

# 2022 STATUS UPDATE ON MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRLS IN GREATER WORCESTER



**November 2022**

[investinggirls.org](https://investinggirls.org)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Investing in Girls Alliance (IIGA) has been working to improve the status of middle school-aged girls since 2007. IIGA is made up of representatives from local and state government agencies, public schools and colleges in the Greater Worcester area, and non-profit and private organizations.

This report is both a compendium of recent research findings on middle school and high school girls in and around Worcester and a report of the analysis of the annual DPH Youth Risk Behavior Assessment data. This report presents the data we have from middle and high school surveys, disaggregated for girls, with some comparisons for girls who participate in girl-serving organizations, or GSOs.

### Key Findings:

- Since 2012, the number of middle school girls who feel they are “at the right weight” continues to decline, and the number who feel they are “slightly/very overweight” continues to increase. This trend is mirrored among high schoolers.
- Both middle and high school girls are showing a decrease in the number who report getting exercise for 60 minutes or more on 7 days of the week over 2019; there is also an increase in the number of girls who report 0 days of 60 minutes of exercise in a typical week.
- Middle school girls who participate in girl-serving programs are more likely to report having learned about health relationships (63.5% GSO vs 56.7% girls at large), and more likely to report having been taught about sexual health (49.1% GSO vs 45.5% girls at large).
- In response to a new question in the Greater Worcester Regional Youth Health Survey for 2021, “In the past 30 days, how often was your mental health not good?”, the results show the largest group (30.2%) of middle school girls in the middle at “sometimes”. At the two extremes of the scale – “never” and “all the time”; middle school girls in GSOs are more likely to report an extreme. One possible cause may be the acceptance of sharing about mental health within the peer groups and supportive adults in the GSO; other explanations are still to be explored.
- In the high school data, we can see the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health, in the swing of the bell curve toward “most” and “all the time”. It is somewhat reassuring to see a return to the more typical bell curve when the same question asks high school girls to answer for the past 30 days only. *\*Note: this data was collected in the late winter and early spring of 2021-2022.*
- More middle school girls in GSOs tell us they were taught about mental health in school – 52.3% of GSO girls versus 41.9% of girls at large. The implication here is that the GSO experience may have reinforced the lessons of the school; or taught it specifically and girls remembered the original lessons from school.

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- In 2021, fewer middle school girls reported aspirations of attending college or other training, having someone to talk with about their future, and thinking about their futures with hope. However, there is a clear and powerful impact on girls engaged in out-of-school time programs on their future expectations, and it is most impactful at the middle school level.
- High schoolers also show a slight drop in their future aspirations, and girls engaged with a GSO show a slight benefit in this area. At the high school level, more girls are reporting participation in high school clubs and government, and in holding a job in 2021 than in 2019; participation in sports and in volunteer work shows a decrease, most likely to the “in person” nature of these opportunities which was curtailed through the start of the 2021-22 school year.
- Overall, we see a rise in girls’ use of technology not for schoolwork across the seven years of data. There is a significant increase in 2021, likely due to engagement in virtual activities during the pandemic. GSOs increased the availability of online activities for girls, and that may account for the higher numbers. This increase is more evident in our middle school girls.
- Online time increased over the span of the data, however, the reported data around texting and sexting has remained fairly steady at the middle school and high school levels. There is a significant increase in sexting and requests for nude and sexually suggestive photos as girls enter high school. While about 1 of 7 middle school girls (12.2) report being asked for nude or suggestive photos; more than 1 of 3 girls in high school (37.8%) report being asked.
  - By comparison, just 3.4% of middle school boys (about 1 in 28) report having been asked to send a nude or sexually suggestive picture of themselves to another person; 19.1% of high school boys (less than 1 in 5) report being asked.
- With the increase in online time, the increase in electronic bullying continues to increase as well. Our middle school girls engaged in GSOs are not immune to bullying. For high school girls, we see a decrease in electronic bullying; although among high school girls with GSO participation there seems to be a different story emerging, we will continue to track this into the future.
- Some girls face additional barriers and challenges to thriving, where possible, we have pulled out data that speaks to these concerns. It is important to work closely with partners who work directly with girls managing additional burdens to learn from their experience and not unintentionally marginalize or stigmatize these girls.

