

## Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) FAQ's

### **Q. What is the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)?**

A. The YRBS was developed in 1990 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to monitor priority health risk behaviors that contribute markedly to the leading causes of death, disability, and social problems among youth and adults in the United States. These behaviors, often established during childhood and early adolescence, include tobacco use, poor eating habits, inadequate physical activity, alcohol and other drug use, sexual behaviors that contribute to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV infection), and behaviors that contribute to unintentional injuries and violence.

### **Q. What are the components of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS)?**

A. The YRBSS includes national, state, and local school-based surveys of representative samples of 9th through 12th grade students. These surveys are conducted every two years. The national survey is conducted by the CDC. State and local district surveys have been conducted by the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services and the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development in cooperation with local school districts since 1995.

### **Q. What is the purpose of the YRBSS?**

A. The YRBSS was designed to: determine the prevalence of health risk behaviors; assess whether health risk behaviors increase, decrease, or stay the same over time; examine the co-occurrence of health risk behaviors; provide comparable national, state, and local data; provide comparable data among subpopulations of youth; and monitor progress toward achieving state and national health objectives.

### **Q. Why is the survey being done?**

A. Survey results are used to provide state-based data to help measure how many youth practice health-risk behaviors. The survey results are also used to create state and local health programs as well as school programs to help improve health and reduce unhealthy behaviors and to determine if these programs are working.

### **Q. Are sensitive questions asked?**

A. Some questions may be considered sensitive. To help solve health problems among our youth, we must first understand them. AIDS, HIV infection, and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are major health problems. Sexual intercourse and intravenous drug use are among the behaviors known to increase the risk of HIV or other STDs. The only way to determine if adolescents are at risk of becoming infected with HIV or other STDs is to ask questions about these behaviors. Attempted suicide, tobacco use, alcohol and other drug use, and weapon-carrying also may be considered sensitive topics. Questions are presented in a straightforward and sensitive manner in recognition of these topics.

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### **Q. Who supports this survey?**

A. The YRBS has widespread support. The survey is supported by many major national organizations interested in the health of youth. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Association for Health Education, the American Association of School Administrators, the American Cancer Society, the American Medical Association, the National Association of Chronic Disease Directors, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, the Directors of Health Promotion and Education, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Institute for Youth Development, the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Education Association, the National PTA, the National School Boards Association, and the Society of State Directors of Health, Physical Education and Recreation have provided letters of support.

**In Alaska**, the YRBS is supported by the Association of Alaska School Boards, the Alaska Association of School Administrators, the Alaska Association of Secondary School Principals, the Alaska Action for Healthy Kids, the Alaska Parent Teacher Association (PTA), the Alaska School Nurses Association, the All Alaska Pediatric Partnership, the American Heart Association, the American Lung Association, the American Cancer Society, the Alaska Health Education Consortium, the Alaska Tobacco Alliance, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, the Alaska Public Health Association, the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, the Alaska Mental Health Board, the United Way of Anchorage, United Way of Mat-Su, United Way of the Tanana Valley, United Way of Southeast Alaska, the Governor's Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, and others.

### **Q. What grades are surveyed?**

A. The statewide YRBS is administered to students in grades 9 through 12. There is a shorter version of the YRBS questionnaire designed for middle school that is an available option for local surveys.

### **Q. How many students are surveyed?**

A. In the statewide survey, approximately 2,000 students from about 45 high schools are randomly selected to participate in the YRBS every other year. Approximately 1,400-1,500 actually participate in the survey. In addition, approximately 20 school districts choose to conduct a local survey involving more students.

### **Q. How are schools and students selected?**

A. A random sample of eligible public high schools (not including boarding schools, charter school, alternative schools or correctional schools) is computer generated. The probability of a school being selected is based on enrollment in grades 9 through 12. One or two classes (approximately 25 to 50 students) in each grade 9 through 12 are then selected randomly to participate in each school, depending on the size of the school.

