

**Taking Some Chances**  
*Results of the 2001 Youth Risk Behavior Survey for Arlington*

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<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>SOME BASICS ABOUT RISK BEHAVIORS .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>THE QUESTIONNAIRE .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>DATA ANALYSIS .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>USE OF SUBSTANCES.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>ALCOHOL .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>Who's tried alcohol?.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Who's currently using alcohol? .....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>How much are young people drinking? .....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Are young people drinking and driving? .....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>When does alcohol use begin? .....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>National trends in alcohol use .....</i>	<i>5</i>
<b>CIGARETTES AND OTHER TOBACCO PRODUCTS .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<i>Who's tried smoking? .....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Who's currently using tobacco products?.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>How much are young people smoking? .....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>When does cigarette smoking begin?.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Where do youth who smoke obtain cigarettes?.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>National trends in tobacco use.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<b>ILLEGAL DRUG USE .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<i>Who's tried marijuana and other illegal drugs?.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Who's currently using illegal drugs?.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>When does marijuana use begin? .....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>National trends in use of selected illegal drugs .....</i>	<i>7</i>
<b>HEALTHY HABITS .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>NUTRITION AND WEIGHT MANAGEMENT .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>Drink your milk! Eat your fruit and vegetables! .....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Perceptions of weight.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Methods of losing weight .....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>National trends in dietary practices, perceptions of weight, weight loss methods.....</i>	<i>9</i>
<b>PHYSICAL ACTIVITY .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>USE OF SAFETY BELTS AND HELMETS.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<i>National trends in seat belt and safety helmet use.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<b>KEEPING SAFE .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>RESPONSIBLE SEXUAL BEHAVIOR .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>How many young people are engaging in sexual intercourse?.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Are young people engaging in responsible sexual behavior?.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Do young people understand the risks of sexual intercourse?.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>When do young people begin having intercourse? .....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>National trends in sexual behavior among youth.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<b>DEPRESSION AND SUICIDAL THOUGHTS .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<i>Depressive symptoms.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Suicidal thoughts and plans.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Suicide attempts .....</i>	<i>13</i>
<b>VIOLENCE, WEAPONS, AND GANGS .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<i>Carrying weapons.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Getting into fights .....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>National trends in fighting and carrying weapons.....</i>	<i>13</i>

*Gang membership* ..... 14  
*Victimization* ..... 14  
**CONCLUSION** ..... **14**  
**WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON RISK BEHAVIORS?** ..... 14  
**WHEN DO RISK BEHAVIORS BEGIN?** ..... 15  
**HOW DO ARLINGTON YOUTH COMPARE WITH THEIR PEERS NATIONWIDE?** ..... 16

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Purpose of Survey**

Risk behaviors are any behaviors that jeopardize that a person's health, safety, or well-being. Before 2001, little was known about adolescent risk behaviors in Arlington. Many of these behaviors are illegal (such as using alcohol before age 21) or considered inappropriate for young people (such as fasting to lose weight). As a result, young people are often reluctant to reveal or discuss their own involvement in these behaviors.

In 2001, the Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families administered the Youth Risk Behavior Survey to a group of 1700 young people. These young people were enrolled in grades six, eight, ten and twelve in Arlington Public Schools.

Planning for the survey began well before 2001. These plans focused on developing procedures to ensure that:

- The students chosen for the survey would accurately represent the views and behaviors of their peers.
- The participants would give honest answers to sensitive questions.
- Students participated with the knowledge and consent of their parents or guardians.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey was developed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The questionnaire asks about the risk behaviors linked to the most common causes of death and disability among adolescents (such as drinking and driving) as well as behaviors linked to the development of chronic disease in adults (such as smoking cigarettes).

### **Key Findings**

#### **Alcohol**

- About one-third of 10<sup>th</sup> grade students and ½ of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students used alcohol in the 30 days prior to the survey. Compared to their peers nationwide, 10<sup>th</sup> grade students are less likely to drink; 12<sup>th</sup> grade students equally likely to consume alcohol.
- Nearly one-third of 12<sup>th</sup> grades students report binge drinking; i.e. consuming more than 5 or more drinks of alcohol in a few hours or less.

#### **Cigarettes**

- Students in higher grades were more likely to report smoking in the previous 30 days (from 6 percent of 6<sup>th</sup> grade students to 36 percent of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students.)
- The percent of high school students who smoke is about the same in Arlington and nationwide.
- Experimentation is common – 1/4<sup>th</sup> of 6<sup>th</sup> grade students had at least tried smoking.