## OUR HISTORY

The **Investing in Girls Alliance** (IIGA) has been working to improve the status of middle school-aged girls since 2007 when the Mayor's Youth At-Risk Taskforce identified rising violence among middle school-aged girls as a growing concern. Worcester's girl-serving organizations were tasked to develop a coordinated response, and the Alliance was born. IIGA is made up of representatives from local and state government agencies, public schools and colleges in the Greater Worcester area, and non-profit and private organizations.

### Investing In Girls Alliance Vision, Mission, and Priorities

**Our vision** is to improve the lives of girls in greater Worcester and ensure local girls grow up to be happy, healthy, and productive

**Our mission** is to improve services for middle school girls in central Massachusetts through research, education, advocacy, and collaboration

The Investing in Girls Alliance has three priority areas we believe are central to the well-being of middle school-aged girls;

- **Health and healthy relationships;** addressing physical, behavioral, and sexual health.
- **Economic empowerment;** addressing career readiness and financial literacy.
- **Violence and safety;** addressing relationship and community violence and promoting safe behaviors and environments for girls.

The work of IIGA centers around four key strategies; **Data and Research** to effectively measure the well-being of local girls and understand their current and emerging needs, **Public Education** to raise community awareness of the unique needs, assets, and challenges of middle-school-aged girls, **Promoting Best Practices** through networked training and peer sharing and **Advocacy** to secure gender equitable policies and sufficient resources for girls by aligning with like partners across the state including the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women, and funders who prioritize funding for girls.

This 2022 Status of Girls Update is a result of our **Data and Research** strategy. IIGA provides this gender-specific data to support our alliance members, and community partners as they continue to provide quality programs for our middle school girls. These programs are critically important as they provide the protective environment and relationships that help girls mitigate the risks they face and support their healthy development through the crucial middle school years. 2021 marked an important addition to our data collection; we have added a data point of participation in a girl-serving program during out-of-school time to the Worcester Division of Public Health (DPH) annual survey to all middle schoolers. The responses to this question will allow us to see the impact of our programs on the girls who participate, in relation to the population of all girls who participate in the survey regionally.

## OUR METHODOLOGY

This report is both a compendium of recent research finding on middle school and high school girls in and around Worcester and a report of the analysis of the annual DPH Youth Risk Behavior Assessment data.

IIGA has had access to the YRBS (Greater Worcester Regional Youth Health Survey) data from the DPH since 2017, and in 2019 we were able to add the question “Do you participate in after-school programs” and definitions of the after-school programs that are girl-serving. This allows for the comparison of national data from the CDC, statewide data, regional (Worcester and surrounding towns) data, and data from middle school girls in Worcester and surrounding towns who participate in girl-serving programs.

The most significant environmental factor in our 2019 Status of Girls in Greater Worcester report was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are beginning to see through the data some of those impacts now. This report presents the data we have from middle and high school surveys, disaggregated for girls.

## OUR FINDINGS

### Demographics

This report identifies findings from the group of communities that participate in the Greater Worcester Regional Youth Health Survey; Grafton, Millbury, Leicester, Shrewsbury, and Worcester for 2021, the most recent survey year; the data comes from 4,586 middle schoolers; 2,207 who identify as female and who are ages 12-15. 386 girls tell us they participate in an after school program that serves girls – a Girl Serving organization (GSO).

