



# Trending Data Now: A Guide to Conducting Your Own Virtual Risk Behavior Survey

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# INTRODUCTION

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As health professionals, we rely on health surveys and risk behavior surveys to track the prevalence of substance use rates, perceptions of harm, and assets. The most common survey in Vermont is the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System which is given in odd years to middle and high school students across the state. As crucial as this data is for establishing trends over time and for comparisons of local data to the statewide numbers, there are some challenges. First, the full survey in Vermont is over 100 questions and takes a full class period to administer. Second, the length of the survey means that it takes a long time to get the results back. Local school-district level results are even more delayed than county reports, but local data is what most prevention coalitions and school districts use to inform work. Third, we only have results from alternating years. This means that it can take several years to see the impacts of changing public health policies on risk behaviors.

**This guide is designed to help schools administer a shortened youth risk behavior survey more frequently.** This shortened survey focuses on mental health, substance use, perceptions, and assets. Many of the questions are identical to those from the full survey, which allows schools and health officials to draw comparisons between already existing longitudinal data. This shortened survey is also available through SurveyMonkey, a user-friendly digital format that allows students to complete the survey using school-provided computers or tablets. The shorter format is also designed to take no more than 15 minutes of class time, which makes it easier for schools to implement without sacrificing a full class period. Lastly, the digital format allows schools to immediately analyze and compare results. No long delays means that school officials can immediately address concerning trends in real time, and evaluate the effectiveness of school interventions. This format is also easy to edit, allowing schools to add a question or two to evaluate local programs.

**This guide aims to answer several important questions:**

- 1. Whom will I survey?**
- 2. Whose permission must I get to conduct the survey?**
- 3. What survey administration procedures should I follow?**
- 4. Who will administer my survey?**
- 5. How will I analyze the data?**

# WHO SHOULD I SURVEY?

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**The first step** to administering a successful survey is to **decide what populations you'd like to survey**. To best compare results to existing data, the population taking this survey should be the same as the population who take the full YRBS. This means if your school surveys the entire school population, plan to do that with this shortened survey as well. If you only survey certain classes, do that here too.

The higher your response rate, the stronger and more reliable your data will be. In smaller schools and school systems, like those in Vermont, surveying the full school population will give you the best data. This can be done by partnering with a core class instructor, such as English or History, or surveying during homeroom. In Vermont, all public schools participate in the full YRBS every other year and every effort is made to reach the full school population. If you are unable to survey your entire school population, you'll need to select a representative sample using scientific procedures like a random number generator to select which instructors of a required core class should administer the survey.



# WHOSE PERMISSION DO I NEED?

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**The second step** to conducting a survey is to get permission from school and/or district administration. Having administration on board and excited to use the data is an important step in securing teacher or staff buy in, especially for those giving class time to survey administration. **In presenting to administration, have a plan for where, when, and who will be administering the survey; steps to maintain student anonymity; and how the results might be used.**

**Parent permission** is also crucial for students to participate. There are two types of permission that can be collected. The first is **active permission**, which requires a parent to authorize their student's participation. This is often called an opt-in permission form. This type of permission typically requires more time and resources to obtain and can reduce the number of students who participate by about 50%. The second is **passive permission**, which allows a parent to remove their child from participation by returning the permission form. This is often called an opt-out permission form. For the best response rate, opt-out permission is recommended.

Permission slips can be shared by email with parents, sent through school portals, or even sent home in hard copy with students. If you choose active permission, plan time to call or email parents to follow up on missing permission forms. If you're using paper forms or asking teachers to help track down missing ones, make sure teachers understand the importance of timely data and are confident for conversations with families. Leave at least two weeks for permission slips to return if using passive permission, and at least a month if using active permission forms.

**Sample permission forms for both active and passive permission are included in the appendix at the end of this guide.**



# WHO WILL ADMINISTER THE SURVEY?

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For most schools, having teachers administer this survey will allow for the best access to the largest student population. This may be the teachers for core classes, or homeroom teachers, or advisory instructors. Other schools may have luck surveying classes as they come into the cafeteria, or the library. Whatever you choose, it's important that **all administrators are given a script to read to introduce the survey, and understand the importance of maintaining student anonymity.** This introduction should make sure students understand their responses are anonymous, and should share what your school will do with the results. An example script is included below.

