

MINNESOTA STUDENT SURVEY DATA VALIDITY: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is the Minnesota Student Survey (MSS)?

The MSS is a census survey that includes questions about a wide variety of youth behaviors, perceptions, and risk and protective factors related to health, safety, and academics. The survey is a valuable planning and monitoring tool for school districts, county and state agencies. The MSS is a collaboration between Minnesota schools and the Minnesota Departments of Education, Health, Human Services, and Public Safety.

The 2013 MSS was administered in the first half of 2013 to public school students in grades 5, 8, 9 and 11, statewide. All public school districts in Minnesota were invited to participate. Of the 334 public operating districts, 280 agreed to participate (84 percent of public operating school districts). Public school student participation was voluntary and surveys were anonymous. Across the state, approximately 66 percent of fifth graders, 71 percent of eighth graders, 69 percent of ninth graders and 62 percent of eleventh graders participated in the 2013 MSS. Overall participation across the four grades was approximately 67 percent of total enrollment.

More information can be found at:

- <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/SafeSch/MNStudentSurvey/>
- <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/chs/mss/>

When is the MSS administered?

The 2013 MSS was administered in the first half of 2013. Schools determine when specifically the survey is administered.

How representative is the MSS?

The MSS has had a historically high response rate—the school district participation rate was: 91% in 2007, 88% in 2010, and 84% in 2013). It is administered to students in the regular public elementary and secondary schools, charter schools, and tribal schools. It is also offered to students in all grade levels in alternative learning centers and to youth in juvenile correction facilities—though these data are reported separately. Even if data is not representative of all youth in the community, it can still provide a meaningful snapshot of what many people in the community are experiencing.

No data source is perfect. Ideally, multiple data sources will be used to paint an overall picture of what's happening in your community. For example, you can compare self-reported drug use among youth in your community to local narcotics arrest data and data on admissions to treatment among youth for drugs as their primary substance of abuse. Look for multiple sources of information that point to the same findings.

Do students tell the truth?

If there is a student conspiracy related to lying on the MSS, it would have to stretch across the state and across years. We see similar patterns of responses in each region, and over time. In addition, Minnesota findings are consistent with findings from national surveys such as the Youth Risk Behavior Survey and the Monitoring the Future survey. Further, surveys are omitted from the final data set if response patterns were frequently inconsistent or highly improbable.

From the 2010 Statewide MSS Trend Report: *Do Students Tell the Truth?*

“One question sometimes raised about student surveys is whether students' responses are honest and accurate. Researchers use a variety of data analysis techniques to examine the likely accuracy of surveys and these were applied to the student survey as well. Surveys with numerous inconsistencies or improbable answers were excluded from data analysis. In 2010, for example, 1.2 percent of all surveys were removed because of a pattern of inconsistent and/or improbable answers. Another 1.6 percent of surveys were not used because the question on gender was not answered.

The majority of students exhibit patterns of responses that are reasonable and consistent across similar questions. In addition, as results have demonstrated, percentages for many answers are consistent over time across the seven Minnesota Student Survey administrations studied for this report. Such similarities are likely to occur only if the survey responses reflect the actual perceptions of Minnesota's youth; it is extremely unlikely that these patterns could be replicated by chance over time. Furthermore, the survey findings are often consistent with findings in similar states and with national trend lines of increasing or decreasing behaviors.

This combination of individual response patterns, plausible relationships among answers, consistency over time within the state, and consistency with other research and with national studies all attest to the overall credibility of student responses.”

Do students understand the questions?

The Minnesota Student Survey includes questions from a variety of sources. Major sources include the Minnesota Adolescent Health Survey conducted by the University of Minnesota in the late 1980's, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted every two years by CDC, the Monitoring the Future Survey, and the California Healthy Kids Survey. Questions taken from these surveys have benefitted from the extensive validity and reliability studies that have been conducted on these surveys. Another group of questions were created by the research team or by advisory committees, especially in situations where there were no or few model questions already available. We have not conducted rigorous content validity testing of the entire Minnesota Student Survey. We do periodically ask volunteer groups of youth to try out new versions of the survey and give us feedback on the questions.

Can self-reported data be trusted?

Actual substance use would be nearly impossible to measure. Compliance data varies greatly with enforcement, and under-represents actual cases. For example, school disciplinary incidents involving alcohol are way lower than self-reported rates of use. Further, data on alcohol sales do not tell us who is consuming the alcohol. The advantage of self-reported data is that it gives you the respondents' own views and beliefs directly.

The MSS is anonymous; no names or identifying code numbers were used, therefore answers cannot be traced to individuals, which has been shown to increase respondents' comfort answering honestly, but it also eliminates our ability to cross-check student responses with other sources of information.

How can data on perceptions be used?

Data on perceptions are measuring...perceptions. People are less likely to drink and drive if they perceive they'll get pulled over. From the MSS we know that students perceive that their peers are drinking more than they actually are, and from the research literature we know that youth drinking is influenced by social norms (including the idea that "everybody's doing it.") That's important information to know. However, it is important to distinguish between perceptions and behaviors because your approach to addressing them will likely be different.

How is anonymity guaranteed?

In the paper survey administration instructions provided to schools, survey administrators are reminded that the survey is to be anonymous, confidential, and private. To ensure privacy, administrators are advised:

- "Plan to take measures to space students apart so that individual responses cannot be viewed. The survey is anonymous."
- "At no time is personal information (name, identification number) asked in the survey. It is ESSENTIAL that student responses be confidential."
- "Students need to understand that no one will see their answers to any of the questions. For this reason, survey administrators SHOULD NOT OPEN any completed survey booklets."
- "Booklets should be collected, placed in the return envelope, and the envelope sealed in front of the students. Return envelopes have been included in the survey shipment."

How can we use MSS data to evaluate the effectiveness of our prevention strategies if it's only administered every three years?

The MSS was developed as a monitoring tool for the state. Administration of the survey is resource intensive for schools, and the findings do not change drastically from year to year. The survey is not intended to be used as a pre-post test, nor is it intended to replace evaluation data collection tools.