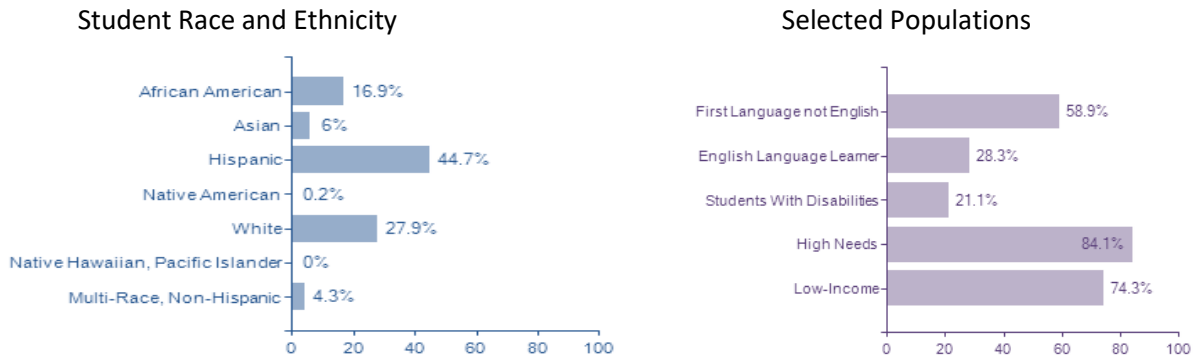
To understand the environment where the girls IIGA seeks to impact lives, we can look at the largest community represented in the survey. Worcester is a diverse city with a growing population. The 2021 population is 205,918: up 10% in the past ten years. Worcester is becoming more diverse, 68% are White, 23% Hispanic, 13% Black, 7% Asian, and 6% identified as two+. The most common foreign languages in Worcester are Spanish (28,346 speakers), African Languages (6,419 speakers), and Vietnamese (5,499 speakers). Worcester also has a relatively high number of Other Indo-European (3,280 speakers) and Portuguese (2,946 speakers). 78.5% of Worcester residents were born in the US; 21.5% were foreign-born.

Data from the Worcester Public School District Profile provides a closer look at the middle and high school-aged students who took the survey in 2021. Middle school enrollment is down from 2019. A total of 5,164 students are enrolled in grades 6 (1,683), 7 (1,748), and 8 (1,733). This is a significant decrease from the 2019 middle school enrollment of 7,271. 7,252 students are enrolled in high school grades 9 (1,943), 10 (1,856), 11 (1,710), and 12 (1,743). Of the

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23,735 students enrolled in the district, 11,609 are identified as female, 12,124 as male, and 2 as non-binary.

The charts below from 2021-22 enrollment data show the diversity and unique characteristics of Worcester Public School students:



## HEALTH

Because our data comes from a regional youth health survey, the preponderance of our data describes a broad spectrum of health risk behaviors. These include girls’ perception of their weight and behaviors to manage it, levels of physical activity, and healthy behaviors regarding eating, drinking, and sleep habits. Additionally, we have data on behavioral health including mental health and substance use behaviors, and finally, sexual health practices.

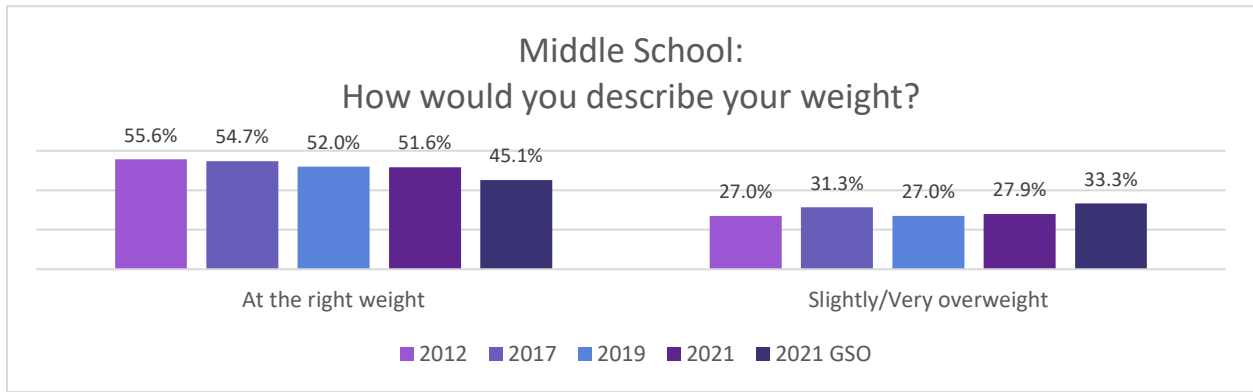
### Physical Health

Indicators of physical health from the YRBS data include how girls describe their weight, how physically active girls are, and their healthy eating behaviors.