### **Illegal drug use**

- About 1 in 5 10<sup>th</sup> grade students reported current marijuana use; for 12<sup>th</sup> graders, the rate is closer to 1 out of 3 students. These rates are about the same as national averages in 2001.
- 6<sup>th</sup> grade students were more likely to report using inhalants than using marijuana. But that pattern is reversed among 8<sup>th</sup> grades and high school students.

### **Diet and weight**

- About 30 percent of students think they are overweight but 40 percent or more are trying to lose weight
- About 15 percent of those trying to lose weight use inappropriate weight reduction methods such as fasting or vomiting

### **Exercise**

- Only about half of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students report vigorous exercise three or more times per week. In earlier grades, the figure is about  $\frac{3}{4}$ .

### **Belts and helmets**

- Consistent use of bike helmets declines from 44 percent (among 6<sup>th</sup> grade students) to 20 percent (among 12<sup>th</sup> grade students)
- Seat belt use is about 75 percent or better at all grade levels.

### **Sexual intercourse**

- About 20 percent of 10<sup>th</sup> grade and 40% of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students report being sexually active
- 35% of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students have had two or more sexual partners in their lifetime

### **Suicide and depression**

- 15% of 10<sup>th</sup> graders and 10% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders reported attempting suicide in the past 12 months
- 1/5<sup>th</sup> of 6<sup>th</sup> grade students and 1/3 of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students said they had seriously considered suicide in their lives

### **Weapons**

- Just over 10% of high school student carried a weapon in the previous month
- 20 to 30 percent of high school students were in a fight in the previous year

### **Next Steps**

The Partnership is currently reviewing this data to identify the most serious threats to our young people's well being. We will then begin a public awareness and prevention campaign around that behavior. However, we hope that other community groups will also begin to review this rich source of data and use it to better inform parents, teachers, business leaders, the faith community and others about the pattern of risk behaviors found in our community. We can then begin to create a safer, healthier environment in which our young people can thrive.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Data from the 2001 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) suggest that many young people in Arlington are taking some chances with their health and safety. These risk behaviors take various forms, ranging from failure to wear bike helmets to drinking alcohol, fighting and attempting suicide. But these behaviors all pose significant threats to the well-being of our young people.

A key part of the mission of the Arlington Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families is to review and disseminate data on the well-being of children, youth, and families in the county. Risk behavior data is particularly hard to obtain because young people are obviously reluctant to reveal their participation in dangerous or illegal activities. But without this information, it's difficult to identify the greatest hazards to the health of our young people, design educational programs, or determine if efforts at prevention are working.

To learn more about risk behaviors, in 2001 the Partnership first administered an anonymous, classroom-based survey of young people in Arlington's public middle and high schools. Students in grades six, eight, ten and twelve completed a lengthy questionnaire developed originally by the Centers for Disease Control (with some modest modification by the Partnership.) Administering the question anonymously and in a classroom creates the best conditions for truthful responses to these sensitive questions.

### **Some Basics about Risk Behaviors**

How do we measure risk behaviors? The extent of a young person's participation in unsafe activities can be gauged in a number of ways. The most common ways include:

- Lifetime participation: This measure is typically based on the question: "Have you *ever* engaged in this behavior?"
- Current participation: This measure is based on the question: "Have you engaged in this behavior during this *specific time period*?" The length of the time period depends on the behavior. A current user of alcohol is someone who has had a drink in the past month whereas a current user of marijuana is someone who has used marijuana in the past year.
- Age of onset: This measure is based on question "How old were you when you first engaged in this behavior?" Typically this measure is expressed as the percent of young people who report initiating a behavior before the age of 13.
- Intensity of participation: This measure is based on questions about the extent of participation – such as the number of cigarettes smoked or lifetime sexual partners.

### **The Questionnaire**

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) was developed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to obtain detailed information on those health-related behaviors that contribute markedly to death, disability and social problems of young people and adults.

The survey asks about use of tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drugs; sexual behaviors that lead to pregnancy and disease; exercise, dietary habits; depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts; and behaviors leading to intention and unintentional injuries such as suicidal thoughts and fighting.

For high school students, the questionnaire was nearly identical to the one used by the CDC for its national survey of students in grades 9 through 12. We did add a few optional questions related to gang membership, time since last physical exam, and motorcycle helmet use. For middle school students, we used a questionnaire adapted by the CDC by the state of Virginia for its 1992 administration of the YRBS. The changes made the survey shorter and less cognitively challenging, compared to the high school version.

