

# SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

## Results from the 2009 Gloucester Student Health Survey

What issues do Gloucester youth face? Have these changed over time? Are they the same as in other similar places? What can we as a community do to support Gloucester youth? In an effort to answer such questions, the Healthy Gloucester Collaborative through Health Education Services, the Gloucester Health Department, and the Gloucester Public Schools administered the Gloucester Student Health Survey in April 2009 to all public school students in grades 6-12 (1,509 student responses analyzed). Social Science Research and Evaluation, Inc., a private non-profit research firm in Burlington, consulted on survey design, implementation, analyses, and reporting. Because similar surveys were conducted in 2003 and 2007, we can examine how health and mental health issues are changing in Gloucester. The results are expected to help school 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 Gloucester 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 Gloucester, but exist in all communities, and that Gloucester 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 health are summarized below. Additional results are available in an Executive Summary. Please contact Ann-Marie Jordan of the Gloucester Public Schools at 978-281-9816, or Jack Vondras of the Gloucester Health Department at 978-281-9771, for additional survey information.

### Substance Use

**Alcohol:** Alcohol is the most popular substance among youth, including youth in Gloucester. Compared to other substances, use of alcohol starts earliest and increases most dramatically, with over 8 out of every 10 Gloucester 12<sup>th</sup> graders (84%) reporting that they have ever consumed alcohol. 16% of middle schoolers and over half (51%) of high schoolers reported drinking in the 30 days prior to the survey, a measure of current use. 36% 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 71% of high school drinkers (those who reported current alcohol use) engaged in binge drinking. Gloucester youth report that alcohol is fairly easy to obtain and that their most common source is a “3<sup>rd</sup> party” adult other than a parent, usually an adult friend or a stranger. Trend data are promising. Between 2007 and 2009, rates of both current alcohol use (56% to 51%) and current binge drinking (41% to 36%) decreased, reversing increases previously observed after 2003. Rates of these behaviors are, however, higher in Gloucester than among Massachusetts high school students (current alcohol use – 51% Gloucester 2009 vs. 46% MA 2007; current binge drinking – 36% vs. 28%).

**Tobacco:** 8% of middle school students and 27% of high school students reported that they smoked in the 30 days prior to the survey, peaking at 32% among 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Current cigarette use among Gloucester middle school students increased from 4% in 2007 to 8% in 2009, a notable reversal of a prior decline from the 2003 rate of 9%. The high school rate remained unchanged at 27% and well above the state average of 18%.

**Marijuana:** Marijuana use is the most commonly used illegal drug, with 6% of middle school students and 33% of high schoolers reporting that they used it in the 30 days prior to the survey. In fact, current marijuana use (33%) was more common among Gloucester high school students than cigarette use (27%). Reported use increased rapidly with age, from 0% to 14% between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, to 22% in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and up to 42% in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Current use among Gloucester high school students has remained largely unchanged since 2003 (34% in '03, 32% in '07, 33% in '09), and above the state average of 25%.

**Other Drugs:** Use of drugs other than marijuana is much less common, with 2% or less of high school students (and even fewer middle schoolers) reporting current use of cocaine (1%), ecstasy (2%), heroin (0.4%), or methamphetamines (0.4%), and 4% reporting use of any other illegal drug. Trend data reveal slight but consistent decreases in use of these substances since 2007, and while comparative Massachusetts data on current use of these substances are not available, data on lifetime use are promising, with levels of lifetime use below state averages.

### Violence and Safety

**Fighting, Weapons Carrying, and Bullying:** The Gloucester Student Health Survey revealed that youth are generally safer when they are in school than when they are not in school. For example, students were less likely to report fighting and weapons carrying when they were in school than when they were out of school. There is one issue, however, that more commonly occurs in school and

that is bullying. Being bullied is more common among younger students than older ones – 47% of Gloucester middle school students and 18% of high schoolers reported that they had been bullied at school in the 12 months prior to the survey. The rate of being bullied was highest among middle schoolers and declined through the following years (6<sup>th</sup> = 43%, 7<sup>th</sup> = 50%, 8<sup>th</sup> = 48%, 9<sup>th</sup> = 25%, 10<sup>th</sup> = 20%, 11<sup>th</sup> = 17%, 12<sup>th</sup> = 11%). Available high school trend and comparative data reveal positive findings for issues related to violence and safety, with decreases and rates below state averages. For example, the percentage of Gloucester high school students who reported staying home from school out of fear for their safety decreased from 6% in 2007 to 3% in 2009, a rate below the state average of 5%.

