



New Jersey Middle School Risk and Protective Factors Survey: 2021 Mercer County Summary

The New Jersey Middle School Risk and Protective Factors Survey (NJRPFSS) is a student health survey that has been conducted by the New Jersey Department of Human Services (NJ DHS) Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) once every three years since 1999. The survey is administered to seventh and eighth grade students across New Jersey (NJ) and includes questions about their use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs and the availability of these substances in their community, as well as factors that encourage or discourage substance use and antisocial behaviors. Results from this survey are used to help communities decide what types of programs can help youth avoid risky behaviors. These data are also used to inform program funding, policymaking, and the design of education initiatives in the community.

In 2018, DMHAS contracted with the [Center for Research and Evaluation on Education and Human Services \(CREEHS\)](#) at Montclair State University to administer this survey to seventh and eighth grade students in public and charter schools across the state. Schools were eligible for selection if they had at least 40 students enrolled in grades seven and eight combined. Schools were randomly selected within each county. The number of selected schools ranged from 4 to 10, depending on the number of eligible schools per county. The likelihood of any given school's selection increased with its enrollment size. When a school declined to participate, its spot was offered to another school within the same county.

In-person survey administrations began in November 2019 and were intended to continue through June 2020. On March 18, 2020, all NJ schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, all study and data collection activities were put on hold. Survey administrations resumed in January 2021 and concluded in March 2021 using a fully virtual administration design. In total, CREEHS collected 6,490 student surveys from 97 schools across all of NJ's 21 counties.

The tables that follow present selected data collected in **Mercer County** and statewide across the two school years (2019 – 2020 and 2020 – 2021). Data based on COVID-19 survey items were collected only during the 2020 – 2021 period.

Participating Sample

Overall, 331 students participated in the survey in **Mercer County**. Fifteen of these students were removed from data analysis due to inconsistent responses, leaving 316 eligible responses from students in **Mercer County**. This sample represents 4 out of 4 of the selected schools in the county.

Table 1. Student Participation: County to State Comparison

	Mercer County (N=316)		New Jersey (N=6,190)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Data collection year					
2020	143	45.3	3,955	63.9	-18.6 *
2021	173	54.8	2,235	36.1	18.6 *
Grade					
7 th grade	144	45.6	3,020	48.8	-3.2
8 th grade	172	54.4	3,170	51.2	3.2
Gender					
Male	125	39.6	2,740	44.6	-5.1
Female	181	57.3	3,299	53.8	3.5
Other gender	10	3.2	99	1.6	1.6
Ethnicity					
Hispanic or Latino	78	25.2	1,807	29.8	-4.7
Race					
White	142	44.9	3,022	48.8	-3.9
Black or African American	29	9.2	511	8.3	0.9
Asian	32	10.1	441	7.1	3.0
Native American or Alaskan Native	2	0.6	31	0.5	0.1
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1	0.3	11	0.2	0.1
Other race	62	19.6	1,171	18.9	0.7
Two or more races	40	12.7	898	14.5	-1.9
Military parent					
Yes	42	13.4	970	15.8	-2.4

Some sample sizes may be lower than sample N reflected in the header due to item-level nonresponse.

BLUE indicates the county is below the state average and **ORANGE** indicates the county is above the state average (significant at $p < .05$).

Caution should be practiced when comparing county and state level data, especially when demographic characteristics are significantly different.

Substance Use

Students were asked about their use of various substances, including illicit drugs across three time periods:

- Lifetime (i.e., ever): “How old were you when you first...”
- Past Year: “Within the past year (12 months) how often have you...”
- Past 30 Days: “During the past 30 days, on how many occasions have you...”

