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Physical Fighting and Weapon Carrying Behavior  
Among Alaska Adolescents

**Introduction**

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) measures health risk behaviors related to the leading causes of mortality, morbidity and social problems among youth in the United States. In 1995, Alaska implemented the survey for the first time among high school and middle school students.<sup>1</sup> The Alaska survey sampled a representative group of high school and middle school students (1,634 high school and 1,265 middle school students). Six categories of adolescent behavior were examined: behaviors that result in unintentional and intentional injuries; tobacco use; alcohol and other drug use; sexual behaviors; dietary behaviors; and physical activity.

**Fighting and Weapon Carrying Among High School Students (Alaska and U.S.)**

Overall Alaska high school students were similar to U.S. students in regard to fighting and weapon carrying. As with national trends, physical fighting and weapon carrying are more likely to be reported by males than females (Table 1).

No significant differences were found between Alaska Native and Non-Native students regarding fighting or weapon carrying. It is important to note that whereas some of the students may be carrying weapons for legitimate activities (i.e., hunting), carrying weapons on school property is never appropriate. Nineteen percent of Alaska high school males and 5% of females report having carried a weapon to school on one or more of the last 30 days.

**Table 1. Physical Fighting & Weapon Carrying Behavior Among High School Students**

Risk Behavior	Alaska		U.S.	
	Males (%)	Females (%)	Males (%)	Females (%)
Carried a weapon on one or more of last 30 days	35.7	9.9	31.1	8.3
Carried a gun on one or more of last 30 days	14.3	3.3	12.3	2.5
Carried a weapon on school property on one or more of last 30 days	18.8	4.8	14.3	4.9
In physical fight one or more time during past 12 months	45.0	25.5	46.1	30.6
In physical fight on school property one or more times during past 12 months	25.0	7.5	21.0	9.6

**Fighting and Weapon Carrying Among Alaska Middle School Students**

Eighty percent of middle school males and 56% of females report having been in a physical fight. Over two thirds (75%) of male middle school students and almost one half of female middle school students report having ever carried a weapon. Over half (59%) of male middle school students report having ever carried a gun, while just over a quarter (28%) of female middle school students report having ever carried a gun.

**Other High Risk Behaviors Associated with Physical Fighting and Weapon Carrying Among Alaska Adolescents**

Students who report having carried a weapon in the past 30 days are more likely to report other risky behaviors than are students who have not carried a weapon (Table 2). These risky behaviors include: alcohol use, smoking, sexual activity, and marijuana use. Students who report having carried a weapon in the past 30 days are also more likely to report having considered suicide.

**Table 2. Risk Behaviors Associated With Weapon Carrying**

Risk Behaviors		% Reporting Risk Behavior within past 30 days	
		no weapon	carry weapon
Current Alcohol Use	Males	44	60
	Females	44	58
Current Smokers	Males	30	58
	Females	34	43
Current Sexual Activity	Males	24	37
	Females	31	36
Current Marijuana Use	Males	26	43
	Females	23	41
Seriously Considered Suicide	Males	12	24
	Females	30	55

## Discussion

Overall these data suggest that a significant number of adolescents in Alaska are involved in physical fighting and carrying weapons. Results indicate that these same students are involved in other high-risk behaviors. Given that risk-taking behaviors do not occur in isolation, it is important to address prevention and intervention efforts in a broad context.<sup>2</sup> For violence prevention programs to have the greatest impact and to be successful, they (prevention programs) must cast a wide net. Schools alone can not stem the tide nor can communities, parents, public health agencies, or individuals, but collectively these groups can change the picture of youth violence.<sup>3</sup>

## References

1. Youth Risk Behavior Survey Alaska Report 1995 (1997-update). Alaska Department of Health & Social Services and Department of Education, December 1997.
2. Dryfoos, J: Adolescents at Risk: Prevalence and Prevention. Oxford Press, New York, NY. 1990.
3. DeClemente, Ralph J; Hansen, William B; and Ponton, Lynne E: Handbook of Adolescent Health Risk Behavior. Plenum Press, New York, NY. 1996.

(Contributed by Tammy Green, Education Specialist, Section of Epidemiology.)