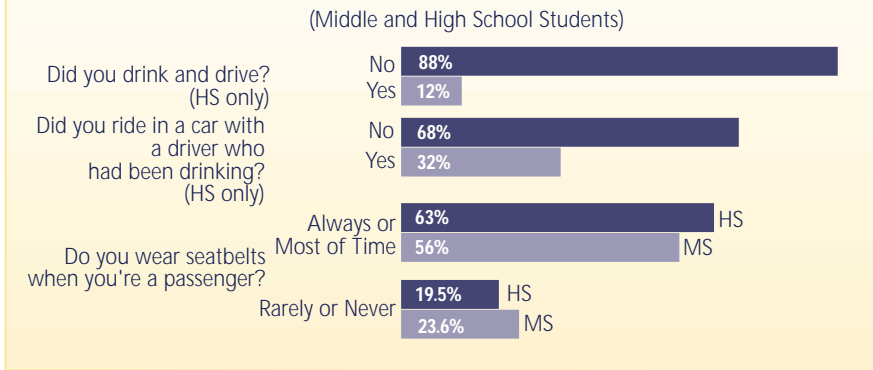
On the next few pages we provide a snapshot of some of the findings from the 1995 survey in Alaska. The published report of survey findings includes many more details.¹ Here we just provide a broad picture of survey findings, to help readers see the levels of health risks among Alaska's teenagers in the 1990s.



Youth Risk Behavior in Alaska (continued)

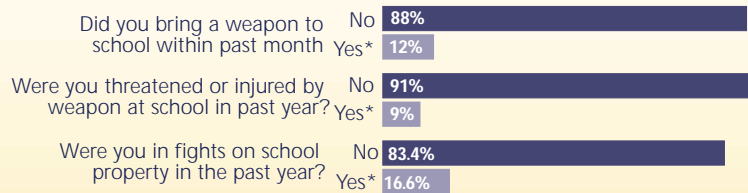
Car and other motor vehicle crashes cause 30 percent of the deaths among Alaska's young people every year—and we know many crashes involve drivers who have been drinking. Yet 20 percent of high school students and nearly 25 percent of middle school students say they seldom or never use seatbelts when riding in cars. And nearly one third of high school students report riding in cars with drivers who have been drinking.

Drinking, Driving, and Seatbelts in Month Before Survey



Weapons and Fighting at School

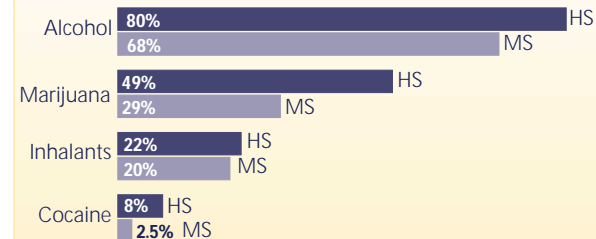
(High School Only)



*At least once

Alcohol or Drugs

(Middle and High School students who have used at least once)



Several times in the U.S. over the past few years—including once in Alaska—students have brought guns to school and murdered or wounded other students or teachers. But while we must stop this horrifying violence, it's useful to remember that the overwhelming majority of schools report no violence, and the overwhelming majority of students don't bring weapons to school. Still, more than one in ten of Alaska's high-school students reported bringing weapons (including guns, knives, or clubs) to school at least once in the month before the 1995 survey. Nearly one

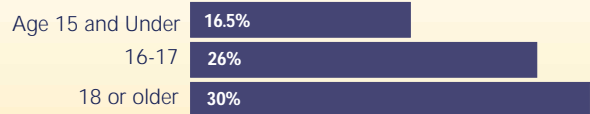
in ten reported being threatened or hurt by other students with weapons at school during the previous year. Close to one in five reported getting into one or more fights at school in the previous year.

Research has shown that teenagers who regularly use alcohol or drugs are more likely to fight, to smoke, to have sex, and even to consider suicide. We also know that alcohol and drugs not only impair judgement but can damage brain cells and even cause death. Most of Alaska's high school and even middle school students have at least tried alcohol. Nearly half of high school students and a third of middle school students have smoked marijuana. And one in five students—including those in middle school—have sniffed glue or used other inhalants that can kill.



Youth Risk Behavior Survey in Alaska (continued)

Share of Alaska Boys (15 and Older) Chewing Tobacco in Month Before Survey

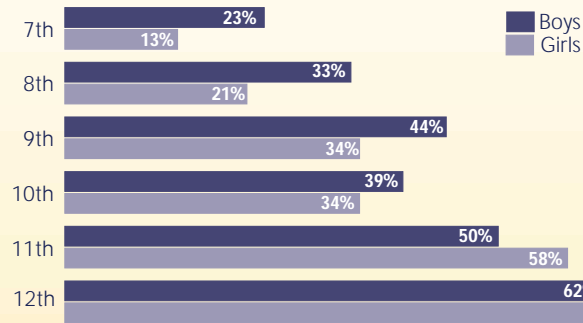


We know that smoking cigarettes can cause lung cancer, emphysema, and heart disease, among other things. A growing body of evidence also shows that chewing tobacco and snuff can cause mouth and other cancers. One quarter of Alaska's high school students and nearly 10 percent of middle school students reported smoking cigarettes regularly—on at least 10 of the 30 days before the 1995 survey. And among boys—who are much more likely than girls to chew tobacco—chewing grows more common as they get older. About 16 percent of boys 15 or under reported chewing tobacco at the time of the survey, but nearly twice as many boys 18 and older chewed.

Higher Tobacco Taxes and Teenage Smoking

In 1997, Alaska tripled cigarette taxes, raising the tax on a pack of cigarettes from 29 cents to \$1.00. Many health experts believe higher taxes reduce smoking by making cigarettes too expensive for some people—especially teenage smokers—to buy. Others, however, disagree about whether higher taxes actually cause people to quit smoking. The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services has commissioned a study of the effects of higher taxes on teenagers who smoke. The department also hopes the results of the 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Survey in Alaska will provide some information on the effects of the tax increase on teenage smoking. But since the survey was not conducted in the Anchorage school district, it will not provide a statewide sample.

Percentage of Alaska Students (Grades 7-12) Who Have Had Sexual Intercourse



Source: State of Alaska Epidemiology, Bulletin #23, 1997. Based on 1995 YRBS.

Teenagers who have sexual intercourse not only risk becoming pregnant (or fathering children), they risk being infected with sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, which can kill them. And research has found that many younger teenage girls who have sex don't really want to but do so anyway because they feel pressured.²

In Alaska, nearly one quarter of boys and more than one in ten girls in the *seventh* grade—boys and girls who are most likely 12 years old—report having had sex. That share climbs steadily through the rest of middle and high school. The 1995 survey found that the younger teenagers are when they start having sex, the more likely they are to smoke, drink, and do other things that can hurt them. By the time they are

seniors in high school, nearly two thirds of both boys and girls in Alaska have had sex. Fewer than half the sexually active Alaska teenagers reported using condoms regularly in 1995, and only 18 percent of sexually active girls said they were using birth control pills.



Notes for Health Risks Section

¹ Alaska Departments of Health and Social Services and Education, *Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Alaska Report 1995*. February 1996.

² K. A. Moore, A. K. Driscoll, and L. D. Lindburg, *A Statistical Portrait of Adolescent Sex, Contraception, and Childbearing*. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