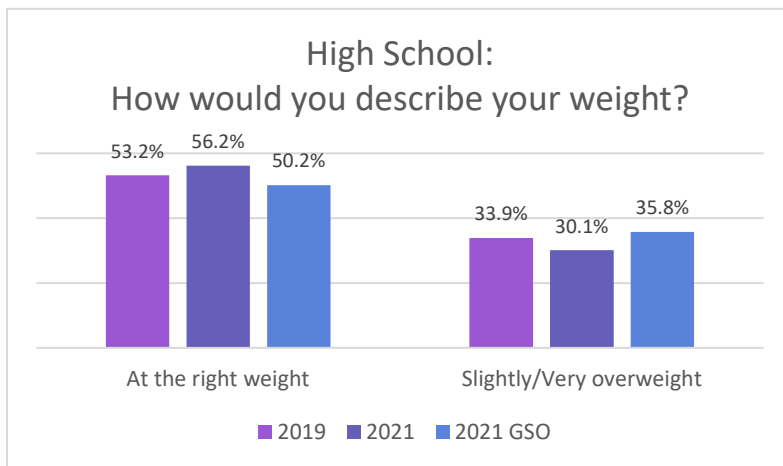
Since 2012, the number of middle school girls who feel they are “at the right weight” continues to decline, and the number who feel they are “slightly/very overweight” continues to increase. This trend is mirrored among high schoolers. The chart below from middle school shows the trend from 2012-2021 and the high school chart from 2019.

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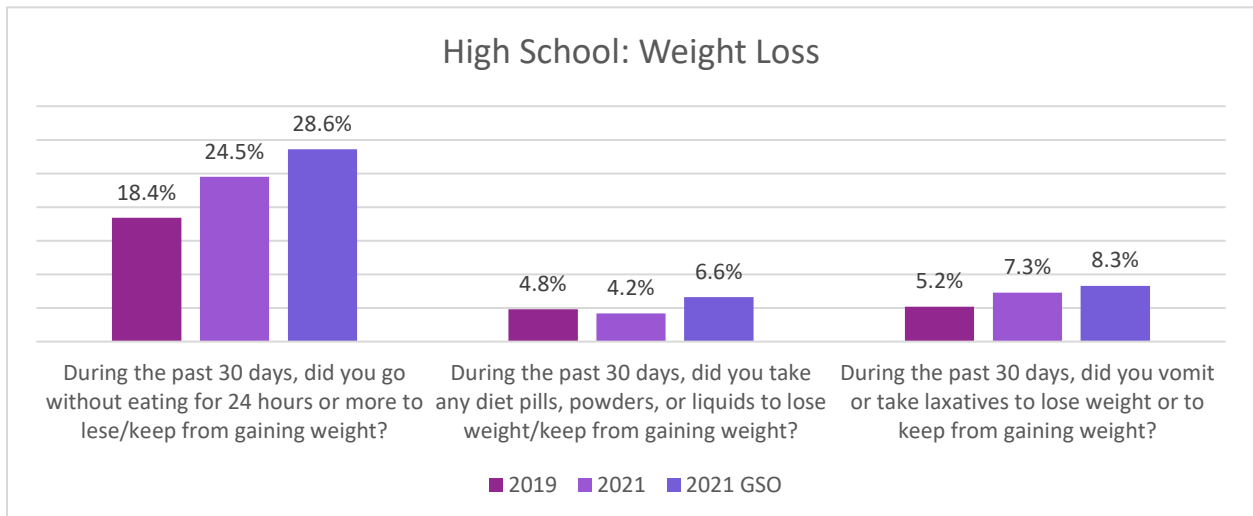


Among middle school girls, while 27.9% indicate that they are slightly/very overweight, a staggering 47.7% also report that they are actively trying to lose weight.

Both middle and high school girls participating in girl serving organizations are not immune to this trend and show the same relationship to weight as the greater Worcester sample.



