

Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)

A Guide to Conducting Your Own Youth Risk Behavior Survey



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION



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Introduction

The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System measures six categories of priority health-risk behaviors among youth: behaviors that contribute to unintentional injuries and violence; tobacco use, alcohol and other drug use; sexual behaviors that contribute to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV infection; unhealthy dietary behaviors; and physical inactivity, plus obesity and asthma. Forty-eight states, six U.S. territories, two tribal governments, and 22 of the largest urban school districts in the U.S. — through a cooperative agreement with the Division of Adolescent and School Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion at CDC — administer a Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) to scientific samples of high school student in the spring or fall of odd-numbered years. Some of these sites also administer the YRBS to middle school students. These surveys, along with a National YRBS, constitute CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System. CDC provides both fiscal and technical support for these surveys. If you are funded by CDC to conduct a YRBS this document is not for you.

This document is designed for communities that plan to conduct a YRBS without technical or fiscal support from CDC. To obtain the best possible information about the prevalence of youth risk behaviors in your community, you should carefully consider at least these nine questions:

1. Who will I survey?
2. Whose permission must I get to conduct the survey?
3. How do I develop my YRBS questionnaire?
4. When should I conduct my YRBS?
5. What survey administration procedures should I follow?
6. Who will administer my YRBS?
7. How will I analyze the data?
8. How will I report the results of my YRBS?
9. Should I have a policy for sharing my YRBS data?

This guide will help you answer each of these questions, but is not intended to replace expertise and experience in school-based survey research. You may find that additional technical support is needed as you conduct your YRBS. One source of that support might be the YRBS coordinator in your state. Check with your state education or health agency for the appropriate person to contact. You also might seek assistance from local colleges or universities or survey research consulting firms. Finally, make sure to thoroughly review the YRBS website at www.cdc.gov/yrbss before you begin. In particular, click on YRBS Methods and review the documents you find there including the one called *Frequently Asked Questions*.

Questions to Consider

1. Who Will I Survey?

Begin by deciding what grade(s) you want to include. The YRBS was originally developed for high school students in grades 9 through 12. You also may choose to conduct a YRBS among middle school students in grades 6 through 8 or grades 7 and 8.

Then, decide how schools and students will be selected to participate. The quality and usefulness of the results will depend largely on the procedures you use to select schools and students. Only by using scientific sampling procedures can you ensure the results can be generalized to the entire student population. Moreover, if you want to compare your results with those from the national or a state YRBS, you must use comparable sampling (and administrative) procedures. If you do your YRBS only among schools and students that are selected without scientific sampling procedures, the results will apply just to those participating schools and students – not to all the schools and students in your community.

If you are using scientific sampling procedures, decide whether to ask all schools in your community to participate—a census of schools—or to scientifically select a certain number of schools to participate—a sample of schools. The census of schools will be appropriate if there are very few schools in your community.

Next, decide whether to ask all classes in each school to participate – a census of classes – or to scientifically select some classes to participate – a sample of classes. The census of classes might be appropriate in very small schools, but is rarely necessary in most schools. To scientifically select classes, compile a list of classes that all students in the desired grade(s) are required to take; for example, a required English class or a particular class period such as second period. Number the list sequentially, and then use either a table of random numbers or a sampling interval to select the classes that will participate in each school. It is strongly recommended that you select entire classes, because this approach is the least disruptive to students and teachers.

If you lack knowledge about scientific sampling procedures, an evaluator or assessment expert in your district or state education or health agency may be able to assist you. A staff member of a local college or university that offers courses in survey research, statistics, or educational psychology also may be able to help you choose the most appropriate sample design and provide guidance in scientific sampling procedures. It is always best to conduct your YRBS among the smallest number of schools and students possible to minimize burden on the education system. Except for very small populations, it is rarely necessary to survey all schools and all students. Regardless of how you select your sample, keep in mind that the higher your school and student response rates, the better your data will be.