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**Q. What if school districts, schools, or students do not choose to participate?**

A. Participation in the YRBS is **voluntary**. However, to develop accurate statewide estimates of priority health-risk behaviors among adolescents, participation rates must be high. If your randomly selected district, school or classroom does not choose to participate they CANNOT be substituted with other schools and classrooms in the state. The goal is to achieve 90 to 95 percent participation by selected schools and students.

**Q. Is student participation anonymous? How is student privacy protected?**

A. YES, the survey is **anonymous**. Survey administration procedures are designed to protect student privacy and allow for anonymous participation. The survey is administered by teachers or proctors that must follow strict guidelines and sign an assurance of confidentiality form. Students submit a completed optically scannable answer sheet, containing no personal identifiers, in a sealed envelope which is then placed in a large box or large envelope and returned to the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services.

**Q. Are students tracked over time to see how their behavior changes?**

A. NO. Each year a new sample of schools and students is drawn. Students who participated cannot be tracked because no identifying information is collected.

**Q. How long does it take to fill out the survey? Does the survey include a physical test?**

A. One class period is needed to fill out the written survey, which typically has an average of 100 questions. The survey does not include a physical test or exam.

**Q. Do parents have to give permission for the student to participate?**

A. YES. There are two types of parent permission. Active parental permission requires that the parent sign a permission slip for the student to participate (opt in). Passive parental permission requires that parents who do not want their student to take the survey to sign a permission slip denying the student to participate (opt out). Both types require parental notification, the opportunity for parents to review the survey, and a parent permission form. **By law, Alaska operates under an active parental permission system.**

**Q. Is Alaska the only state that requires active parental permission for the YRBS?**

A. NO, there are two others; New Jersey and Utah.

**Q. What are the pros and cons of active parental permission?**

A. PROS: Improved confidence that parents have actually given permission and parents may feel more in control; reduces school administrators' concerns over parents' concerns about the survey.

CONS: A non-return of the permission slip does not necessarily mean an objection to student participation; more resource intensive (money, time, and staff); risk of low response rate that may result in biased data.

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**Q. Do students answer questions truthfully?**

A. Research indicates data of this nature may be gathered as reliably from adolescents as from adults. Internal reliability checks help identify the small percentage of students who falsify their answers. To obtain truthful answers, students must perceive the survey as important and know procedures have been developed to protect their privacy and allow for anonymous participation.

**Q. If my district participates in the statewide YRBS, can we get our data back to use at the district level?**

A. NO. Since a limited number of classrooms from each district participate in the survey, the survey data would not be representative of your high school students in your district.

**Q. How can my district get local YRBS data?**

A. All districts in Alaska (regardless of whether they are selected to be included in the statewide sample) are given the option of conducting a local level survey at the same time, with support from the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. In this case, either more classrooms are randomly selected (large districts), or all high school students in the district are asked to participate in the survey.

**Q. Since this is not an academic activity why is it done in the school? Can the student take it home to do?**

A. NO. The survey is school-based because it is the best way to protect student privacy and collect credible data from students. The survey needs to be administered in a controlled setting under strict standardized guidelines to ensure anonymity and make students comfortable enough to tell the truth. Asking the students to take the YRBS questionnaire home to complete might jeopardize their privacy and threaten the reliability and validity of the data.

**Q. Doesn't asking students questions in a survey about health-risk behaviors (e.g., sexual intercourse) increase the likelihood that they will practice that behavior.**

A. There is NO evidence that health-risk behaviors can be changed simply by reading a question about them. Trend data from the Alaska YRBS indicate that the prevalence of many health-risk behaviors (including sexual behaviors, tobacco use, and many violence-related behaviors) has decreased or stayed the same since 1995 when the first YRBS was done in Alaska.

**Q. What does "weighted" data mean?**

A. Although "weighted" data is a statistical term and describes how the data are analyzed, it has been used as a general term to mean that the overall survey response rate met the minimum goal of 60% or higher in order for the data to be reliable and statistically representative of the overall high school population. The higher the response rate the better the data. If the overall response rate is less than 60%, the results are NOT used to report state estimates.

