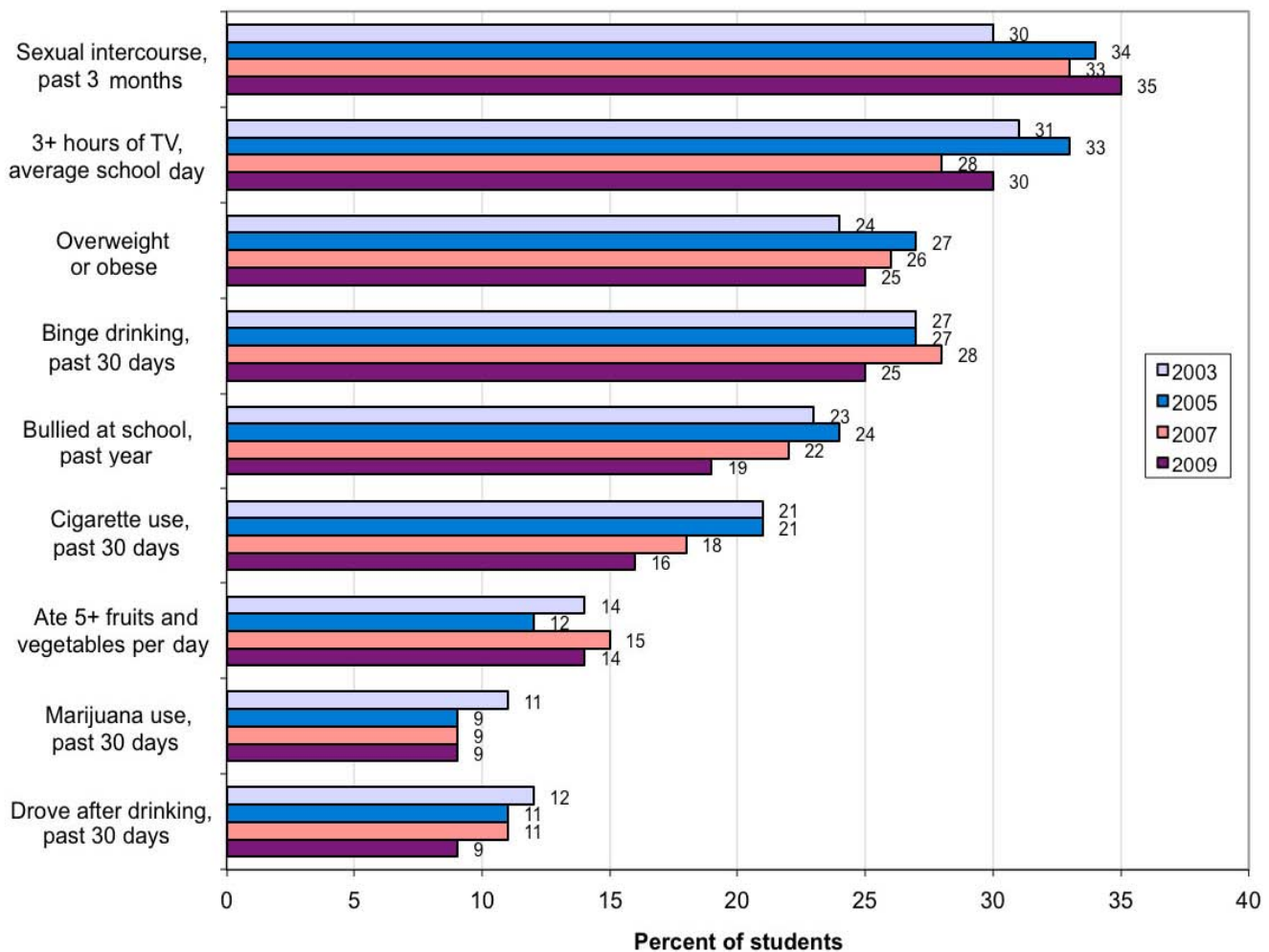


# 2009 Health and Risk Behaviors of Massachusetts Youth



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – FEBRUARY 2011

### 2003 - 2009 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey Grades 9 - 12, Selected Variables



## INTRODUCTION

Health and Risk Behaviors of Massachusetts Youth, 2009, is the product of a collaborative effort between the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) and Department of Public Health (DPH) to conduct two youth surveys in Massachusetts public secondary schools in the spring of 2009. Altogether, 8,514 students in 121 schools participated in the surveys. ESE's Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey measures high school risk behaviors over time. DPH's Youth Health Survey provides a snapshot of middle school student risk behaviors as well as other health status indicators in high school.

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

**Several adolescent risk behaviors, especially those related to substance use, have decreased since 2003.** Compared to 2003, a lower percentage of high school students in 2009 were drinking alcohol before age 13 (25% vs. 17%), ever smoking cigarettes (53% vs. 43%) or using methamphetamines (6% vs. 3%) or having been offered, sold or given drugs on school property in the past year (32% vs. 26%). Also, fewer students reported ever having been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease (2% vs. 6%).

**A few behaviors have become worse in recent years.** From 2003 to 2009, past month smokeless tobacco use increased from 4% vs. 6%, and drinking the recommended 3 glasses of milk per day decreased (19% to 13%). From 2007 to 2009, fewer high school athletes reported using mouth guards (57% to 47%).

**Many risk behaviors begin in middle school.** It is clear that many young adolescents engage in risky behaviors well before they reach the 9th grade. In 2009, some middle school students reported ever smoking cigarettes (15%), ever drinking alcohol (28%), ever using marijuana (9%), or injuring themselves on purpose (15%). Middle school students were substantially more likely than high school students to report having been bullied in school in the past year (36% vs. 19%).

**Many important risk areas remain statistically unchanged since 2003.** Among high school students, there have been no significant changes in the percent reporting any lifetime sexual intercourse (currently 46%), condom use at last intercourse among sexually active youth (35%), or ever having been/getting someone pregnant (6%). Also unchanged are high school students' reports of being in a physical fight at school (9%), riding with a driver who had been drinking (27%), or making a suicide attempt in the past year (7%).

Given the current national emphasis on the threat of obesity, it is notable that indicators of nutrition, physical activity, and weight among Massachusetts youth have also not shown improvement since 2003. Currently, 27% of middle school students and 25% of high school students are either overweight or obese according to their own self-reported height and weight. At the high school level, only 14% ate the recommended 5 servings of fruits and vegetables and only 36% ate breakfast every day – two behaviors associated with lower levels of overweight. Further, only one third of middle school (33%) and high school (34%) students engaged in the recommended 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on at least 5 days of the week. Only 58% of high school students attended physical education class in an average week.

**More students report factors that help to protect against risky behavior.** Factors such as academic achievement, close relationships with parents or caregivers, a belief that school staff are supportive, and involvement in community service have been recognized as potential protective factors among adolescents, associated with lower rates of risk behaviors. Compared to 2003, significantly more students in 2009 reported that they felt there was a teacher in their school they could talk to about a problem (64% vs. 71%) or there was a parent or adult family member they could talk to about things important to them (78% vs. 83%).

**Many students are dealing with chronic and long-term health conditions.** In 2009, students reported troubling rates of asthma (middle school 20%; high school 23%), diabetes (middle and high school 1%) long-term emotional problems or learning disabilities (middle school 10%; high school 15%), and physical disabilities or long-term health problems (middle school 12%; high school 8%).