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2. Whose Permission Must I Get To Conduct the Survey?

You may be required to secure authorization or permission to conduct a YRBS from the school board or another governing body or person. Investigate the clearance procedures in your community for conducting student surveys. Assemble a clearance package that includes information such as the rationale for conducting the YRBS in your community; when, where, and by whom the survey will be administered; the steps you will take to ensure confidentiality of schools and anonymity of students; and how the results will be used.

You also should obtain parent permission for students to participate. Two approaches to securing parental permission are available. *Active parental permission* means that you collect a signature from each parent authorizing the student's participation. A student is not allowed to take part in the YRBS unless a parent has returned a signed form indicating their approval of their student's participation in the survey. Only students whose parents have provided written approval in this manner can participate in the survey. *Passive permission* means that students are excluded from the survey only when a parent returns a signed form denying permission.

Active parental permission typically requires more time and resources and may reduce the number of students who participate in the survey because of the difficulty of both getting permission forms home to parents and having forms returned to school. As a general rule, expect the use of active parental permission to reduce student response rates by about 50 percent unless you implement extraordinary follow up procedures. If you use active parental permission, the following are some steps you can take to help maximize student participation:

- Mail permission forms and information about the survey directly to parents.
- Emphasize the importance of the survey to teachers and ask them to remind students to return the permission forms to school.
- Telephone parents to follow up on missing permission forms.

Sample passive and active parental permission forms are in Appendix A. Regardless of what type of parental permission you use, make sure that a copy of your YRBS questionnaire is available at the school for parents to review if interested.

3. How Do I Develop My YRBS Questionnaire?

The standard high school and middle school YRBS questionnaires can be downloaded from the YRBS website at <http://www.cdc.gov/yrbss>. On the YRBS home page, click on Questionnaires and Item Rationale - http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/yrbss/questionnaire_rationale.htm. No special permission is required to use the YRBS questionnaires and there is no charge.

Each question in the standard YRBS questionnaire has been carefully developed. You may choose to modify the questionnaire depending on community needs and interests. No special permission is required to modify the questionnaire. If you decide to add questions, the questionnaire must still be short enough for students to complete in one class period. The standard YRBS questionnaire takes about 35 minutes to complete, allowing time for providing

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instructions, distributing materials, and collecting completed questionnaires in a single class period. The addition of too many questions may contribute to boredom or fatigue and could cause students to give inaccurate or incomplete responses. Any revision of the standard questionnaire should be undertaken with caution and with the guidance of a survey research expert. Keep in mind that it is easy to make a question different, but much harder to make a question better.

Every student must have a YRBS questionnaire. CDC does not provide copies. Depending on available funds, you may opt either to print scannable questionnaire booklets or make copies of the questionnaire. In the second case, students can record their responses directly on the questionnaire or on a separate scannable answer sheet. Each option has implications for how the data are analyzed. If students record their responses directly on the questionnaire, the data will need to be entered into a database manually and cannot be electronically scanned. (See question 7, How will I analyze the data?).

Scannable questionnaire booklets and answer sheets are available through many printing companies. Scannable answer sheets must offer eight-option responses to match the format of the standard YRBS questionnaire. Before purchasing quantities of scannable questionnaire booklets or answer sheets, be sure the scanner you will use is compatible with the type of booklet or answer sheet you have chosen. Most printing companies should be able to match your scannable questionnaire booklets or answer sheets to your scanner. If students use scannable questionnaire booklets or answer sheets, you may need to provide number 2 pencils.

The YRBS website only provides the YRBS questionnaires in English. You may need to translate the questionnaire to meet the needs of the population in your community. To determine whether your YRBS questionnaire should be translated, ask in what language regular academic tests for classes such as math or social studies are produced. If students take these tests in English, then it is likely they can complete the YRBS questionnaire in English.

