

Dane County: 2021 youth survey captures shifting trends among adolescents during COVID-19 pandemic

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Today, the Dane County Youth Commission released the results from the 2021 Dane County Youth Assessment (DCYA). Every three years, Dane County youth in grades 7 through 12 complete a survey that captures their opinions, concerns, behaviors, attitudes, and experiences on a range of topics. The COVID-19 pandemic had a dramatic impact on certain student behaviors and ultimately on how the DCYA presents data in the report.

Some antisocial behaviors (like bullying) that usually take place at school were down considerably. Behaviors that typically involve students congregating or socializing face-to-face (like alcohol use or sexual behavior) were down as well. Unfortunately, emotional health topics related to stress and worry (struggling with homework, anxiety, and depression) were higher. Youth reporting increased problems with mental and emotional health has gone up consistently over time, but that trend accelerated this year. It is impossible to know for sure the degree to which certain results are attributable to the pandemic, and behaviors may return to past levels once students return to school and resume prior behavior patterns.

Nearly 27,000 students across 19 area school districts completed the survey. The DCYA provides educators, policy-makers, and funding bodies data to inform grant writing, program development, and public policy. The survey has been administered since 1980 and includes topics related to health and nutrition, alcohol and other drug use, emotional and mental health, sexual activity and knowledge, bullying experience, out-of-school time activities, employment, and many other risk and

positive behaviors engaged in by youth in the Dane County community.

“The Dane County Youth Assessment provides key insights into our youth’s attitudes and experiences to help us better understand their concerns, especially as our community continues to face challenges related to the pandemic,” said Dane County Executive Joe Parisi. “While we are seeing positive declines in bullying and vaping, we cannot ignore the emotional health concerns our young people report struggling with, particularly among female, LGBTQ+, and low-income youth. The results speak to the continued need for mental health services, which Dane County has continued to prioritize and expand during this unprecedented time.”

Takeaways from the DCYA include, but are not limited to, the following:

Family and Home

- 7.7% of all 7th through 12th graders report skipping meals or eating less at least once in the past 30 days because their family did not have enough money for food. Youth reported 11.5% in 2018 and 12.2% in 2015.

Physical Health

- Youth who expressed they stayed up past 11pm three or more nights a week, also reported feeling more depressed, struggling more with homework, and skipping class more frequently than their peers.
- Teens, ages 11 to 17, who take their computers and other devices to bed with them most nights are 2.5 times more likely to be deprived of sleep during weekdays than teens who do not.

Mental and Emotional Health

- 77.5% of youth who identify as gay or lesbian, 70.5% of youth who identify as bisexual, and 63.9% of youth questioning their sexual orientation report feeling anxious “always or often” compared to 44.1% of youth who identify as straight/heterosexual.
- Youth whose families are struggling financially are more anxious (65.8%) than students who say money is not a problem for their family right now (33.1%).
- 44.0% of high school female youth report depressive symptoms—up from 34.2% in 2018, 30.3% in 2015, and 25.6% in 2012.
- 20.6% of all high school youth report they are receiving mental health

services. 64.6% of high school students reporting depression are not receiving mental health services.

School Experience

- 51.8% of 9th through 12th grade Black/African-American students “agree” that they feel close to people at their school compared to 64.1% in 2018 and 66.9% in 2015. 62.7% of all high school students agreed.
- 95.3% of students said they attended school remotely some or all of the school year. 51% of high school students and 48.9% of 7th through 8th graders said they fell behind in the 2020-21 school year.

Out-of-School Time

- The 2021 DCYA asked 9th through 12th grade students about community involvement or engagement or if they had any conversations about racial issues in school or the larger community. 94.7% agree that people, working together, can make changes. 50.7% said they talked about racial inequality a few times. 17.4% said they never really talked about it.

Bullying and Abuse

- 19.8% of 7th through 8th grade students and 11.6% of high school students reported being the target of some face-to-face bullying. This was 48.9% and 35.7% respectively in 2018. High school females report more electronic bullying (25.7%) than males (15.9%).
- 3.5% of all 9th through 12th grade youth report they have been hit by a parent, leaving signs of injury. This is down from 17.8% back in 2009.
- 6.1% of all 9th through 12th grade youth report they have been forced, either verbally or physically, to take part in a sexual activity in their lifetime. It rises to 10.1% for high school girls and 16.0% for high school youth who identify as lesbian/gay/bisexual/questioning.
- 8.4% of high school youth girls, in the lowest income category, report having had sexual contact in order to stay safe or to get something like a place to stay, money, gifts, alcohol, or drugs (sex trafficking). This is 0.6% for girls in the highest income category.

Tobacco, Alcohol, and Drug Use

- 7.6% of high school students say they have used vapor electronic cigarettes in the last 30 days compared to 18.8% in 2018 and 16.0% in 2015.
- 22.9% of high school youth report drinking alcohol in the past 12 months compared to 30.9 in 2018, 34.8% in 2015 and 43.1% in 2012.

Sexual Behaviors

- 68.7% of high school youth who say they are having intercourse “always” use some form of birth control compared to 74.3% in 2018, 70.1% in 2015 and 73.7% in 2012.

The DCYA is a collaborative effort led by the Dane County Youth Commission in partnership with the United Way of Dane County, Public Health Madison & Dane County, the City of Madison, and county schools. For the full results of the current and past Dane County Youth Assessments, as well as further demographic analyses, please go to <https://www.dcdhs.com/About-Us/Commissions-Boards-and-Committees/Youth-Commission/Youth-Assessment>