**Dating Violence:** The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that adolescents are more likely to experience sexually violent crimes than any other age group, and studies suggest that sexual violence can have a detrimental impact on psychological development. With this in mind, developers of the Gloucester Student Health Survey included questions in the high school survey about whether youth had ever been physically and/or sexually hurt by a date or someone they were going out with. A total of 7% of Gloucester high school students, 3% of males and 11% of females, reported that they had ever been physically and/or sexually hurt by a date, a rate lower than the previously observed 10% in 2003 and 9% in 2007. Additionally, 5% (2% males, 7% females) reported that they had ever been forced by anyone to have sexual intercourse against their will, down slightly from 6% in 2007.

### Mental and Physical Health

**Depression:** 14% of Gloucester middle school youth and 21% of high schoolers reported that they had experienced 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”).

**Self-Harm:** 9% of middle schoolers and 13% of high schoolers reported that they hurt themselves on purpose (for example, by intentionally cutting, burning, or bruising themselves) in the same time period.

**Suicidality:** Students were asked whether they had seriously considered suicide, made a plan to commit suicide, and actually attempted suicide in the 12 months prior to the survey: considered suicide (9% MS, 8% HS), made a plan to commit suicide (3% MS, 6% HS), attempted suicide (1% MS, 3% HS).

In general, these mental health concerns tended to increase in the middle school years, and then vary with some decreases throughout the high school years. There were substantive differences in reports of these issues by males and females, with females approximately twice as likely to report each issue. For example, among Gloucester high school students, 14% of males and 27% of females reported experiencing depression, 8% of males and 17% of females reported self-harm, 4% of males and 11% of females reported seriously considering suicide, 5% of males and 7% of females reported planning suicide, and 1% of males and 4% of females reported actually attempting suicide. Survey organizers stress that these data should be viewed in context with other statistics that reveal that males are more likely than females to actually die from committing suicide. Trend and comparative data are promising, with high school trend data revealing decreases between since 2003 in these issues and levels lower than state averages: depression (23%-22%-21%; 24% MA); self-harm (17%-13%-13%; 17% MA); considered suicide (14%-10%-8%; 13% MA); planned suicide (13%-8%-6%; 11% MA); and, attempted suicide (9%-3%-3%; 8% MA).

**Social Supports:** Respondents were asked whether they have people to talk to about problems, specifically trusted school adults, family adults, and other non-family adults outside of school. Gloucester youth were most likely to report having a family adult to talk to (MS – 83%, HS – 79%), followed by a school adult (MS – 56%, HS – 66%), and a non-family adult outside of school (MS – 50%, HS – 49%). Available high school trend data reveal increases between 2007 and 2009 in the percentage of students who reported having a trusted school adult (58% to 66%) and/or a family adult (75% to 79%) to speak with about a problem, reversing decreases from 2003 rates (63% and 77% respectively). The percentage who reported having a non-family adult to speak with remained steady in 2009. Comparative data show that 2009 Gloucester high school students were virtually as likely as their 2005 Massachusetts peers (2007 data not available) to report having a trusted school adult (66% Gloucester vs. 67% MA), family adult (79% Gloucester vs. 81% MA), or a non-family adult to rely on (49% Gloucester vs. 48% MA).

**Sexual Issues:** A total of 51% of Gloucester high school students reported that they had ever had sexual intercourse in their lifetime, increasing from 28% among 9<sup>th</sup> graders, to 39% among 10<sup>th</sup> graders, 64% among 11<sup>th</sup> graders, and 72% among 12<sup>th</sup> graders. These rates have continued to hover at approximately 50% over time (48% in 2003, 50% in 2007, 51% in 2009). A larger proportion of Gloucester (51%) than Massachusetts (44%) high school students reported ever having sexual intercourse and this difference is consistent across all grades (9<sup>th</sup> – 28% Gloucester, 26% MA; 10<sup>th</sup> – 39% Gloucester, 40% MA; 11<sup>th</sup> – 64% Gloucester, 51% MA; 12<sup>th</sup> – 72% Gloucester, 64% MA). Sexually active Gloucester students, however, were slightly more likely than their Massachusetts peers to report using a condom during their last sexual experience (64% Gloucester, 61% MA).

**Physical Activity:** A new item added to the 2009 Gloucester survey assessed how many youth engage in the U.S. Surgeon General's recommended 60 or more minutes of physical activity on at least 5 days in a week. 56% of Gloucester high school students reported this level of activity, a rate higher than the state average of 41%. Of note is how physical activity declined with/age grade, with 65% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders meeting the recommended activity level, down to 62% of 10<sup>th</sup> graders, 54% of 11<sup>th</sup> graders, and 46% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders.