



New Jersey Middle School Risk and Protective Factors Survey: 2021 Union 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 **Union County** during the 2020-2021 school year and statewide across 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, 258 students participated in the survey in **Union County**. Eighteen of these students were removed from data analysis due to inconsistent responses, leaving 240 eligible responses from students in **Union County**. This sample represents 6 out of 7 of the selected schools in the county.

Table 1. Student Participation: County to State Comparison

	Union County (N=240)		New Jersey (N=6,190)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Data collection year					
2020	0	0.0	3,955	63.9	-63.9 *
2021	240	100.0	2,235	36.1	63.9 *
Grade					
7 th grade	106	44.2	3,020	48.8	-4.6
8 th grade	134	55.8	3,170	51.2	4.6
Gender					
Male	113	48.1	2,740	44.6	3.5
Female	120	51.1	3,299	53.8	-2.7
Other gender	2	0.9	99	1.6	-0.8
Ethnicity					
Hispanic or Latino	117	50.2	1,807	29.8	20.4 *
Race					
White	81	33.8	3,022	48.8	-15.1 *
Black or African American	42	17.5	511	8.3	9.2 *
Asian	8	3.3	441	7.1	-3.8
Native American or Alaskan Native	3	1.3	31	0.5	0.8
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	0.0	11	0.2	-0.2
Other race	68	28.3	1,171	18.9	9.4 *
Two or more races	31	12.9	898	14.5	-1.6
Military parent					
Yes	35	14.8	970	15.8	-1.1

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

	Union County (N=240)		New Jersey (N=6,175)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Lifetime use					
Ever used (at least once)					
Alcohol	29	12.3	1,006	16.5	-4.2
Binge drinking	5	2.1	248	4.1	-2.0
E-cigarettes	16	6.7	589	9.6	-2.9
E-cigarettes without marijuana	15	6.3	553	9.0	-2.7
E-cigarettes with marijuana	3	1.3	211	3.4	-2.2
Marijuana	5	2.1	194	3.2	-1.1
Prescription drugs not prescribed to them	3	1.3	149	2.5	-1.2
Cigarettes	6	2.5	112	1.8	0.7
Inhalants	3	1.3	83	1.4	-0.1
Other illicit drugs	2	0.9	63	1.1	-0.2
Early onset use (11 years or younger)					
Alcohol	8	3.4	401	6.6	-3.2
E-cigarettes without marijuana	2	0.8	101	1.7	-0.8
Prescription drugs not prescribed to them	3	1.3	68	1.1	0.1
Cigarettes	5	2.1	50	0.8	1.3
Marijuana	2	0.8	34	0.6	0.3
Past year use					
Alcohol	17	7.2	632	10.4	-3.2
Binge drinking	3	1.3	171	2.8	-1.5
E-cigarettes	8	3.4	403	6.6	-3.2
E-cigarettes without marijuana	8	3.4	365	6.0	-2.6
E-cigarettes with marijuana	3	1.3	161	2.6	-1.4
Marijuana	3	1.3	153	2.5	-1.2
Prescription drugs not prescribed to them	2	0.8	107	1.8	-0.9
Other illicit drugs	1	0.4	34	0.6	-0.1
Cigarettes	3	1.3	65	1.1	0.2
Cough medication	1	0.4	56	0.9	-0.5
Inhalants	3	1.3	47	0.8	0.5

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

Past 30 day use					
Alcohol	9	3.8	362	5.9	-2.1
Binge drinking	3	1.3	102	1.7	-0.4
E-cigarettes	8	3.3	241	3.9	-0.6
E-cigarettes without marijuana	8	3.3	222	3.6	-0.3
E-cigarettes with marijuana	3	1.3	96	1.6	-0.3
Marijuana	4	1.7	104	1.7	0.0
Prescription drugs not prescribed to them	0	0.0	51	0.8	-0.8
Inhalants	1	0.4	32	0.5	-0.1
Cigarettes	2	0.8	27	0.4	0.4

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

	Union County				New Jersey			
	2010	2012	2015	2021 ^a	2010	2012	2015	2021 ^a
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Alcohol								
Lifetime	28.3	27.4	15.3	12.3	27.0	23.1	14.3	16.5
Past year	22.0	22.7	9.6	7.2	20.4	17.3	8.4	10.4
Past 30 days	11.7	9.0	4.0	3.8	10.7	9.0	4.4	5.9
Binge drinking								
Lifetime	9.1	7.8	4.3	2.1	9.5	7.6	3.2	4.1
Past year	7.1	4.6	3.2	1.3	7.6	6.3	2.6	2.8
E-cigarettes^b								
Lifetime	-	-	12.5	6.7	-	-	10.5	9.6
Past year	-	-	8.4	3.4	-	-	8.8	6.6
Past 30 days	-	-	4.1	3.3	-	-	5.5	3.9
Marijuana								
Lifetime	4.5	2.1	4.7	2.1	5.7	5.4	4.8	3.2
Past year	3.6	2.1	3.0	1.3	5.0	4.9	2.6	2.5
Past 30 days	1.9	1.4	2.1	1.7	3.1	3.3	1.8	1.7
Prescription drugs not prescribed to them								
Lifetime	7.5	10.4	5.1	1.3	5.8	5.6	3.2	2.5
Past year	5.7	7.4	3.1	0.8	4.2	3.9	2.2	1.8
Past 30 days	3.8	3.5	2.2	0.0	2.7	2.0	1.3	0.8
Cigarettes								
Lifetime	9.2	12.2	2.8	2.5	9.5	7.6	4.2	1.8
Past year	7.0	8.0	1.7	1.3	7.4	5.7	3.2	1.1
Past 30 days	3.5	1.7	1.2	0.8	4.4	3.2	2.4	0.4
Inhalants								
Lifetime	7.9	7.3	3.2	1.3	4.8	4.1	1.4	1.4
Past year	4.5	5.4	1.7	1.3	3.4	2.7	0.7	0.8
Past 30 days	1.2	1.4	1.0	0.4	1.9	1.6	0.5	0.5
Other illicit drugs								
Lifetime	1.5	3.4	2.1	0.9	2.4	2.5	1.4	1.1
Past year	1.0	2.7	1.7	0.4	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