4. When Should I Conduct My YRBS?

Once you have picked the semester or quarter in which to conduct your YRBS, you must carefully plan the dates for the survey. In general, it is best to avoid administering the survey on a Monday or a Friday, before or after a school holiday, during the last month of the school year, or at any time when student attendance is apt to be low. Furthermore, try to administer the survey during as short a period as possible—ideally, on the same day or during the same week.

The YRBS's supported by CDC are usually conducted during the spring of odd-numbered years. To avoid interfering with these surveys or overburdening schools with multiple requests for survey participation, consider conducting your YRBS during an even-numbered year. Contact the YRBS coordinator in your state to make sure that your YRBS does not interfere with the state-wide survey.

5. What Survey Administration Procedures Should I Follow?

The importance of setting standards and following prescribed survey administration procedures cannot be overestimated. Survey administration standards help protect the confidentiality of schools and anonymity of students, improve the quality of data collected, and increase school and student response rates. Both schools and students must feel confident every reasonable effort has been made to protect their privacy. To ease anxiety about how the survey will be conducted, inform students, parents, and other stakeholders of all the steps you are taking to ensure privacy.

Important: If you cannot conduct your YRBS and maintain student privacy, then you should not do the survey.

One way to help ensure that the survey is administered to all classes in the same way, is to develop a script for survey administrators to read to students when they conduct the survey. A sample survey administrator script is in Appendix B.

You might also consider assembling a student survey packet consisting of a YRBS questionnaire, a scannable answer sheet (if appropriate), a sharpened number 2 pencil, a blank sheet of paper for students to use to cover their answers, and a large box or envelope in which students can place their completed questionnaires or answer sheets.

With today's technology, you may wish to consider on-line survey administration in a school's computer lab. However, CDC studies have shown (1) students who complete the YRBS in a computer lab perceive less privacy and anonymity than paper-and-pencil respondents; (2) intrusion by students and staff not part of the class taking the YRBS is more common in computer labs than in regular classrooms used for paper-and-pencil administration; and (3) item completion rates are lower using on-line survey administration than paper-and-pencil administration. CDC does not provide an on-line version of the YRBS questionnaire at this time.

Regardless of the mode of administration, establish a system that allows you to keep track of what schools and classes are participating. One way to do this is to assign sequential numbers to the schools as well as the classes in the schools. These identification numbers will constitute a unique school and class code that you can enter on a tracking document and then use later, as needed, to trace the school and class from which particular data have been collected. To ensure school and student anonymity, this tracking document should be kept in a secure location and then destroyed after data analysis is finished.

6. Who Will Administer My YRBS?

Because of the sensitive nature of the questions on the YRBS, survey administrators must be able to make students completing the survey feel as comfortable as possible, interact easily with students, and establish an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality. Keep this in mind as you select persons to act as survey administrators. Persons who may be appropriate survey

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administrators include: school nurse, psychologists, social workers, and counselors; classroom teachers; graduate students (e.g., those pursuing the fields of health education, survey research, assessment, and evaluation); and members of school or community groups, such as the School Health Advisory Council or PTA.

Consider requiring your survey administrators to sign an assurance of confidentiality (see Appendix C for an example).

If possible, hold a training session for the survey administrators to help ensure standardized administration of the questionnaire. During the training, review all the activities the survey administrators are responsible for. An example set of instructions for survey administrators is in Appendix D. In addition, the training should cover the following topics:

- the purpose of your YRBS,
- the schedule for administering the survey,
- survey materials,
- the importance of safeguarding student privacy, and
- how the results will be used.

If it is not possible to hold a training session, provide comprehensive written instructions to the survey administrators well in advance of the survey date. Follow up with a phone call to each person to confirm instructions and answer questions.

7. How Will I Analyze the Data?

Data analysis is a two-step process. First, the data must be put into a computer-readable format. Then the results can be analyzed. To put your data into a computer-readable format it will need to be entered manually into a data base or scanned electronically.