Table 2. Substance Use: County to State Comparisons

	Mercer County (N=316)		New Jersey (N=6,175)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Lifetime use					
Ever used (at least once)					
Alcohol	65	21.1	1,006	16.5	4.6
Binge drinking	13	4.3	248	4.1	0.2
E-cigarettes	34	11.0	589	9.6	1.4
E-cigarettes without marijuana	30	9.7	553	9.0	0.7
E-cigarettes with marijuana	14	4.5	211	3.4	1.1
Marijuana	15	4.8	194	3.2	1.7
Prescription drugs not prescribed to them	8	2.6	149	2.5	0.1
Cigarettes	11	3.5	112	1.8	1.7
Inhalants	8	2.6	83	1.4	1.2
Other illicit drugs	5	1.7	63	1.1	0.6
Early onset use (11 years or younger)					
Alcohol	26	8.4	401	6.6	1.9
E-cigarettes without marijuana	8	2.6	101	1.7	1.0
Prescription drugs not prescribed to them	3	1.0	68	1.1	-0.2
Cigarettes	4	1.3	50	0.8	0.5
Marijuana	4	1.3	34	0.6	0.7
Past year use					
Alcohol	38	12.4	632	10.4	2.0
Binge drinking	8	2.6	171	2.8	-0.2
E-cigarettes	25	8.1	403	6.6	1.4
E-cigarettes without marijuana	22	7.1	365	6.0	1.1
E-cigarettes with marijuana	13	4.1	161	2.6	1.5
Marijuana	14	4.5	153	2.5	2.0
Prescription drugs not prescribed to them	6	1.9	107	1.8	0.2
Other illicit drugs	3	1.0	34	0.6	0.4
Cigarettes	6	1.9	65	1.1	0.8
Cough medication	5	1.6	56	0.9	0.7
Inhalants	5	1.6	47	0.8	0.8

Table 2. Substance Use: County to State Comparisons (continued)

Past 30 day use					
Alcohol	25	7.9	362	5.9	2.1
Binge drinking	6	1.9	102	1.7	0.3
E-cigarettes	18	5.8	241	3.9	1.8
E-cigarettes without marijuana	16	5.1	222	3.6	1.5
E-cigarettes with marijuana	9	2.9	96	1.6	1.3
Marijuana	10	3.2	104	1.7	1.5
Prescription drugs not prescribed to them	4	1.3	51	0.8	0.4
Inhalants	5	1.6	32	0.5	1.1
Cigarettes	4	1.3	27	0.4	0.8

Some sample sizes may be lower than sample N reflected in the header due to item-level nonresponse.

Alcohol = had a drink of beer, wine or hard liquor (vodka, whiskey or gin) other than a few sips

Binge drinking = had 3 or more drinks of beer, wine or hard liquor in a row within a couple of hours

E-cigarettes = used e-cigarette, vape pen, e-liquid rig (JUUL, N2, Joyetech)

Marijuana = used marijuana (pot, hash, weed)

Inhalants = used inhalants (glue, gas, Whippits) to get high

Other illicit drugs = includes students who used cocaine or crack, heroin (opiates), hallucinogens (PCP, LSD), crystal meth (ice, crank), Ecstasy (MDMA, Molly), other club drugs (ketamine, GHB, Rohypnol), uppers (amphetamines), downers (tranquilizers, sedatives), anabolic steroids, or OxyContin

BLUE indicates the county is below the state average and **ORANGE** indicates the county is above the state average (significant at $p < .05$).

Table 3. Substance Use: 10-Year Trends

	Mercer County				New Jersey			
	2010	2012	2015	2021 ^a	2010	2012	2015	2021 ^a
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Alcohol								
Lifetime	27.8	20.9	53.9	21.1	27.0	23.1	14.3	16.5
Past year	18.4	14.7	7.0	12.4	20.4	17.3	8.4	10.4
Past 30 days	12.3	7.0	3.7	7.9	10.7	9.0	4.4	5.9
Binge drinking								
Lifetime	15.2	6.7	3.1	4.3	9.5	7.6	3.2	4.1
Past year	11.5	5.6	3.0	2.6	7.6	6.3	2.6	2.8
E-cigarettes^b								
Lifetime	-	-	52.1	11.0	-	-	10.5	9.6
Past year	-	-	49.1	8.1	-	-	8.8	6.6
Past 30 days	-	-	45.5	5.8	-	-	5.5	3.9
Marijuana								
Lifetime	6.5	6.4	49.2	4.8	5.7	5.4	4.8	3.2
Past year	5.6	5.1	7.2	4.5	5.0	4.9	2.6	2.5
Past 30 days	4.7	2.8	7.2	3.2	3.1	3.3	1.8	1.7
Prescription drugs not prescribed to them								
Lifetime	6.7	6.3	3.5	2.6	5.8	5.6	3.2	2.5
Past year	5.2	3.3	3.6	1.9	4.2	3.9	2.2	1.8
Past 30 days	4.0	1.3	2.6	1.3	2.7	2.0	1.3	0.8
Cigarettes								
Lifetime	10.1	6.9	49.4	3.5	9.5	7.6	4.2	1.8
Past year	6.4	5.0	47.6	1.9	7.4	5.7	3.2	1.1
Past 30 days	5.3	3.0	47.6	1.3	4.4	3.2	2.4	0.4
Inhalants								
Lifetime	8.0	6.5	4.1	2.6	4.8	4.1	1.4	1.4
Past year	4.6	5.3	1.3	1.6	3.4	2.7	0.7	0.8
Past 30 days	1.6	3.4	1.3	1.6	1.9	1.6	0.5	0.5
Other illicit drugs								
Lifetime	4.1	3.4	1.2	1.7	2.4	2.5	1.4	1.1
Past year	1.7	2.0	0.0	1.0	1.4	1.6	0.8	0.6