## Sample Administrator Script

Prior to beginning the survey, please make sure that all students have permission to participate, and that each student has a device to take the survey. Invite students to be seated before reading the following script:

**"Thank you for participating in this survey. This survey should only take a few minutes of your time today. The questions will ask you about your experiences and opinions, and give information to our school to support student health. Questions include topics such as alcohol or tobacco use, mental health, and youth assets. Completing the survey is voluntary and does not impact your grade in this or any class. This survey is anonymous. Your answers are private, and responses will be reported together by grade. It is important that you answer these questions based on your actual experiences. Don't choose a response because you think it's what someone wants to hear. Some topics may be difficult to think about. If you would like to talk to someone about anything that is part of the survey, guidance counselors are available to meet with you. Thank you for your attention. Please begin. "**

Take a seat at your desk or in the front of the classroom where you cannot see student screens during the survey administration. Do not allow students to talk to one another or walk around the room. It is important that students have privacy to answer freely. Thank you for your assistance administering this survey and for dedicating these few minutes of class time to gathering this important health information.

# WHAT PROCEDURES SHOULD I FOLLOW?

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How you structure survey administration will depend on how your school chooses to access students. The survey collector tools work in several different ways. Options include things as sophisticated as setting up a popup window that will open when students access a website of your choice, or things as easy as sending a link via email to the student body. It's also possible to access QR codes, or even to set up devices in kiosk mode. The different options can all be found on the "collect responses" tab of your survey, and you can edit them by clicking on the three dots all the way to the right on the list of collectors you've created.

**Whatever you choose, here are the steps you'll need to follow:**

- 1. Approach your school administration for support and buy in for giving the survey.**
- 2. Determine what classes will take the survey, and which staff will administer the survey.**
- 3. Choose a date for survey administration.**
- 4. Send home permission slips for students to participate.**
- 5. Determine what collector format works best for your school, and set up collector. Be sure to edit the collector to turn the anonymous response function on.**
- 6. Provide staff with script to read and link to survey collector.**
- 7. Give the survey!**

For the best real-time data, **plan to give this survey at least twice per school year.** Surveying more frequently allows you to respond in real time to concerning changes in trends and evaluate the effectiveness of new interventions.

# HOW WILL I ANALYZE THE RESULTS?

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**Analyzing the data is arguably the most important part of this process.** After all, collecting data isn't helpful if we don't have a plan to interpret the results!

One option for analyzing results is to work with a professional firm. You may find recommendations from local colleges in your area, or from your state health department. This option requires little effort or time on your part, but comes at a price. Your participation could be as simple as providing access to your SurveyMonkey account.

**Contracting with a professional firm isn't your only option.** Giving the survey through an online tool like SurveyMonkey allows the platform to do most of the work for you. Results are immediate, and can be easily displayed graphically. The platform isn't free for a survey of this length, but the minimal cost is less than what it would typically cost to have a professional analyze results for you. The paid version also allows for additional customization, such as imbedding on your website or adding logos and color schemes. It also allows you to turn on anonymous results, which is crucial for protecting student privacy.

**While results are immediate, we do have to take a few extra steps to make sure our data is accurate.** Filters are an excellent way to use edit checks to remove conflicting responses. For example, filtering for responses for 6th, 7th, and 8th grades as well as responses for those under 16 years of age will exclude students who were just clicking through the questions. If you added a question to identify the school, that's an even easier way to filter for authentic responses. Using two filters at the same time this way helps you remove responses from your data pool that might not have taken the survey seriously. For a brief visual tutorial on these tools, see the appendix.

Once you've filtered the results, SurveyMonkey has some excellent tools to show you the data visually. It will automatically show you the responses to all the questions in bar graph form, as well as tell you the total number of responses for each choice. This is a great way to see **the summary data**. If you add a compare filter, you can break down your data by demographics of your choice (ie gender, cis/het vs LGBTQ+, race, etc).

# HOW WILL I ANALYZE THE RESULTS? CONT.

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Until you clear a filter or a compare directive, it remains active so be sure to clear your compare directives between reports to be able to compare results back to the full YRBS.

