

## Summary of Results from the 2016 Bedford Youth Risk Behavior Survey

What issues do Bedford youth face? How have these changed over time? Are they the same as in other similar places? And what can we, as a community, do to support Bedford youth? In an attempt to answer such questions, Bedford Youth and Family Services and the Bedford Public Schools administered the Bedford Youth Risk Behavior Survey in April 2016 to all public school students in grades 6-12 (a total of 1,143 student responses were analyzed). Because similar surveys were conducted in 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014, it is possible to examine how health and mental health issues are changing in Bedford. The results are expected to help community leaders plan and evaluate policies and programming while developing the most effective ways to support young people. The information can also help parents understand challenges their children face and encourage them to work in planning prevention and response strategies.

Largely based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, questions on the anonymous and confidential survey covered a variety of topics concerning behaviors and assets, ranging from demographic and background items (e.g., gender, age, grade, participation in activities), to student substance use (e.g., alcohol, tobacco, other drugs), to other health issues such as stressors, suicide, violence and safety, sexual behavior, dietary behavior, and physical activity. Survey organizers stress that the results can present a skewed picture of Bedford youth because much of the data concerns risky behaviors such as substance use and violence. It is important to emphasize the many positive aspects of adolescent life, the fact that these issues are not confined solely to youth, and that they are community issues that require the attention of all community members and organizations. It is also critical to remember that these issues are not unique to Bedford, but exist in all communities, and that Bedford is taking a positive step toward acknowledging, addressing, and working toward preventing them. Some of the main survey findings related to substance use, violence and safety, and mental and physical health are summarized below. Additional data are available in an executive summary.

### Substance Use

**ALCOHOL** ■ Alcohol is the most popular substance among youth. Compared to other substances, use of alcohol starts earliest and increases most dramatically. 3% of Bedford middle schoolers and 20% of high schoolers reported drinking in the 30 days prior to the survey, a measure of current use. 10% of high schoolers reported binge drinking – having five or more drinks in a row within a couple of hours – in this same timeframe, meaning that half of high school drinkers (those who reported current alcohol use) engaged in binge drinking. Current alcohol use remains at its lowest point since 2008 (any use – 40% 2008, 33% 2010, 22% 2012, 20% 2014, 20% 2016; binge use – 24%, 18%, 9%, 10%, 10%) and rates are below state averages (any use – 20% Bedford 2016 vs. 34% MA 2015, binge use – 10% Bedford 2016 vs. 18% MA 2015). At the middle school level, the 2016 rate of current alcohol use was 3% (2% 2014) and binge use was 0% (0% 2014). Comparative state middle school data are not available.

**TOBACCO** ■ Less than 1% of middle school students and 2% of high school students reported smoking cigarettes in the 30 days prior to the survey, peaking at 3% among 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Current cigarette use among Bedford youth has decreased markedly over time, from a high of 27% in 2001 to 2% in 2016 among high school students and from 9% in 1999 to 0.2% in 2016 among middle school students. The rate of current cigarette use among Bedford high school students (2%) is lower than the 2015 state average of 8%. Also encouraging is the continued low level of current cigar use since peaking in 2008 (13% 2008, 12% 2010, 6% 2012, 4% 2014, 4% 2016), with use below the 2015 state average of 10%.

**MARIJUANA & OTHER DRUGS** ■ Marijuana is the most commonly used drug, with 0.4% of middle school students and 13% of high schoolers reporting use in the 30 days prior to the survey. In fact, current marijuana use (13%) was far more common among Bedford high school students than cigarette use (2%). The 2016 high school rate represents an increase from 2014 (15% 2003, 17% 2005, 21% 2008, 22% 2010, 11% 2012, 10% 2014, 13% 2016), although the current 13% rate remains well below the 2015 Massachusetts average of 25%. Use of other drugs is much less common, with less than 1% of Bedford high school students reporting current use of substances such as cocaine (0.6%), heroin (0%), methamphetamines (0%), steroids (0.2%), ecstasy (0%), and/or oxycontin (0.2%). Use of these substances has remained low over time and recent rates are similar to those observed in previous surveys (comparative state data are not available).

### Violence and Safety

**FIGHTING, WEAPONS, & SAFETY** ■ The Bedford survey revealed that youth are generally safer when they are in school than when not in school. Students were less likely to report fighting, weapons carrying, and worrying about their safety in school than when out of school, and fighting and weapons carrying have declined historically, with high school rates remaining at their lowest levels since 2005. Yet students remain concerned about their safety. For example, there was an increase between 2014 and 2016 in the percentage of Bedford high school students who reported worrying about their safety outside of school (15% to 21% HS). Concern about safety in school remained largely consistent (10% to 9%).

**BULLYING** ■ An issue that more commonly occurs in school is bullying. 20% of Bedford middle school students and 11% of high school students (16% MA 2015) reported that they had been bullied at school in the 12 months prior to the survey, while 31% of middle schoolers and 25% of high schoolers (no comparative data) reported seeing someone else bullied at school.

Additionally, 11% of middle school students and 12% of high school students (13% MA 2015) had been bullied electronically (via email, instant messaging, social networking, or texting). While bullying experiences among Bedford high school students showed some decreases between 2014 and 2016, rates among middle school students increased: bullied at school (MS – 16% to 20%, HS – 11% to 11%); bullied electronically (MS – 7% to 11%, HS – 13% to 12%); saw someone else bullied at school (MS – 26% to 31%, HS – 35% to 25%).