Manual entering: Manually entering the data into a database is probably more economical than electronic scanning if your sample is very small. Consider asking a local college or university to help with the task. Commercial services also are available.

Electronic scanning: If students have recorded their responses on either scannable questionnaire booklets or scannable answer sheets, the forms should be run through a scanning machine. Be certain the scanner is programmed to accommodate the eight-option format of the YRBS questions.

After the data have been manually entered into a database or electronically scanned, they are ready to be analyzed. Begin by carefully editing your data to eliminate inconsistent responses. For your reference, CDC's standard YRBS editing procedures can be found in the *Data User's Manual* on the YRBS website: www.cdc.gov/yrbs – click on Data Files and Recommendations – then click on *Data User's Manual*. Once your data are edited, for your results to be representative of the population you surveyed, you must adjust or weight the data to reflect sample selection probabilities and nonresponse. Staff from a local education agency assessment

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or evaluation department or consultants from colleges, universities, or survey consulting firms can probably assist with editing, weighting, and analyzing your data. For information on appropriate software packages to use for analysis go to the YRBS website – www.cdc.gov/yrbss - and click on YRBS Methods – and then select *Software for Analysis of YRBS Data*.

8. How Will I Report the Results of My YRBS?

Effective reporting of the results of your local YRBS will allow you to provide a broad audience with valid, useful information on the risk behaviors of students in your community. Your audience may include some or all of the following groups:

- **Parents:** Parents may be more inclined to support school health policies, programs, and activities if they are informed about the risk behaviors of students.
- **Teachers:** Teachers will benefit from having more information about the prevalence of risk behaviors among their students and may modify their curricula to address particularly widespread risk behaviors.
- **Students:** Students may want to be involved in designing and implementing relevant policies and programs to address health risk behaviors.
- **Administrators and school board members:** Administrators and school board members can use the YRBS data to guide development of school health policies.
- **Agencies and organizations working with youth:** These agencies and organizations will be interested in using survey results to improve their own programs and activities.

Prioritize your target audiences by assessing their interest in and knowledge of health risk behaviors among youth. Then tailor the vocabulary, format, graphics, and style of your survey products to your primary audience. To reach a variety of audiences with varying degrees of interest in and technical understanding of your results, consider preparing

- an executive summary of the most important results and conclusions;
- a newsletter outlining the major results;
- a one-page summary, fact sheet, or brochure;
- oral presentations;
- press releases; and
- web sites.

To learn from others about the kinds of YRBS products you might develop review the Fact Sheets and Comprehensive Results section of the YRBS website – www.cdc.gov/yrbss - and conduct an internet search using YRBS as the keyword.

9. Should I Have a Policy for Sharing My YRBS Data?

You should have a policy in place to govern how you will respond to requests for your YRBS data. Your agency or organization may already have a policy that will apply. If not, consider carefully what data you are willing to share and how the data will be shared. Determine if Freedom of Information Act policies apply to your data. Remember that you must make sure that the privacy of students and schools is protected at all times. Develop your YRBS data sharing policy before you finish conducting your survey so you are ready for any requests you might receive.

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Appendix A – Sample Parental Permission Forms

Passive Parental Permission Form

Our school is taking part in the 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey. This survey is sponsored by [name of agency/organization]. The survey will ask about the health behaviors of 9th through 12th grade students. The survey will ask about nutrition, physical activity, injuries, tobacco, alcohol, and other drug use. It will also ask about sexual behaviors that cause AIDS, other sexually transmitted diseases, and pregnancy.

Students will be asked to fill out a survey on [date of survey administration]. The survey takes about 35 minutes for the students to complete.

Doing this paper and pencil survey will cause little or no risk to your child. The only potential risk is that some students might find certain questions to be sensitive. The survey has been designed to protect your child's privacy. Students will not put their names on the survey. Also, no school or student will ever be mentioned by name in a report of the results. Your child will get no benefit right away from taking part in the survey. The results of this survey will help your child and other children in the future. We would like all selected students to take part in the survey, but the survey is voluntary. No action will be taken against the school, you, or your child if your child does not take part. Students can skip any questions they do not wish to answer. In addition, students may stop participating in the survey at any point without penalty. If you would like to see the survey, a copy is available [identify location or name and contact information of whom the parent should call].