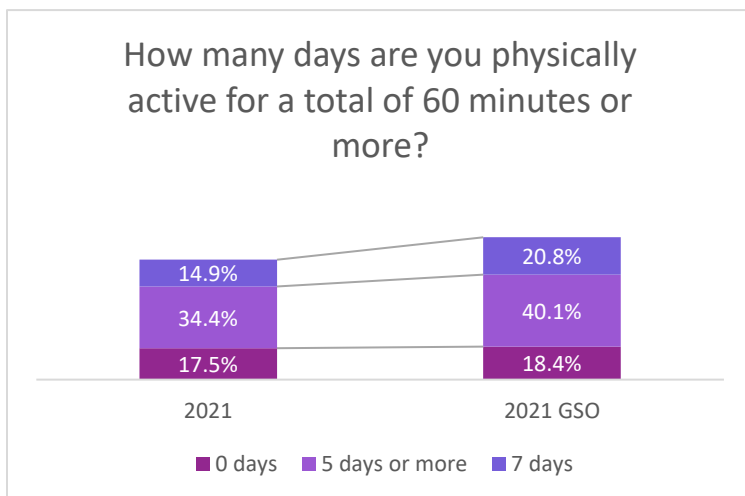
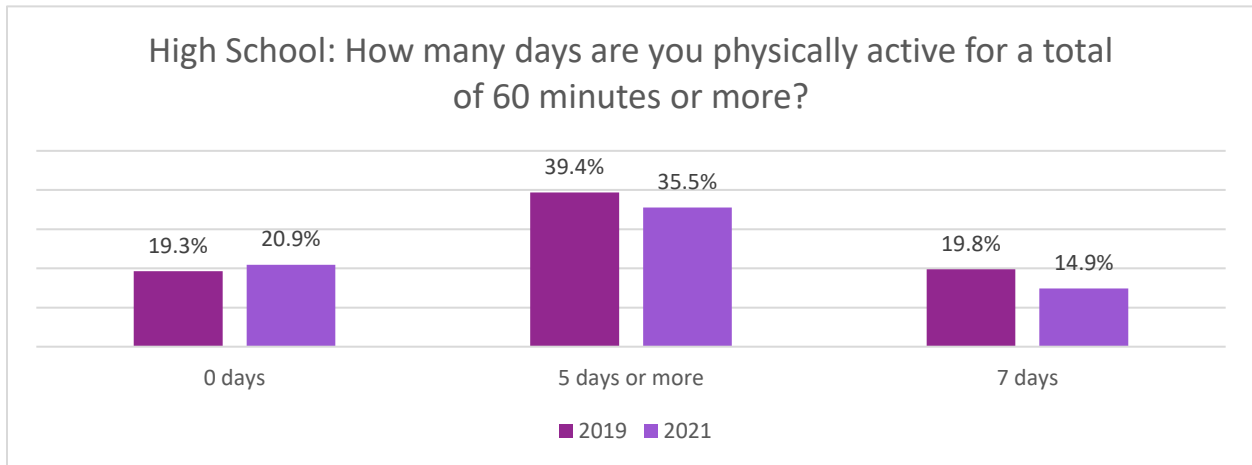
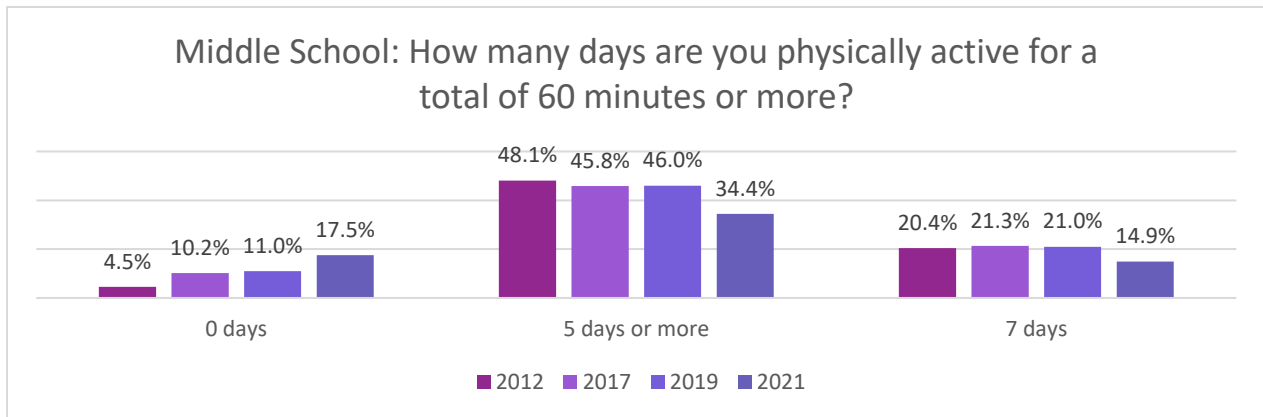
Among high school girls, a higher percentage of girls report they are slightly/very overweight, and they have additional questions about what they are doing to try to lose weight.