- Data not available

^a 2021 data represents an aggregate of data collected across the two school years (2019-2020 and 2020-2021).

^b In 2015, a question item about use of “e-cigarette, vape pen, e-liquid rig” was added to the NJRPFS instrument. In 2020, this question item was modified to add examples and split into two categories to collect use of “e-cigarette, vape pen, e-liquid rig (JUUL, N2, Joyetech) without marijuana” and “e-cigarette, vape pen, e-liquid rig (JUUL, N2, Joyetech) with marijuana.” 2021 data represents the aggregate of these two categories.

Common Sources for Substances

Students were asked “Where do kids your age usually get or buy...” common substances, such as alcohol, marijuana, e-cigarettes, and cigarettes. Below are the top five (six or more, where tied) most frequently indicated sources for each substance. This question was added in 2020.

Table 4. Common Sources: County to State Comparisons

	Mercer County (N=308)		New Jersey (N=6,120)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Cigarettes					
I don't know	202	67.1	4,139	67.8	-0.6
From a friend	44	14.6	804	13.2	1.5
From a gas station	26	8.6	503	8.2	0.4
From some other person	12	4.0	232	3.8	0.2
From a family member	10	3.3	184	3.0	0.3
E-cigarettes without marijuana					
I don't know	187	62.1	3,485	57.6	4.6
From a friend	50	16.6	1,094	18.1	-1.5
From a gas station	16	5.3	506	8.4	-3.0
On the internet	16	5.3	295	4.9	0.5
From some other person	15	5.0	278	4.6	0.4
E-cigarettes with marijuana					
I don't know	206	69.1	4,148	68.6	0.6
From a friend	37	12.4	768	12.7	-0.3
From some other person	21	7.1	378	6.3	0.8
From some other place	8	2.7	80	1.3	1.4
From a family member	8	2.7	127	2.1	0.6
Marijuana					
I don't know	212	70.4	4,368	72.4	-1.9
From some other person	41	13.6	559	9.3	4.4
From a friend	31	10.3	720	11.9	-1.6
On the internet	5	1.7	107	1.8	-0.1
From a family member	5	1.7	94	1.6	0.1

Table 4. Common Sources: County to State Comparisons (continued)

Alcohol					
I don't know	193	63.5	3,815	63.0	0.5
From a family member	43	14.1	902	14.9	-0.8
From a friend	24	7.9	519	8.6	-0.7
From some other person	16	5.3	210	3.5	1.8
From some other place	13	4.3	145	2.4	1.9
Prescription drugs not prescribed to them					
I don't know	229	74.4	4,728	77.3	-2.9
From a friend	20	6.5	374	6.1	0.4
From some other person	18	5.8	256	4.2	1.7
From a family member	15	4.9	315	5.2	-0.3
From a grocery store	11	3.6	210	3.4	0.1

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Suspension and Antisocial Behaviors

Students were asked about their behaviors related to suspension, youth violence, delinquent activities, and other antisocial behaviors.

Table 5. Suspension and Antisocial Behaviors: County to State Comparisons

	Mercer County (N=316)		New Jersey (N=6,183)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Lifetime					
Getting suspended	34	10.9	701	11.4	-0.5
Attacking someone with intent to harm	27	8.6	395	6.4	2.2
Carrying a handgun	8	2.6	147	2.4	0.2
Belonging to a gang	10	3.3	142	2.4	0.9
Belonging to a gang with a name	7	2.2	66	1.1	1.2
Getting arrested	5	1.6	55	0.9	0.7
Past year					
Getting suspended	16	5.1	498	8.1	-3.0
Attacking someone with intent to harm	20	6.4	347	5.6	0.7
Carrying a handgun	8	2.5	152	2.5	0.1
Being drunk or high at school	9	2.9	135	2.2	0.7
Getting arrested	4	1.3	62	1.0	0.3
Taking a handgun to school	2	0.7	53	0.9	-0.2
Selling drugs	5	1.6	51	0.8	0.8
Stealing or attempting to steal a vehicle	2	0.6	45	0.7	-0.1

