

Do Students Tell the Truth on the Virginia Youth Survey (VYS)?

While a very small number of students do not answer the VYS honestly, most students tell the truth. We have confidence in VYS data for the following reasons:

1. 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 a piece of paper to cover their responses.
- Neither survey administrators nor classroom teachers wander around the classroom while students are taking the survey.
- Students are told the importance of providing honest answers; no one will know how they respond, and how the data will be used to improve programs and policies for students.

2. Questionnaire design and content.

The VYS 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 to make sure 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 high school VYS questionnaire has about an 8th 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.

3. Edit checks.

VYS data are edited for inconsistent responses.

- More than 100 edit checks are conducted on each VYS 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.

4. 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.

5. Comparison of VYS data with data from other surveys.

When VYS 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.

6. Consistency over time.

National the results have been fairly consistent since 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.

8. Subgroup differences.

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

9. Psychometric studies.

The Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (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 data appear to be generally reliable and valid.

- When the national youth 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 2-week interval.
- In 2002, 2004, and 2008, CDC conducted additional methodological studies to examine other factors affecting the reliability and validity of data.
- Researchers not associated with CDC also have conducted psychometric tests using the questionnaire and similar questionnaires.