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The next area of the survey relates to how physically active girls are. Both middle and high school girls are showing a decrease in the number who report getting exercise for 60 minutes or more on 7 days of the week; there is also an increase in the number of girls who report 0 days of 60 minutes of exercise in a typical week.



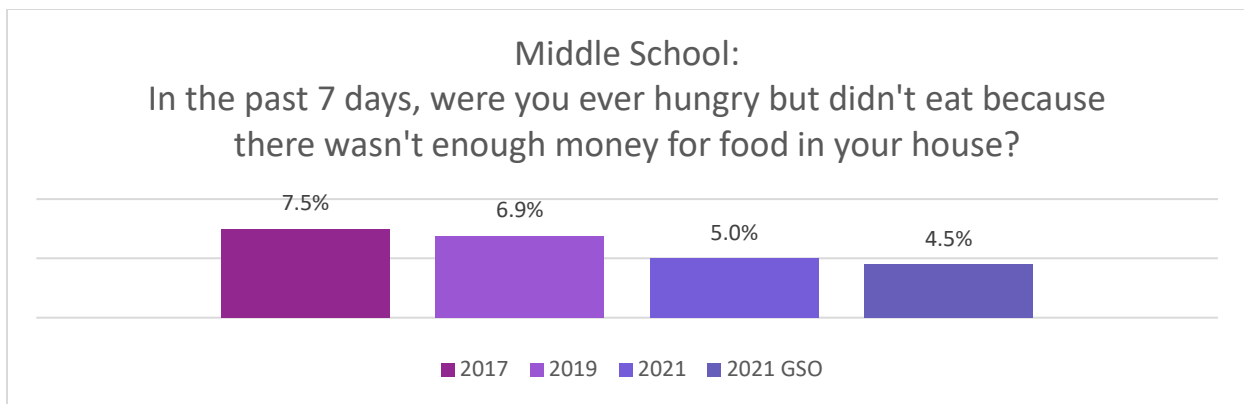
When we compare middle school girls who are active in a Girl Serving organization with all middle school girls, we see that MSG with participation in GSO are more likely to get 60 minutes of exercise 5 days or more a week, and more likely to get 60 minutes of exercise 7 days of the week.



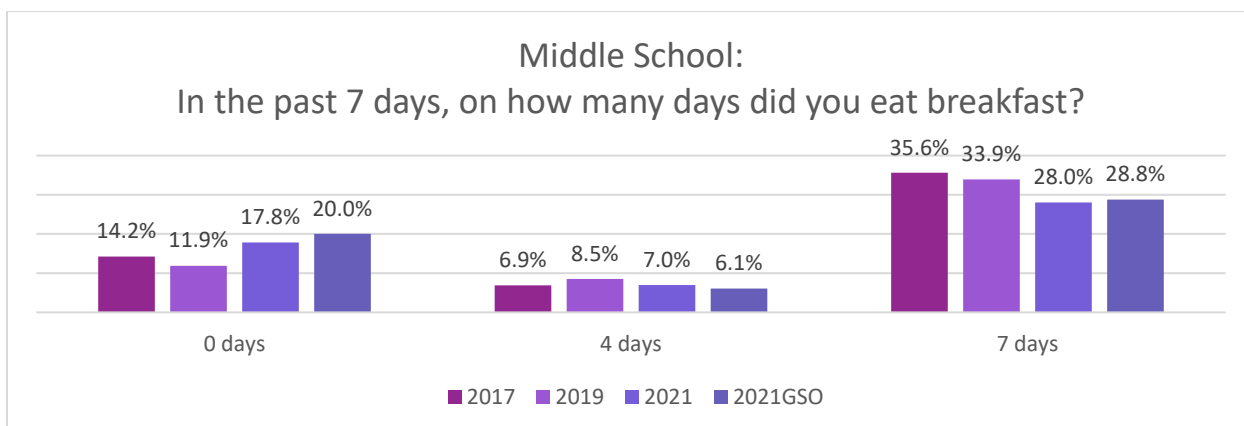
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In IIGA’s 2019 Update on the Status of Girls in Greater Worcester, we reported that girls in our region are doing better in being physically active compared to their peers across the state, with only 10% vs. the state’s 22% reporting no days with physical activity. This data has not yet been updated with the most current survey data.