The use of different questionnaires at different grades has two practical implications:

- First, for several questions, we cannot compare response from high school students with responses of middle school students. For example, we know the percent who ever tried alcohol for both groups but only know the percent currently using alcohol for the older students.
- Second, we can only compare responses from the older students with results of the national data.

### **Collecting the Data**

Our data collection procedures were designed with the goal of obtaining a representative sample; that is, one in which the young people who participate in the survey can truly speak for all youth in their grade.

To ensure our sample was representative, we used generally-accepted procedures for drawing a scientific sample. Specifically,

1. We first identified a course in each grade in which most students are enrolled. For grades six, eight and ten, the course was health/physical education. For grade twelve, the course was Virginia government. By choosing these classes, we ensured that every student in the grade had an equal chance of being selected for the sample.
2. We selected students for the survey by randomly choosing specific class sections. Any student in the selected class section was eligible to fill out the survey.
3. We administered the survey during a time of year (March) and day of week (Tuesday) in which absenteeism was expected to be low.
4. We emphasized to students and teachers administering the survey the need for confidentiality. The survey itself is anonymous and we tried to create classroom conditions that permitted students to have privacy.

## **Data Analysis**

Consultants from the Substance Abuse Research Center at James Madison University oversaw data entry and analysis. The analysis focused on highlighting differences between subgroups of students, as defined by:

- Grade level
- Gender
- Race /ethnicity (for the largest groups only)

All of the results are reported as the percentage of students who engaged in a particular behavior. For a select group of indicators, we look at the percent of “participants” who engage in a particular behavior. For example, we calculate the percent of young smokers (not all young people) who usually get their cigarettes from a store.

Given the sample size for the 2001 survey, a difference of 10 percentage points is statistically significant; that is, is unlikely to have resulted from an unusual sample or error in the data.

## **USE OF SUBSTANCES**

### **Introduction**

This section examines to what extent young people in Arlington are using alcohol, tobacco products and illegal drugs. These substances pose serious health risks to young people. For example, alcohol use has been linked to car crashes, injuries, drowning, and suicide as well as problems in school and work, fighting and delinquency. In addition, those who begin using these substances before the age of 13 are more likely to develop problems and become addicted.

Like young people throughout the country, the substances that Arlington youth are most likely to report using are alcohol, tobacco and marijuana. Not all of those who try these substances become active users – rates of lifetime use (i.e. “ever tried it”) are always substantially higher than the percent of students reporting current use. In 2001, between one-third and one-half of high school students used alcohol; from 20 to 30 percent used marijuana and cigarette smoking was reported by 6 percent of young people in 6<sup>th</sup> grade but 36 percent among those in 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Use of these substances begins well before high school. Among students in 10<sup>th</sup> grade in 2001, 22 percent reported that they began using alcohol before the age of 13, 17 percent reported early cigarette use, and six percent reported early marijuana use.

Fewer than 10 percent of young people report use of other illicit substances such as cocaine, steroids and heroin. With the exception of inhalants, older students, not surprisingly, are more likely to report the use of all of these substances.

## Alcohol

### *Who's tried alcohol?*

By the time they are seniors in high school, nearly 80 percent of Arlington youth report using alcohol on one or more occasions. Not surprisingly, young people are more likely to try alcohol as they get older, as shown in table 1. Among high school students, girls are no more likely to report trying alcohol than boys. While 78 percent of girls but only 70 percent of boys report lifetime use, this difference is not large enough (given the size of the sample in 2001) to be statistically significant.

### *Who's currently using alcohol?*

About one-third of 10<sup>th</sup> grade students and half of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students used alcohol in the 30 days prior to the survey. Girls were less likely to report current alcohol use than boys – 53 percent vs. 62 percent. Again, this difference is not large enough to be significant. Compared to their peers nationwide, 10<sup>th</sup> grade students are less likely (34 vs 45 percent); 12<sup>th</sup> grade students equally likely (53 vs 55 percent) to consume alcohol.

### *How much are young people drinking?*

We can measure *how much* young people are using alcohol either by looking at how many days they drink or how much they drink in a sitting.

- Among high school students, about 40 percent used alcohol on at least one day in the previous month. Fifteen percent of boys and 25 percent of girls report using alcohol on just one or two days. Thirteen percent of boys and 11 percent of girls report using alcohol on five or more days.
- Nearly one-third of 12<sup>th</sup> grades students and 14 percent of 10<sup>th</sup> grade students report binge drinking; i.e. consuming five or more drinks of alcohol in a few hours or less. The same percent of boys and girls engaged in this behavior. Students in 10<sup>th</sup> grade were far less likely to report this behavior than their peers nationwide (14 vs 28 percent) but the difference was far narrower for students in 12<sup>th</sup> grade (31 percent compared to 37 percent among their peers nationwide)

### *Are young people drinking and driving?*

Drinking and driving is a significant threat to the safety of our young people.

