

MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey Executive Summary

Informing data-driven school and
community health policies and practices



2025

MetroWest Region Middle and High School Youth

GRADES 7-12



**METROWEST
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Middle and High School Youth (Grades 7-12)

Background and Methods

The MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey (MWAHS), an initiative of the MetroWest Health Foundation, has been monitoring trends in adolescent health and risk behaviors for two decades. Since 2006, the survey has been administered to middle and high school students ten times, providing critical information on health behaviors and protective factors to drive programmatic and policy efforts at the local and regional levels, including efforts to reduce disparities and promote health equity. This decades-long effort demonstrates the MetroWest Health Foundation's commitment to advancing youth physical and mental wellbeing through data-driven strategies to support youth, families, schools, and communities.

The MWAHS is a voluntary and anonymous survey using a questionnaire adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)¹ and expanded to include behaviors of emerging concern and interest locally, as well as protective factors. The survey is available to all students in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. It was administered online for the third time in 2025, using standardized procedures to ensure student privacy. As in prior survey waves, local procedures were followed to inform parents/guardians of the survey in advance, provide them with the option to view the survey, and give them the choice to opt out their child(ren).

In total, schools in 24 MetroWest communities participated in the MWAHS. At the middle school level, 14,516 students in grades 6 through 8 in 27 schools participated in the survey, representing 88.2% of youth. Because not all districts survey grade 6, this report summarizes middle school data for grades 7 and 8 only. At the high school level, 21,269 students in grades 9 through 12 in 26 schools participated in the 2025 survey, representing 80.5% of high school youth. These high response rates provide a representative picture of adolescent health and wellbeing across the region.



Key Findings

Substance use among MetroWest middle and high school youth continues a long-term downward trend, with historically low levels reported for lifetime use of electronic vapor products (EVPs), alcohol, and marijuana. However, prescription drug misuse is an emerging concern at both grade levels, as it is the only type of substance use that increased in 2025.

- » **Cigarette smoking** has continued to decline, with 3% of middle school students and 9% of high school students reporting lifetime use.
- » **EVP use** has lowered markedly since its peak in 2018. In 2025, 4% of middle school students and 14% of high school students report ever using electronic vapor products.
- » **Alcohol** remains the most commonly used substance, though use has continued to fall. Lifetime alcohol use is reported by 8% of middle school students and 35% of high school students.
- » **Marijuana** use has declined steadily, with less than 2% of middle school youth and 13% of high school youth reporting lifetime use.
- » **Prescription drug misuse**, defined as use without a doctor's prescription or differently than how a doctor told you to use it, remains relatively low but increased slightly in 2025, with 4% of middle school youth and 7% of high school youth reporting lifetime prescription drug misuse.

While declines in use of many substances are encouraging, students across both age levels who report substance use are significantly more likely to experience mental health problems such as depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation. This emphasizes the need for substance use prevention efforts as well as interventions that address co-occurring risks.

Bullying—both at school and online—remains a concern in the MetroWest region despite declines from earlier peaks. Among middle school students, school bullying and cyberbullying have stabilized since 2023 but remain higher than in prior years. Among high school students, both forms of bullying have declined, however, cyberbullying remains elevated compared to earlier surveys.

- » **School bullying** is most common at the middle school level, with 28% of middle school students and 18% of high school students reporting being **bullied at school** in the past 12 months.
- » Reports of **cyberbullying** are similar across grade levels, with 18% of middle school youth and 17% of high school youth reporting being cyberbullied in the past 12 months.
- » **LGBTQ+ youth and youth with disabilities** are more likely to be bullied, both at school and online. LGBTQ+ youth are 1.8-2.1 times more likely to be bullied at school and 1.4-1.6 more likely to be cyberbullied than heterosexual youth. Youth with learning and/or physical disabilities are 1.7-2.1 times more likely to be bullied at school and 1.8 times more likely to be cyberbullied than nondisabled youth.

- » **Help-seeking** among students who are bullied varies, with substantially lower reports among those who experience cyberbullying compared to school bullying. Among students bullied at school in the past 12 months, 64% of middle school youth and 55% of high school youth talked to an adult at school or outside of school about being bullied. However, only 35% of middle school youth and 31% of high school youth who were cyberbullied spoke with an adult about their experience.

Being bullied, whether at school or online, is associated with elevated mental health problems. This concern is exacerbated by the fact that many students who are bullied do not seek help from adults, particularly those who are cyberbullied. These findings indicate a need for bullying prevention efforts which start early, are sustained across grade levels, and address both in-person and digital environments.

Mental health has improved among middle and high school youth since 2021, when reports of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation were highest. Since 2023, mental health problems have been largely stable among middle school youth and have continued to decline among high school youth. However, mental health remains a serious concern at both grade levels, particularly for females and youth from minoritized groups.

- » **Stress and anxiety** are notable concerns in middle and high school. 16% of middle school youth and 23% of high school youth report life was “very” stressful in the past 30 days. 23% of middle school youth and 28% of high school youth report anxiety symptoms in the past two weeks.
- » **Depressive symptoms** are reported by 17% of middle school youth in their lifetime and 19% of high school youth in the past 12 months. While reports have declined since 2021, they are still higher than pre-pandemic levels among middle school youth.
- » **Suicidality** remains a serious concern. 14% of middle school students report having seriously considered suicide in their lifetime, and 9% of high school students report suicidal ideation in the past 12 months.
- » **Mental health disparities** are pronounced, with substantially higher reports of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation among females (1.7-2.0 times higher than males), LGBTQ+ youth (2.6-3.8 times higher than heterosexual cisgender youth), and youth with disabilities (2.1-2.6 times higher than nondisabled youth) across both age groups.
- » Many youth are not receiving needed **mental health support**. Only 34% of middle school youth and 29% of high school youth reporting they received the help they needed “most of the time” or “always” for emotional challenges. Only about half of youth with depressive symptoms in the past year (52% of middle school youth and 53% of high school youth) received any formal mental health services at school or outside of school during that time.
- » **Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)** for mental health support is an emerging concern. 13% of middle school youth and 14% of high school youth reported using AI in the past 12 months for support with emotional challenges or problems. Among youth with depressive symptoms in the past 12 months, 30% of middle school youth and 28% of high school youth used AI for support.