The compare function is also a great way to see how one intervention might impact risky behaviors. For example, if you compare the students who report that they agree or strongly agree that their parents have clear rules and consequences for behavior to those who disagree or strongly disagree, **you can generate a report highlighting the perceptions of risk and substance use behaviors between those two populations.** If your school is focusing on communicating to parents the importance of talking to youth about the dangers of substance use on the developing brain and setting clear and consistent consequences, you can use this compare directive to assess the effectiveness of the parent education efforts.

**One of the most impactful ways to use data is to track changes over time.** Using traditional methods like the YRBS requires significant work to enter the state or local results in a spreadsheet and add data as each new survey is released. That process is crucial for showing trends, but can take a lot of staff time. Using this survey through SurveyMonkey does that extra step of tracking trends for you. The easiest way to have this tool do the trends tracking for you is to set up a different collector for each time you give the survey. You can do this easily under the "collect responses" tab. You can then display results over time by comparing the responses by collector. To minimize the chance for error, simply close the collector after each administration period.

The final tab in the "analyze results" section that can help you display your data in a useful way is the "show" tab. This function allows you to only show the questions you're interested in seeing at a given time. For example, you can easily hide the demographics questions on a report, or you can just see the two items you want to compare without wading through the entire survey. This is an ideal function if you only want to display one section of the survey at a time.

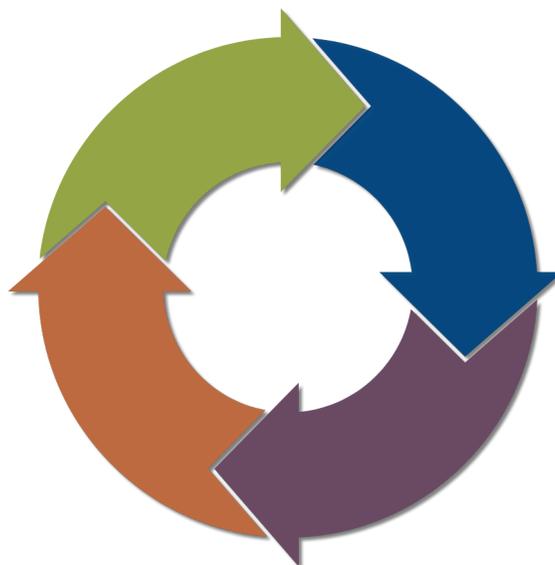
The final step is to **decide where and how to share this data.** School health teams, administrators, teachers, parents, and community members are all audiences that would be interested in the results. You might consider sharing a few data points in a parent newsletter, speaking at a school in-service training, or hosting a community dialogue night.

# ADDING QUESTIONS

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This survey tool is designed to be **easily customizable for your school's needs**. You can add questions to make it easier to report data or to assess new projects your school is implementing. For example, in the demographics section, it may be helpful to add a question with the names of your middle and high schools in your district. This will allow you to filter results by school for administrators, and can also be helpful as an edit check in the filtering process. Alternately, if your community is a current Drug Free Communities grantee and needs to track core measures, consider adding the additional perception of harm questions. Are you working on a specific intervention and want to track it's effectiveness? Add a question about that work to your assets page. Keep in mind that adding questions to the survey will make it take longer for students to complete, so ensure your teachers are planning for that additional time. Do not add questions unless you have a plan for how to use the responses to those questions.

As an additional note, you'll notice that the phrasing of some questions on this survey are different than those on the YRBS. **These differences are intentional**. For example, this survey asks about past 30 day history in the mental health section, where the YRBS asks about the past 12 months. Since this survey is designed to give more frequent information, asking about past 30 day history allows you to have a current view of mental health. The gender identity question in the demographics is also asked in a more inclusive way to support students' mental health.



# APPENDIX

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- Sample parent notification letter
- Sample active permission form
- Sample passive permission form
- SurveyMonkey filter tutorial

## Sample Parent Notification Letter

Dear Caregivers,

Our district is taking part in a youth behavior survey on **DATE**. This survey covers topics like mental health, substance use, and youth assets, and is for students in grades 6 through 12. This survey helps us to determine the extent to which students engage in or experience health risks and assets. The results from this survey support public health officials, educators, and community organizations to assess and improve efforts to support adolescent health.