- About one-fourth of young people in 10<sup>th</sup> grade (and just over one-third of those in 12<sup>th</sup> grade) report riding with a drinking driver in the previous month.
- About one-fourth of 6<sup>th</sup> grade students and 40 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students report *ever* riding with a driver who had been using alcohol.
- Seven percent of youth in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and 21 percent of those in 12<sup>th</sup> grade drove after drinking in the month prior to the survey.

### *When does alcohol use begin?*

Among youth in 10<sup>th</sup> grade in the spring of 2001, 22 percent reported using alcohol (other than a few sips for religious purposes) before the age of 13. Most of these students reported use at the age of 11 or 12. But six percent said they first used alcohol at the age of eight or younger. Substance abuse counselors confirm that this “early onset” is not uncommon among youth seeking help for alcohol abuse. Young children often obtain alcohol by sipping drinks left unattended by adults after a party or other occasion. Among youth in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, 17 percent reported alcohol use before age 13.

### *National trends in alcohol use*

From 1991 to 2001, fewer students also reported ever having alcohol and drinking in the previous month. Fewer high school students reported drinking and driving and driving with someone who had been using alcohol (which fell from 40 to 31 percent). But there was no improvement in the percent of youth reporting binge drinking, which remained at about 30 percent.

## **Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products**

### *Who’s tried smoking?*

Experimentation with smoking is common. Among students in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, one-fourth have tried cigarettes. Lifetime use increases steadily to two-thirds of students in twelfth grade.

### *Who’s currently using tobacco products?*

Young people in high school are more likely to report smoking than those in middle school. Only six percent of students in sixth grade smoked cigarettes in the previous month. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, 15 percent report cigarette smoking. And in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, 36 percent report smoking cigarettes. The percent of high school students who smoke is about the same in Arlington and nationwide.

Fewer students use cigars and smokeless tobacco. For example, among young people in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, 4 percent report current use of cigars and 12 percent report use of smokeless tobacco. Cigar use increases steadily with grade (from 6 percent in sixth grade to 12 percent in 12<sup>th</sup> grade) but smokeless tobacco use shows no particular pattern.

### *How much are young people smoking?*

Frequent use of cigarettes (defined as smoking on 20 or more of the past 30 days) is relatively uncommon, especially among young students. For example, while 6 percent of

sixth grade students report current smoking, only one percent report frequent use. By 12<sup>th</sup> grade, however, 15 percent of youth report frequent smoking.

*When does cigarette smoking begin?*

Between 15 and 17 percent of young people in grades 10 and 12 report that they began using cigarettes before the age of 13.

*Where do youth who smoke obtain cigarettes?*

Among young smokers, methods of obtaining cigarettes vary. Few middle school youth try to purchase cigarettes from stores. But one-quarter of youth in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and nearly 60 percent of those in 12<sup>th</sup> grade tried to obtain cigarettes this way. Other common methods include:

- having another person purchase cigarettes,
- borrowing cigarettes from another smoker and
- taking them from a store or family member.

*National trends in tobacco use*

From 1991 to 2001, the percent of high school youth who had tried cigarettes, smoked cigars or used smokeless tobacco in the past month all decreased. Current cigarette use increased from 28 to 36 percent (in 1997) then declined to 29 percent in 2001.

## **Illegal drug use**

*Who's tried marijuana and other illegal drugs?*

Marijuana and inhalants are the most commonly used illegal drugs. In sixth grade, inhalant use is most common, reported by 17 percent of young people. But in eighth grade, marijuana use is most common. 19 percent of youth in 8<sup>th</sup> grade report marijuana use compared to 12 percent who report inhalant use.

Marijuana remains the most commonly-used illegal drug through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Among high school seniors, almost half had tried marijuana but less than 10 percent had tried cocaine and inhalants; and 5 percent or less had used heroin, methamphetamines, illegal steroids or other injectable drugs.

*Who's currently using illegal drugs?*

In 2001, information on current use was only collected for high school youth.

- About 20 percent of youth in 10<sup>th</sup> grade use marijuana and 30 percent of those in 12<sup>th</sup> grade.
- High school girls are less likely to report marijuana use than boys but the difference is not statistically significant (20 percent for girls compared to 27 percent for boys.)

