

Do Students Tell the Truth on the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)?

Research indicates data from the YRBS is gathered credibly from youth who participate in the survey. Internal reliability checks put into place by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) help identify the very 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.

Confidence in YRBS data are provided by:

Comparison of YRBS Data with Data from Other Surveys

When YRBS results are compared to results from other national, state, and local surveys on the same topics, the results are generally quite similar, particularly when differences in survey administration, sample selection, and question wording are taken into consideration.

Consistency Over Time

YRBS results have been fairly consistent since its introduction by the CDC in 1991. While the prevalence of some behaviors has increased or decreased significantly over time, most changes have been gradual and in one direction, either up or down, and have not bounced around from year to year.

Edit Checks

YRBS data are edited for inconsistent responses.

- More than 100 edit checks are conducted on each YRBS data set to remove inconsistent responses. For example, students who report carrying a weapon on school property also must have reported carrying a weapon anywhere or the responses to these two questions will be deleted. Only a very small percentage of responses to each question are identified as inconsistent and removed from the data sets.
- Though it rarely occurs, questionnaires with only a few valid responses are removed entirely from the data set.

Health Outcome Data

YRBS results are consistent with health outcome data. For example, YRBS data from the past decade indicate that the prevalence of sexual experience is decreasing, and the prevalence of condom use is increasing. During this same time period, decreases in teen pregnancies, teen births, and sexually transmitted disease rates among adolescents have also occurred.

Logic Within Groups of Questions

Questions on similar topics produce logical responses. For example, more students have thought about attempting suicide than have made a plan to attempt suicide. Fewer still have actually attempted suicide, and very few have made an injurious suicide attempt. This logical pattern of responses within groups of questions has occurred since the first surveys were conducted.

Psychometric Studies

CDC has conducted a series of psychometric tests to better understand the quality of the questionnaire and the data collected with it. Based on the data available, the YRBSS data appear to be scientifically, credible, reliable and valid.

- When the YRBS questionnaire was developed psychometric tests were conducted in a cognitive laboratory setting, in focus groups, and in regular classrooms among diverse groups of students.
- In 1992 and 2000, CDC conducted reliability studies to measure the stability of responses during a two-week interval.
- In 2000 and 2002, CDC conducted additional methodological studies to examine other factors affecting the reliability and validity of YRBS data.
- Researchers not associated with CDC also have conducted psychometric tests using the YRBS questionnaire and similar questionnaires.

Questionnaire Design and Content

The YRBS questionnaire is designed to protect the anonymity of students.

- No names or other types of personally identifying information are ever requested.
- Skip patterns are not used. This ensures all students complete the questionnaire in about the same amount of time. If skip patterns were used, some students who engaged in few risk behaviors would complete the questionnaire far faster than those students who engaged in many risk behaviors. All students are expected to answer every question.
- The YRBS questionnaire is written on a 7th grade reading level. This helps students accurately comprehend questions and response options. The total number of questions is kept low to help ensure students have an adequate amount of time to respond to every question. Questions are written in a straightforward and direct manner and require only one response.

Subgroup Differences

Subgroup differences are logical and have remained generally constant over time. For example, many behaviors like drug use and sexual experience consistently increase by grade, while others like physical fighting consistently decrease by grade. Other behaviors vary consistently by gender. Males are far more likely than females to use smokeless tobacco.

Survey Environment

Survey administration procedures are designed to protect the confidentiality of schools and the anonymity of students.

- Students sit as far apart as possible throughout the classroom and have an envelope to cover their responses.
- Neither survey administrators nor classroom teachers roam around the classroom while students are taking the survey.
- Students are told the importance of providing honest answers and that no one will know how they responded individually.
- Students are provided with information on how the data will be used to improve programs and policies for students.
- Make-ups are done only when the privacy of students can be completely protected.