

SURVEY SHOWS TEENS DRINKING LESS BUT MORE USING MARIJUANA

This article was written by Brent Runyon and published in the Falmouth Enterprise on June 3, 2011.

The results of a new survey of over 1,000 Falmouth students show that underage drinking is down, while more young people are using marijuana.

The results of the Communities that Care survey given to 1,027 students in Falmouth from 6th grade to 12th grade, show that 37.3 percent of young people reported they drank alcohol in the past 30 days, 30.3 percent said they used marijuana, and 13.2 percent said they smoked cigarettes.

That means that most Falmouth youth are not drinking alcohol or doing drugs on a regular basis, said Karen M. Cardeira, Director of Falmouth Human Services and project director of the Falmouth Prevention Partnership. "The majority of the kids are not doing drugs and drinking," said Ms. Cardeira. She said the results of the new survey are especially encouraging regarding alcohol use among high school aged teens.

Youth Alcohol Use Down

"We're seeing a significant decline in high school students who used alcohol in the past 30 days," she said. In 2009, 50.9 percent of Falmouth High School students said they used alcohol in the past 30 days. In 2011, that number dropped to 43.4 percent. "That's a very significant decline and its below the state average," she said. The state average is 44 percent.

The survey was given in the school system because it is the best way to reach a large number of young people. But the purpose of the survey is to guide the Falmouth Prevention Partnership, which is a coalition of community members who are working to reduce substance abuse in the community.

"I think this is a community issue that we have to deal with as a community," said superintendent of schools Marc P. Dupuis. "The survey showed some good trends, particularly in regards to some of the alcohol use, but there's still work to be done." The survey is part of a five year \$625,000 federal grant to decrease alcohol and drug use among young people. Most of the focus of the coalition over the past two years has been on alcohol use among teenagers, which Ms. Cardeira said appears to be working.

Marijuana Use Increasing

But not all the results of the survey are positive, Ms. Cardeira said. "On the flip side, the use of marijuana by high school students has increased dramatically," she said. In 2009, 31.5 percent of high school aged teens said they had used marijuana in the past 30 days. In 2011, that percentage rose to 37.6 percent.



Ms. Cardeira said the increase in use may be attributable to the perception that marijuana is not a significant risk to their health, she said. Other factors may be the national debate over the benefits of medical marijuana and the Massachusetts vote to decriminalize the drug in 2009. “I think we’re going to have to educate everyone about what the real risks of marijuana are,” Ms. Cardeira said. “This stuff that’s out there now is not the marijuana that was around when we were kids.”

Mr. Dupuis also saw the marijuana use increase as a surprising and troubling trend. “The marijuana use seemed to be on the increase, which is something that needs to be worked on,” he said.

Youth Perception of Risks

Ms. Cardeira noted that a large number of students perceive cigarettes to be significantly more harmful and harder to get than marijuana, which she said may be the residual effect of strong anti-smoking campaigns.

Across the grades surveyed, 93.4 percent of Falmouth students perceive cigarettes to be a significant or moderate risk, while 66.9 percent perceive marijuana as risky. A small number of students, 7.5 percent, across the grades surveyed said cigarettes were easy to get, while 10.4 percent of students said marijuana was easy to get. Alcohol was also reported to be less risky than cigarettes and easier to get than marijuana. 78.8 percent of students said they saw alcohol as risky, and 18.1 percent said it was easy to get.

Students were also asked what they perceived parents in the community thought about young people using cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana. Across the grades, 92.7 percent of students said they thought that parents disapproved of cigarettes, while 84.9 said

parents disapproved of alcohol, and 86.4 said parents disapproved of marijuana. The survey also showed that the young people in Falmouth who do try drugs and alcohol begin between the ages of 13 and 14.

Non-Medical Use of Prescription Drugs Also Increasing

The students were also asked about their use of prescription pain killers and other illegal drugs. Over 90 percent of students across the grades said they had never used painkillers, hallucinogens, ecstasy, prescription tranquilizers, such as Xanax or Valium, or prescription stimulants, such as Ritalin or Adderall.

But there are some results of the prescription drug section of the survey that are troubling said Falmouth Prevention Partnership Coordinator Sharon F. Sodekson. Eleven percent of eighth graders in Falmouth reported they had used prescription drugs in their lifetime, which is more than twice the state average of 5 percent. About the same number of Falmouth High School students, 11.9 percent, said they had used prescription drugs at some point in their lives. That number is less than the state average of 15 percent.

Falmouth Prevention Partnership Working with Schools and Other Organizations

Mr. Dupuis said a positive result of the survey was that many Morse Pond students reported feeling significantly safer in school than they did when the survey was given two years ago. "A lot of work has been done in that regards in all the schools," Mr. Dupuis said.

Ms. Sodekson said the Falmouth Prevention Partnership has sponsored an array of community programs and activities designed to lower the risks to young people and increase more positive activities.



The Falmouth Prevention Partnership cosponsored two events with the Falmouth Police and Falmouth recreation departments to safely collect and dispose of unused medications, and plans to make this a yearly occurrence. The partnership was also involved in the revitalization of the Teen Center facility at Gus Cauty Community Center, including buying new furniture and computers and repainting the facility.

The partnership collaborated with the recreation department, Falmouth Public Schools and Together We Can to increase activities for teens, including organizing dances for

Lawrence School students, providing chaperones at the Teen Center during football games, and starting a game night in the gym on Wednesday nights.

The prevention partnership worked with liquor store retailers to discourage adults from buying alcohol for teens, by placing stickers on paper bags in stores that read, "We Won't So Please Don't". The Sticker Shock Campaign was designed to educate adults about the social host laws in Massachusetts, and the partnership plans to make this a yearly occurrence.

The partnership also sponsored the expansion of No Guff Week to Falmouth Academy, all public schools and the community. The partnership provided funding for anti-bullying programming in Falmouth Public Schools by paying for speakers to visit the schools.

Falmouth Prevention Partnership is a community collaboration of over 40 organizations and 100 individuals, including police, the faith community, schools, town government, civic organizations, hospital and health clinics, the National Honor Society, and the media. The partnership was featured in over 120 newspaper articles in 2010, and 25 articles so far in 2011, Ms. Sodekson said.

With Falmouth Public Schools, the partnership co-sponsored the Guiding Good Choices Parent Education Program, trained 16 community facilitators, and co-sponsored seven parent education series.

The partnership began the Safe Homes Campaign, which provided educational and support campaign to help parents connect and keep their children alcohol and drug free. The campaign began in April 2010, and so far 50 families have pledged to be a Safe Home. The goal is to have 400 families make this pledge and support each other, Ms. Sodekson said.

The partnership was also involved in data collection and tracking of the Falmouth community profile from multiple sources of data in year one. The data was made available to the community at large for future funding purposes, and tracked the amount of volunteer time and in-kind goods and services provided throughout town toward prevention efforts. In 2010, over 5,000 volunteer hours and over \$350,000 in-kind dollars were provided, Ms. Sodekson said.