- The percent of youth reporting marijuana use is about the same as national averages for young people in grades 10 and 12 in 2001
- Fewer than five percent of youth in both grades report use of cocaine and inhalants.

*When does marijuana use begin?*

Few (six percent or less) students in 10<sup>th</sup> grade reported initiating use of marijuana before age 13.

*National trends in use of selected illegal drugs*

Drug use reported by high school youth taking the Youth Risk Behavior Survey generally increased from 1991 to 2001. The percent of youth who ever used marijuana increased (from 31 to 42 percent); who had used marijuana in the previous month rose (from 15 to 25 percent); who had used cocaine increased (from 6 to 9 percent); who had used cocaine in the previous month rose (from two to four percent); and who had taken illegal steroids increased (from 3 to 5 percent.) Only the percent of youth who had ever used an inhalant declined (from 20 to 15 percent).

## **HEALTHY HABITS**

### **Introduction**

Are young people in Arlington developing good habits in the areas of nutrition, weight management, exercise, and use of safety belts and helmet? This question matters because adopting a healthy lifestyle can help young people avoid illness and disease both when they are young and as adults.

- Developing healthy patterns of eating and exercising can substantially reduce the risk of developing chronic diseases such as high blood pressure and heart diseases.
- Getting enough calcium as a child and participating in weight-bearing exercises (such as walking, jogging, jumping rope and basketball) helps to build strong bones. It may also help to avoid osteoporosis later in life.
- Overweight adolescents are far more likely than normal weight teenagers to become overweight adults. Becoming overweight or obese makes it more likely that someone will develop many illnesses, including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, some forms of cancer, asthma, sleep apnea, and stroke.
- Using safety belts and helmets can lower the risk of serious accidental injuries.

Many young people are risking their health by failing to use safety helmets, exercise vigorously or consume recommended servings of milk, fruits and vegetables. About three-fourths of young people consistently use their seat belts. Far fewer wear safety helmets when biking, skateboarding, or roller blading.

Few students follow recommendations for diet and exercise. For example, only half of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students report regular vigorous exercise. Girls in 12<sup>th</sup> grade are twice as likely as boys to report no vigorous exercise in a typical week

About 30 percent of youth think they are overweight but 40 percent are trying to lose weight. About 15 percent are using an unhealthy form of weight loss, such as fasting or vomiting.

## **Nutrition and weight management**

*Drink your milk! Eat your fruit and vegetables!*

Are young people in Arlington eating enough milk, fruits and vegetables? The 2001 YRBS suggests that, like their peers nationwide, Arlington youth are not following healthy guidelines:

- Sixteen percent of youth in grades 10 and 23 percent in grade 12 reported drinking *no* glasses of milk in the previous week.
- According to the CDC, milk is by far the largest single source of calcium for high school students. But less than 15 percent reported drinking three or more glasses per day. Girls were less likely to drink three or more servings per day (7 percent vs 16 percent for boys).
- About 10 percent of youth in grades 10 and 12 reported eating *no* fruit in the previous week. Between 60 and 68 percent reported less than one serving per day.
- Only about 27 percent of young people in 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade reported five or more servings per day of fruits and vegetables. Girls are less likely to report eating “five a day” than boys (25 percent vs 29 percent) but the difference is not statistically significant.

### *Perceptions of weight*

What do young people think about their weight? About 30 percent of students think they are overweight (with the vast majority saying they were slightly overweight) but 40 percent or more are trying to lose weight

### *Methods of losing weight*

What methods of weight loss are these young people trying?

- Most reported using exercise and eating less. From 50 to 65 percent of young people (depending on grade) reported using exercise to lose weight. From 40 to almost 50 percent reported using eating less.
- About 15 percent of those trying to lose weight using unhealthy methods such as fasting or vomiting. Girls were more likely to use unhealthy weight loss methods than boys (21 percent vs 9 percent)

## *National trends in dietary practices, perceptions of weight, weight loss methods*

Nationwide, fewer young people are eating five or more daily servings of fruits and vegetables, drinking three or more glasses of water, and exercising vigorously. Fewer think they are overweight (32 to 29 percent) but more trying to lose weight (42 to 46 percent).

### **Physical activity**

Many Arlington youth are not receiving the many benefits of regular physical activity, particularly after grade 10.