The survey examined whether students actively respond by trying to stop bullying and/or telling a trusted adult about it when they are bullied or when they see another student being bullied. Of those who had been bullied in school in the past 12 months, 68% of middle schoolers and 53% of high schoolers reported trying to get the person/people doing it to stop, while fewer reported telling a teacher, counselor, or another adult at school (49% MS, 49% HS) and/or telling a parent or guardian (66% MS, 58% HS). There was, however, a notable increase between 2014 and 2016 in positive/active responses to bullying. For example, the percentage of bullying victims who reported their last bullying experience to a trusted school adult increased from 37% to 49% among middle schoolers and from 33% to 49% among high schoolers. Of those who reported seeing another student bullied at school in the past 12 months, 67% of middle schoolers and 61% of high schoolers reported that they tried to get the person/people doing it to stop, while 33% of middle schoolers and 23% of high schoolers told a teacher, counselor, or another adult at school what happened. High school students were more likely than middle schoolers to report just watching it and not doing anything (51% MS, 62% HS). Encouragingly, both were least likely to report taking part in the bullying (5% MS, 5% HS). There was an overall increase among middle school students between 2014 and 2016 in positive/active responses to seeing someone else bullied: tried to get the person/people doing it to stop (62% to 67% MS, 68% to 61% HS); told a teacher, counselor or another adult at school (27% to 33% MS, 24% to 23% HS).

### Mental and Physical Health

**DEPRESSION, SELF-HARM, & SUICIDALITY** ■ 13% of Bedford middle schoolers and 25% of high schoolers reported experiencing depression in the 12 months prior to the survey (students were presented with a clinical definition of adolescent depression which asked if they had felt “so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that [they] stopped doing some usual activities”). 13% of middle schoolers and 16% of high schoolers reported that they hurt themselves on purpose (by intentionally cutting, burning, or bruising themselves) in the same time period. Students were asked whether they had seriously considered, made a plan to commit, and/or actually attempted suicide in the 12 months prior to the survey. High school students were somewhat more likely than middle schoolers to report each of these issues: considered suicide (7% MS, 13% HS); made a plan to commit suicide (6% MS, 10% HS); attempted suicide (2% MS, 4% HS). While high school levels remain slightly below state averages, trend data reveal continued increases in these issues since 2010: depression (16% 2010, 18% 2012, 20% 2014, 25% 2016 – 27% MA 2015); self-harm (11%, 10%, 13%, 16% – MA data not available); considered suicide (7%, 9%, 10%, 13% – 15% MA); planned suicide (5%, 6%, 8%, 10% – 12% MA); attempted suicide (3%, 3%, 4%, 4% – 7% MA). Middle school rates remained largely consistent: reported depression (7% 2010, 12% 2012, 13% 2014, 13% 2016); hurt self on purpose (9%, 13%, 14%, 13%); seriously considered suicide (6%, 7%, 9%, 7%); planned suicide (3%, 4%, 4%, 6%); attempted suicide (2%, 1%, 1%, 2%).

**SOCIAL SUPPORTS** ■ Respondents were asked whether they have people to talk to about problems, specifically trusted school adults, family adults, and non-family adults outside of school. Overall, Bedford youth were most likely to report having a *family* adult to talk to (87% MS, 87% HS), followed by a *school* adult (68% MS, 75% HS), and a *non-family adult outside of school* (34% MS, 40% HS). Trend data largely reveal increases in perceived adult support since 2008: *school adult* (MS – 63% in 2008 to 68% in 2016; HS – 65% to 75%), *family adult* (MS – 82% to 87%; HS – 80% to 87%), *other adult* (MS – 30% to 34%; HS – 43% to 40%). Of note is the difference by grade level in perceived support of a school adult, with levels declining from 6<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> grade and then increasing throughout the high school years (71% 6<sup>th</sup> graders, 59%, 72%, 64%, 73%, 79%, 87% 12<sup>th</sup> graders).

**SEXUAL BEHAVIOR** ■ 20% of Bedford high school students reported ever having sexual intercourse – 7% in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, 11% in 10<sup>th</sup>, 30% in 11<sup>th</sup>, and 39% in 12<sup>th</sup>. There was a slight decrease between 2014 (22%) and 2016 (20%) in the percentage of Bedford high school students who reported ever having sexual intercourse, with the rate well below the peak level of 34% in 2005. A much smaller proportion of Bedford (20%) than 2015 Massachusetts (36%) high school students reported ever having sexual intercourse and this difference is consistent across all grades (9<sup>th</sup> – 7% Bedford, 14% MA; 10<sup>th</sup> – 11% Bedford, 31% MA; 11<sup>th</sup> – 30% Bedford, 42% MA; 12<sup>th</sup> – 39% Bedford, 60% MA). Sexually active Bedford students were also more likely than their 2015 Massachusetts peers to report using a condom during their last sexual experience (74% Bedford, 58% MA), with continued improvement reversing a decline previously observed (76% in '05, 72% in '08, 68% in '10, 64% in '12, 71% in '14, 74% in '16).

**PHYSICAL ACTIVITY** ■ The Bedford survey contained a measure designed to assess whether students are getting the recommended level of 60 or more minutes of daily physical activity (that increased their heart rate and made them breathe hard some of the time). Fifty-one percent (51%) of Bedford middle school students and 46% of high school students reported engaging in 60 or more minutes of such activity on at least 5 of the prior 7 days, with the high school rate of 46% similar to the 2015 Massachusetts average of 45%. Trend data reveal decreases between 2014 and 2016 in recommended physical activity – middle school (42% 2008, 42% 2010, 64% 2012, 56% 2014, 51% 2016), high school (45%, 42%, 48%, 50%, 46%).