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Table 6. Suspension and Antisocial Behaviors: 10-Year Trends

	Mercer County				New Jersey			
	2010	2012	2015	2021 ^a	2010	2012	2015	2021 ^a
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Past year								
Getting suspended	12.5	6.2	24.3	5.1	11.4	9.6	7.2	8.1
Attacking someone with intent to harm	9.1	6.0	44.5	6.4	9.5	7.9	7.0	5.6
Carrying a handgun	1.9	1.9	7.9	2.5	1.9	1.6	2.3	2.5
Being drunk or high at school	7.2	3.1	9.0	2.9	3.9	3.3	1.8	2.2
Getting arrested	3.6	3.4	9.6	1.3	2.8	2.0	1.5	1.0
Taking a handgun to school	1.0	0.3	7.4	0.7	0.5	0.3	0.7	0.9
Selling drugs	3.1	1.7	1.1	1.6	1.3	1.3	0.8	0.8
Stealing or attempting to steal a vehicle	1.5	1.1	7.9	0.6	0.9	0.5	0.8	0.7

^a 2021 data represents an aggregate of data collected across the two school years (2019-2020 and 2020-2021).

Gambling or Betting

Students were asked whether they “bet or gambled something at least once during the past year.” Gambling involves betting anything of value (e.g., money, a watch, soda) on a game or event. This question was added in 2020.

Table 7. Gambling or Betting: County to State Comparisons

	Mercer County (N=311)		New Jersey (N=5,843)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Gambling behaviors in the past year					
Purchasing a loot box or skins in a video game	84	27.0	1,900	32.6	-5.6
Buying a lottery or instant scratch off lottery ticket	37	12.1	1,000	17.2	-5.1
Playing dice or cards ^a	40	13.0	977	16.8	-3.8
Betting on sports	51	16.4	1,102	18.9	-2.5
Playing e-sports ^a	35	11.3	845	14.5	-3.3
Betting on fantasy sports	33	10.7	666	11.5	-0.8

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^a For money or something of value

Mental Health

Students were asked if they have “had a period of time lasting several days or longer when most of the day [they] felt sad, empty or depressed” during the past year. This question was added in 2020.

Table 8. Mental Health: County to State Comparisons

	Mercer County (N=311)		New Jersey (N=5,843)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Feelings of sadness, emptiness or depression in the past year					
Yes	165	53.1	2,950	50.5	2.6

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Risk and Protective Factors

Students were asked questions related to four risk factors and two protective factors, based on the Communities That Care™ survey. Mean item scores were calculated and standardized to a 0 to 1 scale. A higher risk factor score indicates that the group is at greater risk for using drugs and participating in antisocial behaviors. A higher protective factor indicates that the group is better protected from these behaviors.

Table 9. Risk Factors: County to State Comparisons

	Mercer County (N=316)	New Jersey (N=6,190)	Difference
	Mean	Mean	Mean
Risk domains and factors			
Community	0.27	0.28	-0.01
Low neighborhood attachment	0.35	0.35	0.00
Community disorganization	0.20	0.24	-0.04 *
Community transitions and mobility	0.36	0.40	-0.04 *
Perceived availability of drugs	0.28	0.27	0.01
Perceived availability of handguns	0.10	0.10	0.00
Laws and norms favorable to drug use	0.33	0.33	0.00
Family	0.20	0.19	0.01
Poor family management	0.27	0.24	0.03 *
Parental attitudes favorable toward drug use	0.14	0.13	0.01
Parental attitudes favorable toward antisocial behavior	0.21	0.19	0.02
School	0.35	0.35	0.00
Academic failure	0.25	0.27	-0.02
Low commitment to school	0.44	0.42	0.02
Peer-Individual	0.12	0.11	0.01
Gang involvement	0.03	0.02	0.01
Perceived risks of drug use	0.23	0.20	0.03
Early initiation of drug use	0.06	0.05	0.01
Early initiation of antisocial behavior	0.05	0.05	0.00
Favorable attitudes toward drug use	0.17	0.15	0.02
Favorable attitudes toward antisocial behavior	0.22	0.21	0.01
Rewards for antisocial behavior	0.23	0.21	0.02
Friends' use of drugs	0.06	0.05	0.01
Interaction with antisocial peers	0.04	0.03	0.01