This survey is administered via school issued tablet or laptop. Please make sure your student has their charged device at school. This survey is anonymous and survey procedures are designed to protect student privacy. Some students may find some questions to be sensitive. School guidance counselors will be available to any student who would like to make an appointment. Student login information and IP addresses are not recorded.

For this survey to be accurate, it is important that all students are given the opportunity to participate in the survey. Participation is voluntary. Students may opt out or skip any questions they wish. As a caregiver, you have the right to decide if your child participates. If you have any questions or concerns, or would like to see a copy of the questions in advance, please contact **CONTACT NAME AND INFO**.

Please complete the following form and return it to **PERSON AND LOCATION** by **DATE**.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

**NAME**

## Opt-Out Form

Please complete this form only if you **DO NOT** want your child to participate in the survey. Forms must be returned to **NAME, LOCATION** by **DATE**.

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

I have read this form and know what the survey is about.

NO, my child may not take part in this survey.

Caregiver name: \_\_\_\_\_

Caregiver signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Opt-In Form

Please complete this form for student participation in this survey. Forms must be returned to **NAME, LOCATION** by **DATE**.

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

I have read this form and know what the survey is about.

Please check one:

YES, my child may not take part in this survey.

NO, my child may not participate in this survey.

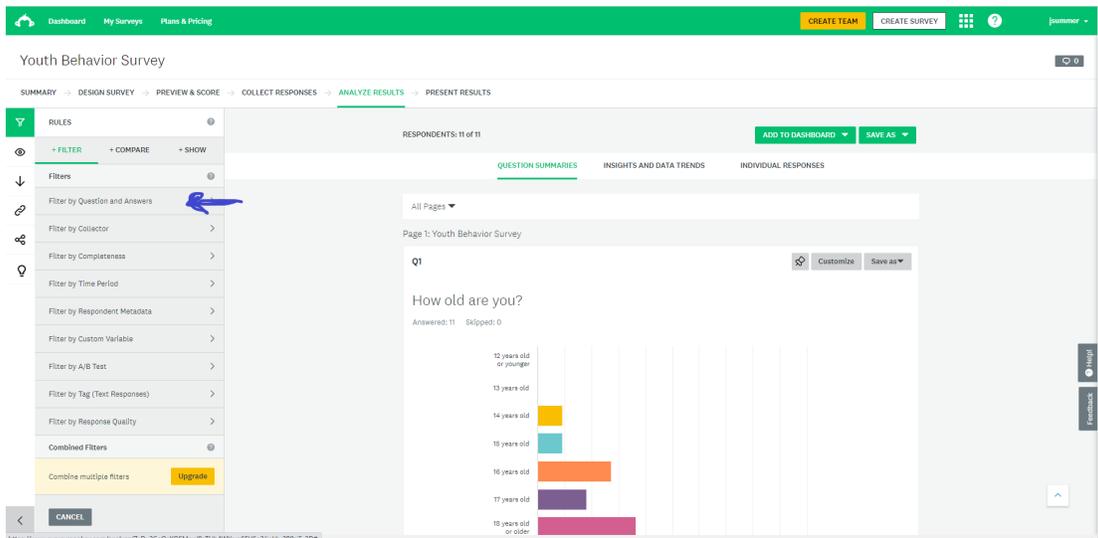
Caregiver name: \_\_\_\_\_

Caregiver signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

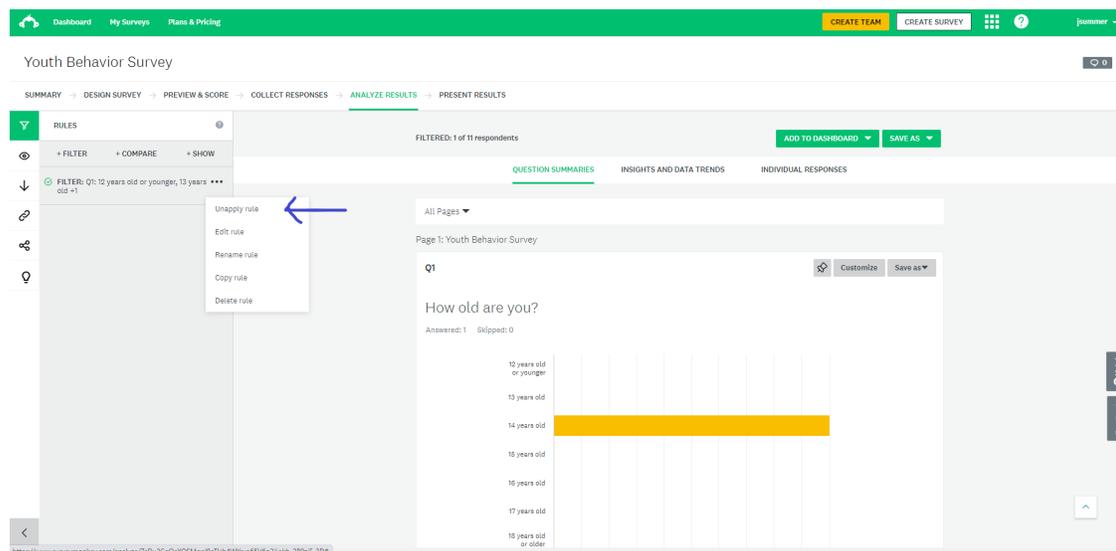
## Filter Tutorial for SurveyMonkey

Using the functions in the "analyze results" section of your survey is very easy. To set up a filter, first go to the "analyze results" section, then click on "filter" and choose the filter you'd like to set up. The most common filter is the first choice, "questions and answers." This filter type will let you filter by the responses to the specific questions you identify.

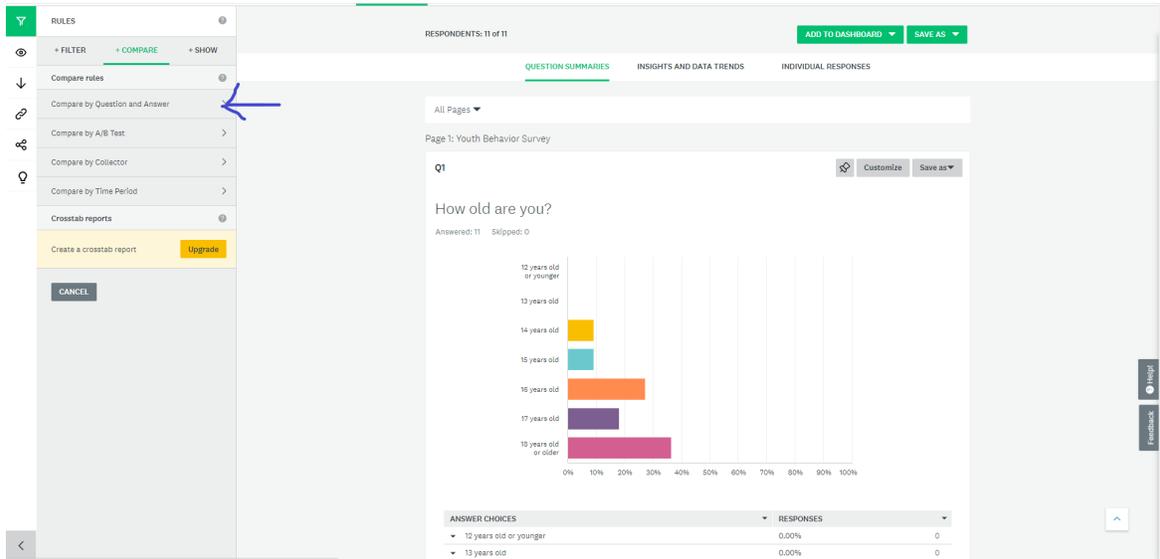


You can use multiple filters at the same time to help you remove conflicting responses. For example, if you create a filter for "middle school name" and "grade 6, 7, 8", you can remove any responses from students who may have reported attending your middle school but are in grade 12, and therefore weren't taking the survey seriously.

To remove a filter, simply click on the three dots to the right of the filter and select "unapply rule" for a filter you may want to use again, or "delete rule" for a filter you don't want.



To compare responses, click the compare tab, and choose the rule exactly the same way as you would choose a filter above.



This function allows you to compare the data based on the response to a given question. For example, if you want to compare the perception of harm responses for youth who agree that their parents have set clear consequences to those who disagree, you can select a compare rule for that question, and just look at the perception of harm page. Alternately, if you're looking for a gender breakdown, this is the easiest way to get that.