	Union County (N=234)		New Jersey (N=6,120)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Cigarettes					
I don't know	171	73.1	4,139	67.8	5.3
From a gas station	22	9.4	503	8.2	1.2
From a friend	17	7.3	804	13.2	-5.9
From some other person	9	3.9	232	3.8	0.1
From a family member	5	2.1	184	3.0	-0.9
E-cigarettes without marijuana					
I don't know	156	67.2	3,485	57.6	9.7
From a gas station	25	10.8	506	8.4	2.4
From a friend	23	9.9	1,094	18.1	-8.2
On the internet	11	4.7	295	4.9	-0.1
From some other person	11	4.7	278	4.6	0.2
E-cigarettes with marijuana					
I don't know	171	73.1	4,148	68.6	4.5
From a gas station	15	6.4	233	3.9	2.6
From a friend	15	6.4	768	12.7	-6.3
From some other person	15	6.4	378	6.3	0.2
On the internet	10	4.3	213	3.5	0.8
Marijuana					
I don't know	171	75.0	4,368	72.4	2.7
From some other person	19	8.3	559	9.3	-0.9
From a friend	18	7.9	720	11.9	-4.0
On the internet	9	4.0	107	1.8	2.2
From a gas station	4	1.8	42	0.7	1.1

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

Alcohol					
I don't know	163	71.5	3,815	63.0	8.5
From a family member	23	10.1	902	14.9	-4.8
From a friend	14	6.1	519	8.6	-2.4
From some other person	9	4.0	210	3.5	0.5
From a grocery store	7	3.1	238	3.9	-0.9
Prescription drugs not prescribed to them					
I don't know	193	83.2	4,728	77.3	5.9
From a friend	15	6.5	374	6.1	0.4
From some other person	7	3.0	256	4.2	-1.2
From a family member	6	2.6	315	5.2	-2.6
From a grocery store	5	2.2	210	3.4	-1.3

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 $p < .05$).

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

	Union County (N=240)		New Jersey (N=6,183)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Lifetime					
Getting suspended	36	15.2	701	11.4	3.8
Attacking someone with intent to harm	21	8.8	395	6.4	2.4
Carrying a handgun	6	2.5	147	2.4	0.1
Belonging to a gang	9	4.0	142	2.4	1.6
Belonging to a gang with a name	4	1.7	66	1.1	0.6
Getting arrested	2	0.8	55	0.9	-0.1
Past year					
Getting suspended	29	12.1	498	8.1	4.0
Attacking someone with intent to harm	23	9.6	347	5.6	4.0
Carrying a handgun	7	2.9	152	2.5	0.5
Being drunk or high at school	7	2.9	135	2.2	0.7
Getting arrested	5	2.1	62	1.0	1.1
Taking a handgun to school	3	1.3	53	0.9	0.4
Selling drugs	3	1.3	51	0.8	0.4
Stealing or attempting to steal a vehicle	3	1.3	45	0.7	0.5

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 $p < .05$).

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

	Union County				New Jersey			
	2010	2012	2015	2021 ^a	2010	2012	2015	2021 ^a
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Past year								
Getting suspended	13.3	9.6	12.5	12.1	11.4	9.6	7.2	8.1
Attacking someone with intent to harm	11.3	10.2	6.3	9.6	9.5	7.9	7.0	5.6
Carrying a handgun	2.3	3.1	3.3	2.9	1.9	1.6	2.3	2.5
Being drunk or high at school	3.6	2.1	3.0	2.9	3.9	3.3	1.8	2.2
Getting arrested	3.5	6.8	1.3	2.1	2.8	2.0	1.5	1.0
Taking a handgun to school	0.8	0.0	0.7	1.3	0.5	0.3	0.7	0.9
Selling drugs	1.2	0.0	1.7	1.3	1.3	1.3	0.8	0.8
Stealing or attempting to steal a vehicle	1.2	0.0	0.6	1.3	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

	Union County (N=224)		New Jersey (N=5,843)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Gambling behaviors in the past year					
Purchasing a loot box or skins in a video game	67	29.9	1,900	32.6	-2.7
Buying a lottery or instant scratch off lottery ticket	25	11.2	1,000	17.2	-6.0
Playing dice or cards ^a	41	18.4	977	16.8	1.6
Betting on sports	34	15.3	1,102	18.9	-3.5
Playing e-sports ^a	37	16.7	845	14.5	2.1
Betting on fantasy sports	16	7.1	666	11.5	-4.3

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 $p < .05$).