Please read the section below and check the box **only if you do not** want your child to take part in the survey. If you check the box "no" below, then sign this form and return it to the school within 3 days. Please see the other side of this form for more facts about the survey. If your child's teacher or principal cannot answer your questions about the survey, please call [name of agency/organization contact] at [phone number]. Thank you.

Student's name: _____ Grade: _____

I have read this form and know what the survey is about.

NO, my child may not take part in this survey.

Parent's signature: _____ Date: _____

Phone number: _____

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Active Parental Permission Form

Our school is taking part in the 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey. This survey is sponsored by [name of agency/organization]. The survey will ask about the health behaviors of 9th through 12th grade students. The survey will ask about nutrition, physical activity, injuries, tobacco, alcohol, and other drug use. It will also ask about sexual behaviors that cause AIDS, other sexually transmitted diseases, and pregnancy.

Students will be asked to fill out a survey on [date of survey administration]. The survey takes about 35 minutes for the students to complete.

Doing this paper and pencil survey will cause little or no risk to your child. The only potential risk is that some students might find certain questions to be sensitive. The survey has been designed to protect your child's privacy. Students will not put their names on the survey. Also, no school or student will ever be mentioned by name in a report of the results. Your child will get no benefit right away from taking part in the survey. The results of this survey will help your child and other children in the future. We would like all selected students to take part in the survey, but the survey is voluntary. No action will be taken against the school, you, or your child if your child does not take part. Students can skip any questions they do not wish to answer. In addition, students may stop participating in the survey at any point without penalty. If you would like to see the survey, a copy is available [identify location or name and contact information of whom the parent should call].

Please read the section below and check one box. Then, sign the form and **return it to the school within 3 days**. Please see the other side of this form for more facts about the survey. If your child's teacher or principal cannot answer your questions about the survey, please call [name of agency/organization contact] at [phone number]. Thank you.

Student's name: _____ Grade: _____

I have read this form and know what the survey is about.

Check one:

YES, my child may take part in this survey.

NO, my child may not take part in this survey.

Parent's signature: _____ Date: _____

Phone number: _____

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Appendix B – Sample Survey Administrator Script

Introduce Yourself and the Survey to the Class.

Good (morning/afternoon). The [AGENCY/ORGANIZATION] is conducting this student survey. One of the many responsibilities of the [AGENCY/ORGANIZATION] is to help schools provide students with information about behaviors that increase the risk of health problems now or in the future.

I'd like to thank each of you for participating. Participating in this survey is voluntary and your grade in this class will not be affected, whether or not you answer the questions. However, only a limited number of students like you are participating in this survey in schools all over the (jurisdiction). The answers you give are very important. I ask that you read each question carefully and answer it based on what you really know or do.

I would like to emphasize that this is not a test of you or this school. To develop better health education programs, educators and health officials must find out which behaviors students like you are engaging in. These behaviors may include sexual behaviors that may result in unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS; tobacco, alcohol, and other drug use; lack of physical activity; poor nutritional habits; or behaviors that may lead to injuries.

Throughout the entire survey process, I will maintain strict procedures to protect your privacy and allow for your anonymous participation. Please do not write your name on the questionnaire or answer sheet. Your answers are private. Results of this survey will never be reported by name, class, or school. When everyone is done, you can deposit your answer sheet in this large envelope or box.

Distribute Questionnaire Booklets or Questionnaires and Answer Sheets. Emphasize Privacy and Anonymity.