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### **Q. What is done to maximize YRBS response rate?**

A. Under active parental consent it is most important to have ALL permission slips returned whether the permission is given or denied. CDC says: “*as a general rule, expect the requirement for active parental consent to reduce student response rates by about 50% unless you implement extraordinary procedures.*” The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services provides education and training to school personnel on the importance of the YRBS and strategies for success. Offering survey release forms at the beginning of the school year is sometimes an effective strategy for some districts. The Department of Education & Early Development offers financial assistance to districts to offset the burden of tracking the forms.

### **Q. This is a conservative state. Aren't most parents going to disapprove of the YRBS?**

A. NO. The majority of parents consent to their students taking the survey. Of all the permission slips turned in for the statewide and local surveys in 2009, 86% gave permission and 14% denied permission. However, of all the permission slips sent out, 25% were not returned which lowered the overall response rate significantly.

### **Q. Have there been any studies to determine why some of the permission forms don't come back to the school?**

A. One study that examined active and passive permission techniques concluded “for a great majority, failure to send in a [active permission] form appeared to reflect latent consent combined with apathy or inertia<sup>1</sup>. There has not been a follow up study in Alaska.

### **Q. Our school's priorities are activities related to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and improving test scores. How can we do the YRBS too?**

A. Study after study has shown that students who do *not* engage in the behaviors assessed by the YRBS have higher grades and test scores. In addition, the YRBS provides valuable data that are relevant to NCLB data collection requirements including data on the incidence and prevalence of illegal drug use and violence among youth, age of onset, and the prevalence of risk factors. The YRBS also provides data to assess local education agency's performance measures for drug and violence prevention programs and activities that include performance measures for drug and violence prevention programs.

### **Q. If the survey is only given to students in high school, why is there a response option for students aged 12 and under?**

A. Most students in high school are between the ages of 14 and 17. Like all well designed surveys, this response option is included in the unusual event that there is a younger student attending high school.

### **Q. Is there potential harm caused to the student by taking the survey?**

A. The only potential risk is that some students might find certain questions to be sensitive.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellickson P, Hawes JA. An assessment of active versus passive methods for obtaining parental consent. Evaluation Review 1989;13(1):45-55.

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**Q. I heard that there is a question on the YRBS that asks “Does your parent have other adult “friends” stay overnight?” Is that true?**

A. NOT TRUE.

**Q. Why do many of the questions repeatedly ask questions about a behavior even if the student has already said they don't engage in the behavior?**

A. There are two reasons for this. First is that the use of skip patterns may increase the chance for error. Second is to ensure confidentiality by enabling all the students to go through each question and end the survey at approximately the same time. If students were allowed to skip questions, the students with the least risk factors would finish sooner and the students with the most risk factors would finish later and both groups would be identifiable among their classmates and teacher.

**Q. Doesn't the federal Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment require active parental permission for this type of survey?**

A. A law passed in 2002 changed the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (*also known as the Tiahrt Amendment*), the federal law that addresses student surveys, but it does not require active parent permission for the YRBS. Under this law, parents must be notified about the survey, given a chance to review the questionnaire if they request to do so, and given an opportunity to opt their child out of participation. These have always been standard YRBS procedures. Active parent permission would be necessary only if students were **required** to participate in the survey and if the YRBS were funded by the US Department of Education, but the YRBS is always voluntary for students and is not funded by the US Department of Education so passive parent permission is acceptable under the current federal law.

**Q. If a parent gives permission under active consent or does not deny permission under passive consent, will the student be required to take the survey?**

A. No. The survey is **voluntary**. The student may refuse to take the survey or decide to take the survey but not to answer some of the questions. In Alaska, 2-3% of students decline the survey, even though they have permission to take it.

**Q. Where can I find more information?**

A. To obtain additional information about the YRBS system visit <http://www.cdc.gov/yrebs> or contact Dr. Laura Kann, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Adolescent and School Health, 4770 Buford Hwy., NE, Atlanta, GA 30341-3724; telephone (770) 488-6181

To obtain additional information about YRBS in Alaska visit <http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/chronic/school/YRBS.htm> or contact the YRBS Coordinator, Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Health, 907-465-3140 or [schoolhealth@alaska.gov](mailto:schoolhealth@alaska.gov)