^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

	Union County (N=221)		New Jersey (N=5,843)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Feelings of sadness, emptiness or depression in the past year					
Yes	125	56.6	2,950	50.5	6.1

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

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

	Union County (N=240)	New Jersey (N=6,190)	Difference
	Mean	Mean	Mean
Risk domains and factors			
Community	0.31	0.28	0.03 *
Low neighborhood attachment	0.43	0.35	0.08 *
Community disorganization	0.30	0.24	0.06 *
Community transitions and mobility	0.44	0.40	0.04 *
Perceived availability of drugs	0.25	0.27	-0.02
Perceived availability of handguns	0.06	0.10	-0.04 *
Laws and norms favorable to drug use	0.35	0.33	0.02
Family	0.20	0.19	0.01
Poor family management	0.26	0.24	0.02
Parental attitudes favorable toward drug use	0.13	0.13	0.00
Parental attitudes favorable toward antisocial behavior	0.20	0.19	0.01
School	0.38	0.35	0.03 *
Academic failure	0.32	0.27	0.05 *
Low commitment to school	0.44	0.42	0.02
Peer-Individual	0.11	0.11	0.00
Gang involvement	0.02	0.02	0.00
Perceived risks of drug use	0.21	0.20	0.01
Early initiation of drug use	0.03	0.05	-0.02 *
Early initiation of antisocial behavior	0.06	0.05	0.01
Favorable attitudes toward drug use	0.16	0.15	0.01
Favorable attitudes toward antisocial behavior	0.22	0.21	0.01
Rewards for antisocial behavior	0.21	0.21	0.00
Friends' use of drugs	0.04	0.05	-0.01
Interaction with antisocial peers	0.05	0.03	0.02 *

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

Overall mean			
Risk factors (combined)	0.21	0.19	0.02 *

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 $p < .05$).

Table 10. Protective Factors: County to State Comparisons

	Union County (N=240)	New Jersey (N=6,190)	Difference
	Mean	Mean	Mean
Protective domains and factors			
School	0.68	0.66	0.02
School opportunities for prosocial involvement	0.72	0.72	0.00
School rewards for prosocial involvement	0.65	0.61	0.04 *
Peer-Individual	0.37	0.44	-0.07 *
Interaction with prosocial peers	0.48	0.57	-0.09 *
Prosocial involvement	0.22	0.31	-0.09 *
Rewards for prosocial involvement	0.41	0.44	-0.03
Overall Mean			
Protective factors (combined)	0.50	0.53	-0.03 *

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 $p < .05$).

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 **Union County** reflects the experiences of 240 students who completed the survey in 2021.

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

	Union County (N=216)		New Jersey (N=2,032)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Parent(s) or guardian(s) information					
Serving as an essential worker	139	65.9	1,015	51.2	14.7 *
Losing their job	33	16.0	286	14.3	1.7
COVID-19 information exposure and reassurance					
Looking at information about COVID-19 for two or more hours per day	14	6.6	155	7.8	-1.2
Parent(s) or guardian(s) providing reassurance about safety most days or every day ^a	99	47.4	857	42.9	4.4
Connectedness^b (most days or every day)					
Communicating with family	147	68.1	1,325	65.2	2.9
Communicating with friends	140	65.7	1,562	77.0	-11.3 *
Communicating with school associates ^c	67	31.0	669	33.1	-2.1
Communicating with sports teammates	37	17.2	483	24.0	-6.8 *
Communicating with church, religious, or faith-based group	24	11.2	139	6.9	4.3 *
Communicating with youth group	19	8.8	165	8.2	0.7
Communicating with volunteer groups	11	5.1	59	2.9	2.2 *

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 $p < .05$).

^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

	Union County (N=216)		New Jersey (N=2,035)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
More than before since March 2020					
Purchasing a loot box or skins in a video game	22	10.2	254	12.5	-2.3
Buying a lottery or instant scratch off lottery ticket	3	1.4	35	1.7	-0.3
Playing dice or cards ^a	6	2.8	61	3.0	-0.2
Betting on sports	1	0.5	37	1.8	-1.4
Playing e-sports ^a	19	8.8	147	7.3	1.6
Betting on fantasy sports	1	0.5	28	1.4	-0.9

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 $p < .05$).

^a For money or something of value

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

	Union County (N=217)		New Jersey (N=2,033)		Difference
	n	%	n	%	%
Most days or every day since March 2020					
Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge	56	25.8	533	26.2	-0.4
Not being able to stop or control worrying	50	23.0	462	22.8	0.2
Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless	55	25.4	471	23.2	2.1
Little interest or pleasure in doing things	59	27.2	534	26.3	0.9

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 $p < .05$).

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.