

REVEAL

what's real

May, 2009 MHS Student Survey Data Frequently Asked Questions

1. How many students were surveyed? 2496 students were surveyed in May of 2009. Total enrollment at the time was 2750. This means that about 91% of students completed the survey and these students are considered representative of the entire student body. There was not a particular group of students absent on the day of the survey whose presence (if they had taken the survey) would have changed the results.

2. Don't students lie on this kind of survey? Research shows that people are no more likely to lie on an anonymous survey than they are to lie in general, and most people are not habitual liars. Even if some students did lie on some questions, each individual response is only 1/2500 of the total. To significantly skew the result on any given question, an entire group of students would have to change their answers in the same way on the same question.

Considering that students did not know ahead of time what the survey questions would be, nor when the survey would be given, this seems a very unlikely scenario. For example, to change the answer from "7 out of 10 students don't drink in a typical month" to 6 out of 10 would require that at least 250 students lie the same way on the same question. To change this result to match the reported perception, over 1000 students would have needed to change their answer from 0 drinks to some larger number.

The data from this survey is fairly consistent with other surveys taken in past years, asking the same questions. According to the data, drinking among students at MHS has become less prevalent over the last 5 years.

3. If this survey data is really true why do so many students believe otherwise? Research on social norms shows us that people in general are not good at estimating the prevalence of behaviors based solely on their personal experience. That is why researchers rely on surveys and studies to gather evidence rather than relying on personal anecdotes. When we try to come to conclusions about majority behavior based on our personal experience then we often generalize behavior from what is most noticeable, exciting or upsetting to us. The "routine" doesn't catch our attention. For example, most students don't brag about how sober they have been – they don't get in trouble for it and become notorious, nor does it make for good gossip.

4. I believe the data when I look at the entire student body, but in my grade, it really does seem like more students drink than that. What happens when you break it down by grade? It's true that this is not an even distribution by grade. The percentage of students who are using gets bigger each year. But even among 12th graders, it is not true that "most" students drink. Only about half of 12th graders report using alcohol in a typical month. And students tend to also significantly overestimate the quantity of alcohol that they believe their peers are drinking.

5. I don't make decisions based on peer pressure anyway, so I don't understand why it's important to know what the majority behavior is. We do make our own choices every day about lots of things, but research bears out that, overall, we are highly influenced by what we think is acceptable and "cool", more so than we care to admit. Our idea of what is desirable behavior is highly influenced by what we consider "normal." No one wants to be "weird" or an outcast. So like it or not, our perception of the majority has an influence on our choices. It's just human nature.

6. Seven out of ten doesn't seem that great. Why are we bragging about that? The fact is that 97% of students believe that the majority of MHS students drink, when in fact, only a minority do. The campaign is designed to correct that misperception. We agree, underage drinking puts kids at risk of serious harm and we would like to see an even bigger majority of students make the choice not to drink.

7. Has this approach worked to reduce alcohol consumption in other communities? Research has shown that once the misperception is corrected, fewer students will choose to drink. Sociologist H. Wesley Perkins and his associate David H. Craig, of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, N.Y., pioneered the social norms approach. Within two years of the implementation of this approach, heavy drinking was reduced by 21 percent at their own campus. Similar reductions have been achieved at the University of Arizona, Western Washington University, Rowan University and Northern Illinois University.

8. Why are you using 2009 data? Isn't there a more recent survey? The 2010 spring Minnesota Student Survey results have not been released yet. We did not want to hold up the campaign waiting for them. We always use the most current data available.

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