Table 9. Risk Factors: County to State Comparisons (continued)

Overall mean			
Risk factors (combined)	0.20	0.19	0.01

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Table 10. Protective Factors: County to State Comparisons

	Mercer County (N=316)	New Jersey (N=6,190)	Difference
	Mean	Mean	Mean
Protective domains and factors			
School	0.65	0.66	-0.01
School opportunities for prosocial involvement	0.70	0.72	-0.02 *
School rewards for prosocial involvement	0.59	0.61	-0.02
Peer-Individual	0.41	0.44	-0.03 *
Interaction with prosocial peers	0.53	0.57	-0.04 *
Prosocial involvement	0.26	0.31	-0.05 *
Rewards for prosocial involvement	0.46	0.44	0.02
Overall Mean			
Protective factors (combined)	0.51	0.53	-0.02 *

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Experiences during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused life-altering disruptions for school-aged youth. Students were asked about their “*experiences since March 2020 (since schools were closed because of COVID-19).*” These questions were newly added in 2020-2021. Data for **Mercer County** reflects the experiences of 173 students who completed the survey in 2021.

Table 11. Experiences during COVID-19: County to State Comparisons

	Mercer County (N=169)		New Jersey (N=2,032)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Parent(s) or guardian(s) information					
Serving as an essential worker	48	30.2	1,015	51.2	-21.0 *
Losing their job	20	12.0	286	14.3	-2.4
COVID-19 information exposure and reassurance					
Looking at information about COVID-19 for two or more hours per day	13	7.8	155	7.8	0.0
Parent(s) or guardian(s) providing reassurance about safety most days or every day ^a	61	36.5	857	42.9	-6.4 *
Connectedness^b (most days or every day)					
Communicating with family	91	53.9	1,325	65.2	-11.4 *
Communicating with friends	132	78.1	1,562	77.0	1.1
Communicating with school associates ^c	58	34.3	669	33.1	1.2
Communicating with sports teammates	30	18.1	483	24.0	-5.9 *
Communicating with church, religious, or faith-based group	4	2.4	139	6.9	-4.5 *
Communicating with youth group	13	7.7	165	8.2	-0.4
Communicating with volunteer groups	2	1.2	59	2.9	-1.7 *

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^a The question asked: “How often has your parent(s) or guardian(s) reassured you that you are safe despite the news about coronavirus/COVID-19?”

^b The question asked: “How often have you communicated (by phone, text, video, gaming, etc.) with the following people or groups since March 2020?”

^c School associates include teachers, school counselors, and classmates.

Table 12. Gambling or Betting during COVID-19: County to State Comparisons

	Mercer County (N=169)		New Jersey (N=2,035)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
More than before since March 2020					
Purchasing a loot box or skins in a video game	15	8.9	254	12.5	-3.6 *
Buying a lottery or instant scratch off lottery ticket	2	1.2	35	1.7	-0.5
Playing dice or cards ^a	4	2.4	61	3.0	-0.6
Betting on sports	2	1.2	37	1.8	-0.6
Playing e-sports ^a	12	7.1	147	7.3	-0.1
Betting on fantasy sports	3	1.8	28	1.4	0.4

Some sample sizes may be lower than sample N reflected in the header due to item-level nonresponse.

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^a For money or something of value

Table 13. Mental Health during COVID-19: County to State Comparisons

	Mercer County (N=169)		New Jersey (N=2,033)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Most days or every day since March 2020					
Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge	42	24.9	533	26.2	-1.4
Not being able to stop or control worrying	44	26.2	462	22.8	3.4
Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless	41	24.3	471	23.2	1.1
Little interest or pleasure in doing things	43	25.4	534	26.3	-0.9

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For More Information

See the *New Jersey Middle School Risk and Protective Factors Survey: 2021 Statewide Report* for additional details and patterns of disparities by demographics. The statewide report explores the extent to which risk and protective factors are related to students' substance use and likelihood of engaging in antisocial behaviors. It also compares rates of substance use and antisocial behavior prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The 2021 Statewide Report* will be available for download from the [DMHAS website](#) upon its release.