Now I would like you to look at the questionnaire (answer sheet). Use the # 2 pencil you have been given to fill out this questionnaire (answer sheet). Do not use a pen or any other pencil. Notice that for each question there are a series of circles on the questionnaire (answer sheet). For each question that you answer on the survey, choose just one answer that best fits what you know or do, then fill in the corresponding circle on the questionnaire (answer sheet). If you must change an answer, erase your old answer completely. Besides question 5, only one circle should be filled in for each question on the questionnaire (answer sheet).

Please be sure to answer every question. When you are finished, look over your questionnaire (answer sheet) to make sure that you haven't skipped any items. You have the entire class period to complete the survey, which means that the survey will end at approximately _____ (a.m./p.m.). If you finish before that time, stay seated and remain quiet. Do not talk with other students.

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It is important that you answer the survey based on what you really know and do. Don't pick a response just because you think that's what someone wants you to say.

After Questionnaire Booklets or Questionnaires and Answer Sheets Are Collected.

I would like to thank all of you for participating in the survey. The information you have provided will be used to develop better health education programs for students like yourselves all around the (jurisdiction).

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Appendix C – Sample Assurance of Confidentiality Form

[NAME OF AGENCY/ORGANIZATION] is firmly committed to maintaining the confidentiality of individual respondents' data obtained through surveys.

Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality

1. All survey administrators shall sign this assurance of confidentiality.
2. All survey administrators shall keep completely confidential the names of respondents, all information or opinions collected, and any information about respondents learned incidentally. Survey administrators shall exercise reasonable caution to prevent access by others to survey data in their possession.

Pledge of Confidentiality

I hereby certify that I have carefully read and will cooperate fully with the above procedures on confidentiality. I will keep completely confidential all information arising from surveys concerning individual respondents to which I gain access. I will not discuss, disclose, disseminate, or provide access to survey data and identifiers. I will devote my best efforts to ensure that there is compliance with the required procedures by personnel whom I supervise. I understand that violation of this pledge is sufficient grounds for disciplinary action. I also understand that violation of the privacy rights of individuals through such unauthorized discussion, disclosure, dissemination, or access may make me subject to criminal or civil penalties. I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality.

SIGNATURE. I have read this and I agree to the Pledge of Confidentiality.

Survey Administrator Signature: _____ Date: _____

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Appendix D – Sample Survey Administrator Instructions

Activities to do before you get to the classroom:

1. Make sure appropriate school district and school building personnel (including teachers) are aware you are coming, when you will be there, and with which classes you will be working.
2. Make sure you have the following materials:
 - A copy of the Script for Survey Administrators to be read to sampled students.
 - A list of classes to be surveyed and their location.
 - Enough copies of the questionnaire booklets or questionnaires and answer sheets for all sampled students.
 - Enough #2 pencils for all sampled students. Let the students keep the pencils after they complete the questionnaire, if possible.
 - One large box or envelope in which students can place their completed questionnaire booklets or answer sheets.

Activities to do in the classroom:

3. Take attendance to be sure only the appropriate students are in the room (i.e., students who are enrolled in the class and have parental permission to participate).
4. Spread students' desks throughout the classroom to minimize the chance students will see each others' responses.
5. Do not allow students or teachers to wander around the room or talk while others are completing the survey.
6. Encourage students to use an extra sheet of paper or a large envelope to cover their responses as they work.
7. Read the directions to the students before they begin. Remind students about the importance of the survey, that completing the survey is voluntary, that their responses are anonymous, and that their grade in the class will not be affected by whether or not they complete the survey.
8. Remind students not to place their name or school name on the questionnaire booklet or answer sheet.

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9. Allow enough time for students to complete the survey without feeling rushed. About 35 minutes should be sufficient for the students to complete the survey.
10. Make sure that only #2 pencils are used.
11. Do not review the answers to the survey as questionnaire booklets or answer sheets are returned, even if this means accepting incomplete data. Do not even appear to be looking at the questionnaires or answer sheets. Students must be confident that their privacy will be maintained and their participation will remain anonymous.