- Only about half of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students report vigorous exercise three or more times per week. (Vigorous exercises such as soccer, basketball, and aerobics make you sweat and breath hard.) In 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, about three-quarters of young people report vigorous exercise.
- Why are seniors less likely to report vigorous exercise? One possible explanation is that many young people reduce the time that they spend exercising after they fulfill their physical education requirement. This typically happens in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Ninety-eight percent of students in 10<sup>th</sup> grade reported being enrolled in PE but only 30 percent of those in 12<sup>th</sup> grade.
- About 26 percent of young people in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and 18 percent of those in 12<sup>th</sup> grade report moderate physical exercise. (Moderate exercises such as walking fast, pushing a lawn mower or mopping a floor do not make you sweat or breathe hard.)
- About half of young people in grade 10 and 40 percent in grade 12 report doing strengthening exercises (such as sit-ups and weight lifting) three or more times per week.
- Girls in grades 10 and 12 were twice as likely to report *no* vigorous exercise in the previous week (24 percent vs. 12 percent for boys).

What do young people do instead of exercising? Between 40 to 59 percent watch t.v. for more than two hours per day (on school days).

### **Use of safety belts and helmets**

The use of both bike helmets and safety belts substantially reduce the risk of death or serious injury if an accident occurs. However, Arlington youth are more likely to habitually use seat belts.

- Consistent use (i.e. always or most of the time) of bike helmets declines from 44 percent among 6<sup>th</sup> grade students to 20 percent among 12<sup>th</sup> grade students.
- About 40 percent of young people in 6<sup>th</sup> grade who rollerblade or skateboard wear a helmet. Only 28 percent of those in 8<sup>th</sup> grade wear a helmet.
- Seat belt use is about 75 percent or better at all grade levels. Students in grade 10 are most likely to consistently wear seatbelts (80 percent), perhaps because many learn to drive that year.

- Among those riding a motorcycle, about half of those in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and two-thirds of those in 12<sup>th</sup> grade report using a helmet always or most of the time.

#### *National trends in seat belt and safety helmet use*

Nationwide from 1991 to 2001, more youth reported the use of safety helmets and belts. For example, the percent who said they never or rarely used safety belts fell from 26 to 14 percent.)

### **KEEPING SAFE**

Keeping young people safe also means helping them to act responsibly about sex; to recognize depressive symptoms or suicidal thoughts (and take appropriate action); and to avoid carrying weapons, getting into fights, or becoming involved with a gang. All of these activities pose significant threats to their safety and well-being:

- Early sexual activity and having multiple sexual partners are associated with higher risk of sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS) and unwanted pregnancy.
- Suicidal thoughts and plans pose obvious risks to young people's well being. Depressive symptoms may indicate clinical depression and may also interfere with academics, friendships and development.
- Fighting and carrying weapons increase the risks of unintentional injuries and also create an environment in which young people feel unsafe and threatened. Early aggressive behavior (before age 13) also puts a young person at risk for later, serious delinquency and trouble with the police.
- According to the CDC, use of firearms is particularly risky, making it far more likely that fighting and violence leads to serious injuries. Homicide is the second-leading cause of death among youth in the United States among young people ages 15 to 19 and the leading cause of death among black youth.

Many Arlington youth do report responsible sexual behavior, either abstaining or using a condom. In 2001, half of young people in 12<sup>th</sup> grade reported ever having intercourse and a third were sexually active. Of these, two-thirds used a condom.

A third or more of 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students report depressive symptoms (i.e. feeling sad or hopeless for a prolonged period.) 15 percent of 10<sup>th</sup> grade students and 10 percent of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students made at least one suicide attempt in the previous year.

In Arlington, most young people do not report carrying weapons or fighting, although at least half have been in a fight at least once. Half of those in 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade report ever getting into a fight. One in five 6<sup>th</sup> grade and one in four 8<sup>th</sup> grade students report ever carrying a weapon. Among older students, 30 percent of 10<sup>th</sup> graders and 30 percent of 10<sup>th</sup> graders report fighting in the previous year.

## **Responsible sexual behavior**

### *How many young people are engaging in sexual intercourse?*

Sexual behavior is less commonly reported by younger students and girls.

- Just over 10 percent of students in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and about 20 percent of students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade reported ever having sexual intercourse. This compares with a third of students in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and half of those in 12<sup>th</sup>.
- Boys are significantly more likely to report having sexual intercourse than girls (47 percent of boys in 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades compared to 33 percent of girls.)

Some youth who have had sexual intercourse were not sexually active at the time of the survey; that is, they did not report having intercourse in the previous three months. For example, while half of students in 12<sup>th</sup> grade said they had ever had intercourse, only a third reported intercourse in the previous three months.