- » **Barriers to help-seeking** at school are common, including: not wanting other students to know (36% in middle school; 33% in high school); believing they should handle problems on their own (37% at each grade level); lack of time/not wanting to miss class (32%; 40%); believing that adults will not understand (30%; 29%), or believing that support at school will not help (31% for each).

While the overall findings on youth mental health are encouraging in light of the 2021 peak in mental health problems, the findings underscore the need for sustained, accessible, and culturally responsive mental health supports, with particular focus on reducing disparities, improving help-seeking, and reducing barriers to care among youth.

Digital media use is a critical influence on youth wellbeing: time spent on smartphones and social media is substantial at all grade levels and has increased among high school youth since 2023. Substantial numbers of youth report negative impacts of digital media use on their sleep, school performance, and mental health. However, digital media can also provide an important source of connection and learning for youth.

- » **High levels of digital media use** are common, with 46% of middle school and 63% of high school students spending 3+ hours on smartphones on an average school day, and 29% of middle school youth and 44% of high school youth spending 3+ hours daily on social media.
- » **Negative impacts of digital media use** are widely reported, including worse sleep (47% of middle school youth; 58% of high school youth), difficulty concentrating in school (28%; 43%), and negative effects on mental health (24%; 32%).
- » **Problematic digital media use** is prevalent, with 31% of middle school and 42% of high school youth reporting symptoms consistent with problematic digital media use that require additional evaluation.
- » **Early access to smartphones** is associated with mental health problems. 42% of MS and 36% of HS youth got their own smartphone before 6th grade, and early access is associated with higher levels of social media use and higher reports of anxiety and depressive symptoms.
- » Youth report both positive and negative **social media experiences**. On the positive side, youth report feelings more connected to peers (57% of middle school youth; 63% of high school youth) and finding people with shared interests/hobbies (62%; 59%). On the negative side, students report that social media keeps them from doing other important things (28%; 37%) and causes them to feel bad about themselves when they see what others post (21%; 22%).
- » **Online gambling** is an emerging concern. 8% of middle school youth (3% of females and 14% of males) and 10% of high school youth (3% of females and 18% of males) have gambled online in the past 12 months on real sporting events, fantasy sports, or casino games.

While digital media provides important opportunities for connection and learning, substantial proportions of youth report negative effects on their sleep, academics, and mental health. This highlights the need for programs across all ages to support youth in developing the skills they need to achieve digital wellness, that is, balanced, intentional, and authentic use of digital media in ways that support their physical, mental, and social-emotional health.

Protective factors—like adult support, school connectedness, and peer support—show encouraging improvements among both middle and high school youth since post-COVID lows. These factors are consistently associated with lower engagement in risk behaviors like substance use and violence, as well as better mental health outcomes.

- » **Adult support** has increased to its highest levels since the MWAHS began, with 75% of middle school and 78% of high school students reporting a trusted adult at school, and over 93% of middle and high school youth reporting adult support outside of school.
- » **School connectedness** has improved since 2023, with more students reporting that they feel like part of their school (69% of middle school youth; 66% of high school youth) and that they feel close to people at school (73%; 69%). However, levels remain below earlier surveys at both grade levels.
- » **Peer support** has increased, with more youth reporting having a friend to talk to (64%; 69%) and feeling connected to a group (76%; 70%), alongside notable declines in loneliness since 2021.
- » Protective factors are strongly linked to **healthier behaviors**, including lower rates of substance use, violence, and mental health challenges among youth who report support and connectedness.
- » **Disparities in protective factors** persist, with lower levels of adult support at school and school connectedness reported among Black and Hispanic/Latino youth, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth with disabilities compared to their peers.

Strengthening and expanding protective factors remains a critical strategy for promoting youth wellbeing and preventing youth from engaging in risk behaviors. Targeted efforts are needed to build protective factors that can mitigate risks for youth who lack support at home and at school.

Conclusions

The 2025 MWAHS highlights both meaningful progress and ongoing challenges in promoting the health and wellbeing of youth across the region. Encouragingly, use of EVPs, alcohol, and marijuana has declined to historically low levels. In addition, protective factors such as adult support and school connectedness have improved markedly in recent years, though they have still not returned to pre-pandemic levels. However, mental health problems including anxiety, depressive symptoms, and suicidality demand continued attention despite recent improvements at the high school level. Adolescent mental health is further shaped by digital media use, which is increasingly linked to less sleep, academic challenges, and poorer mental health outcomes, requiring additional attention to address the link between digital environments and adolescent wellbeing. Notably, disparities by race/ethnicity, sexual orientation/gender identity, and disability persist across many adolescent health indicators, emphasizing the need for targeted, equity-focused strategies to support minoritized youth. Together, the MWAHS findings reinforce the need for continued collaboration among schools, families, and communities to strengthen protective factors and reduce harms so that all youth across the MetroWest region have the opportunity to thrive.

Learn more about the MWAHS at: [Metrowest Health Foundation | Foundation Publications](#)

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System. Available at: [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System \(YRBSS\) | CDC](#) Accessed on March 20, 2026