### *Are young people engaging in responsible sexual behavior?*

From a public health perspective, responsible sexual behavior means either delaying sexual intercourse to adulthood or taking precautions against unwanted pregnancy and disease. Data from the 2001 YRBS indicates that 94 percent of youth in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and 85 percent of those in 12<sup>th</sup> grade reported responsible sexual behavior.

- Among 10<sup>th</sup> grade students, 82 percent were not sexually active and two-thirds of those that were used a condom the last time they had sex.
- Among 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, 60 percent were not sexually active and only 61 percent used a condom. (Some students used another reliable form of birth control but these do not offer protection against sexually transmitted diseases.)
- There was no difference in the percentage of boys and girls reporting responsible sexual behavior.

### *Do young people understand the risks of sexual intercourse?*

Arlington youth are aware of at least one of the risks posed by having sexual intercourse without using a condom. About 95 percent of young people in grade eight and above reported learning about HIV/AIDS in school.

It's less clear that young people understand the risks of multiple sexual partners. Over one-third (35 percent) of young people in 12<sup>th</sup> grade reported having two or more sexual partners in their lifetime. Having more partners substantially increases the risks of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy.

### *When do young people begin having intercourse?*

Less than 10 percent of students in grades 10 and 12 report first having intercourse before age 13 (or roughly before 8<sup>th</sup> grade). However, boys are significantly more likely to report having intercourse before the age of 13 (12 percent of boys vs. 2 percent of girls.)

### *National trends in sexual behavior among youth*

Nationwide, from 1991 to 2001, the percent of youth who ever had sexual intercourse fell; the percent of youth who were sexually active fell and the percent of sexually active youth who used a condom increased.

### **Depression and suicidal thoughts**

In the United States, suicide is the third leading cause of death among youth aged 15 to 19. Clinical depression is often a precursor to suicidal thoughts and attempts. While depression can only be diagnosed by a qualified medical provider, the survey questions related to depressive symptoms indicate how many young people should be screened for depression.

### *Depressive symptoms*

About one-third of students in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and 40 percent of those in 12<sup>th</sup> grade reported feeling sad and hopeless for two weeks or more that they stopped doing a usual activity.

- Nationwide, 27 percent of young people report these symptoms.
- Girls were more likely to report depressive symptoms than boys although the difference (40 percent compared to 35 percent) is not statistically significant.

### *Suicidal thoughts and plans*

Most young people do not report suicidal thoughts and plans. However, a sizable minority do:

- About 20 percent of young people in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades seriously considered suicide in the previous 12 months.
- Eighteen percent of youth in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and 14 percent of youth in the 12<sup>th</sup> grades made a plan to kill themselves.
- Among younger children, 20 percent of those in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and about one-third of those in 8<sup>th</sup> grade reported that they had seriously considered suicide at some point in their lives.
- Twelve percent of those in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and one-fifth of those in 8<sup>th</sup> grade reported that they had ever made a suicide plan.

### *Suicide attempts*

What percent of youth attempt to kill themselves? According to the 2001 YRBS, fifteen percent of those in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and 10 percent of those in 12<sup>th</sup> made at least one attempt.

- Tenth grade students were more likely to make multiple attempts but the difference is quite small (4 percent vs. 3 percent)
- Tenth grade students were also more likely to make an attempt that resulted in the need for medical intervention. Again the difference is quite small (7 percent vs. 4 percent)
- Among high school youth, girls and boys were equally likely to report at least one suicide attempt. (In national data, girls are significantly more likely to report attempts than boys)
- Ten and 12 percent of youth in 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade reported that they ever had attempted suicide.

### *National trends in suicidal thought and plans*

From 1991 to 2001, the percent of youth who seriously considered suicide decreased (from 29 to 19 percent) but the percent who attempted it at least once increased slightly (from 7 to 9 percent)

## **Violence, weapons, and gangs**

### *Carrying weapons*

- Almost 20 percent of youth in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and 25 percent of youth in 8<sup>th</sup> grade report ever carrying a weapon.
- Just over ten percent of older youth report carrying a weapon in the past month. About half of these students carried a weapon to school. Five percent of youth in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and 2 percent of youth in 12<sup>th</sup> grade report carrying a gun in the past month.

### *Getting into fights*

- About half of youth in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and 54 percent of youth in 8<sup>th</sup> grade report being in a fight at some time in their lives.
- Twenty-nine percent of youth in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and 20 percent of youth in 12<sup>th</sup> grade report fighting in the past year.
- Fewer students in 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades reported fighting at school (16 percent and five percent respectively.) Far fewer (six and two percent respectively) report being injured in a fight.

### *National trends in fighting and carrying weapons*

Between 1991 and 2001, the percent of youth who carried a weapon, who carried a Gun or participated in a fight all fell somewhat.

### *Gang membership*

- Nine percent of young people in 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade report being a member of a gang in the previous 12 months.
- Older youth are less likely to report being in a gang – only six percent of those in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and 3 percent of those in 12<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Among older youth, males were far more likely to report gang membership – about 8 percent for boys and 1 percent for girls.

### *Victimization*

- About half of youth in grades six and eight and a third of youth in grades ten and twelve report having property stolen or damaged at school.
- Between three and six percent of older youth report feeling to unsafe to come to school or being threatened at school.
- About ten percent of older youth report being physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend or being physically forced to have sexual intercourse.

## **CONCLUSION**

What can members of the community conclude from these findings? This section reviews the data to identify the most common risk and high-risk behaviors, the age at which risk behaviors begin and how are youth compare with those in the national YRBS.

### **What Are The Most Common Risk Behaviors?**

The YRBS allows the community to identify the frequently-reported risk behaviors among Arlington youth.

- In the area of substance use, the most commonly used substances are cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana. Inhalant use, while less common overall, is reported by almost 20 percent of students in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. The most commonly used substances are also the most-commonly used substances nationwide.
- In the area of healthy habits, inadequate consumption of milk and fruits and vegetables is the norm – about ¾ of our youth (or more) report poor dietary habits. Other problems reported by many youth include insufficient exercise (reported by over half of those in 12<sup>th</sup> grade); excessive television (reported by almost half of students in 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade); not wearing bike helmets (half of students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and 75 percent of those in 12<sup>th</sup> grade who ride bikes) and possibly infrequent check ups.
- In the area of keeping safe, between one-third and 40 percent of high school students did not use a condom the last time they had intercourse. Fighting is reported by one out of three students in tenth grade and one out of five 12<sup>th</sup> graders.

In general, young people in 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades were more likely to report each risk behavior than young people in 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. However, there are some important exceptions to this finding<sup>1</sup>. Students in 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade were more likely to report:

- Being a victim of property crime at school
- Belonging to a gang.
- Ever using an inhalant
- Watching TV for more than 2 hours on a school day.

The overall figures do mask some important differences by sex<sup>2</sup>. In particular:

- Boys are more likely than girls to report ever having sexual intercourse, early sexual intercourse (i.e. before age 13), carrying a weapon, being in a gang, and getting into fights.
- Girls are more likely to report use of unhealthy weight loss methods, not enough milk, and lack of vigorous exercise.

Somewhat surprisingly, girls are equally likely to report use of alcohol, and marijuana. Nationwide, girls are also equally likely to report these behaviors. However, this represents a change from 1993 when fewer girls than boys reported use of alcohol and marijuana.

### **When do Risk Behaviors Begin?**

Table 1 shows that early participation in a risk behavior (i.e. before age 13) is most common for alcohol and cigarettes. Most notably, about one in five tenth grade students in 2001 said they had used alcohol before the age of 13.

<b>Risk Behavior</b>	<b>Students in 10th grade</b>	<b>Students in 12<sup>th</sup> grade</b>
Cigarettes	17	15
Alcohol	22	17
Marijuana	6	5
Sexual intercourse	8	7

*Percent of students reporting that they began risk behavior before age 13*

Less common is use of marijuana or sexual intercourse. Less than ten percent of students in 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades reported these behaviors before age 13.

In each case, the percent of 10<sup>th</sup> grade students reporting early use was greater than the percent of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. However, the differences are too small to conclude that age of onset is declining (that is, that younger kids are starting to participate in these behaviors at a younger age.)

<sup>1</sup> In addition, many questions were not asked the same way on the two questionnaires (middle school, high school). As a result, no direct comparison is possible for many of the 2001 questions.

<sup>2</sup> There may be additional differences by sex. In 2001, only selected questions were examined for these differences.

## **How do Arlington Youth Compare with Their Peers Nationwide?**

In general, Arlington youth are similar to their peers nationwide in their use of substances, development of healthy habits, and ways of keeping safe. While rates of risk behaviors for Arlington youth are generally lower, the differences are too small to be considered significant.

There are some exceptions to this overall conclusion. Compared to their peers nationwide (in the same grade):

- Arlington youth are less likely to report current use of alcohol and lifetime use marijuana in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Arlington youth in both 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades are more likely to report bike helmet use.
- Arlington youth in both 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades are less likely to report being sexually active.
- Arlington youth in 12<sup>th</sup> grade are more likely to report depressive symptoms lasting two weeks or more.