Food security remains a stubborn issue in Worcester and was compounded as COVID-19 swept through our community. Two recent Worcester-based surveys revealed that one in five of the Worcester residents surveyed struggle with food security. 27% of those assisted in food pantries in the past year are between the ages of five and seventeen. <sup>i</sup> However, in the YRBS data, the number of MS girls reporting that they did not eat because there was no money for food has declined, even throughout the COVID pandemic. This may suggest that being able to buy food (having money) may not be the only factor impacting food security in Worcester.



Another factor in food insecurity is the availability of healthy foods. 1 in 5 of our middle school girls does not eat breakfast on any day of the week, and the number eating breakfast every day has dropped. Again, we see that participation in a Girl Serving organization does not insulate our girls from skipping meals or increase the likelihood they will put their nutrition first.

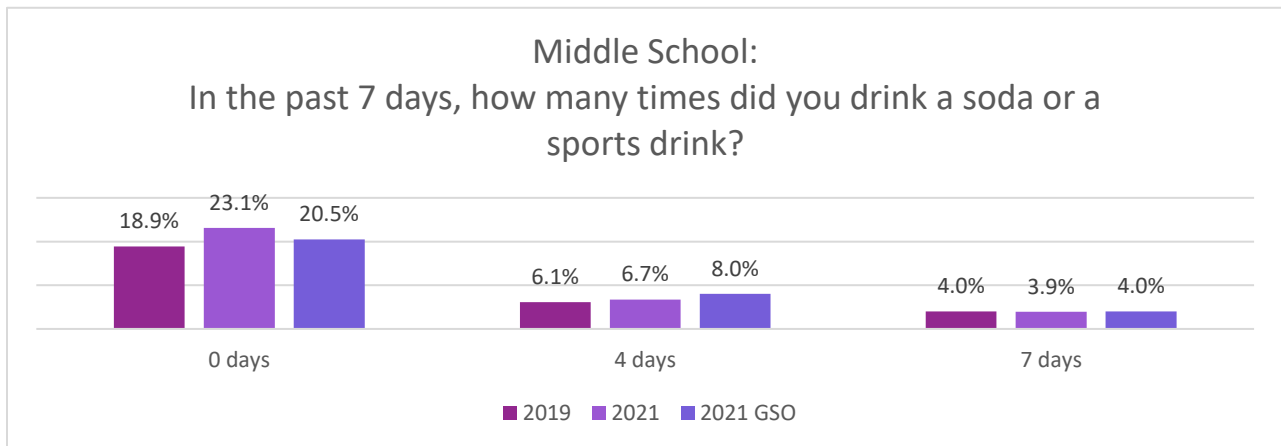


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It is good to see that over a quarter of middle school girls and almost a quarter of high school girls are eating breakfast every day. However, it is concerning to see how many are not; 20% of middle school girls and 23% of high school girls.

The survey also asks about the consumption of soda and sports drinks. One of the important considerations in girls' consumption of sugary and caffeinated drinks is the impact it can have on the quality of sleep adolescents get.<sup>ii</sup> We explore sleep in the next section.

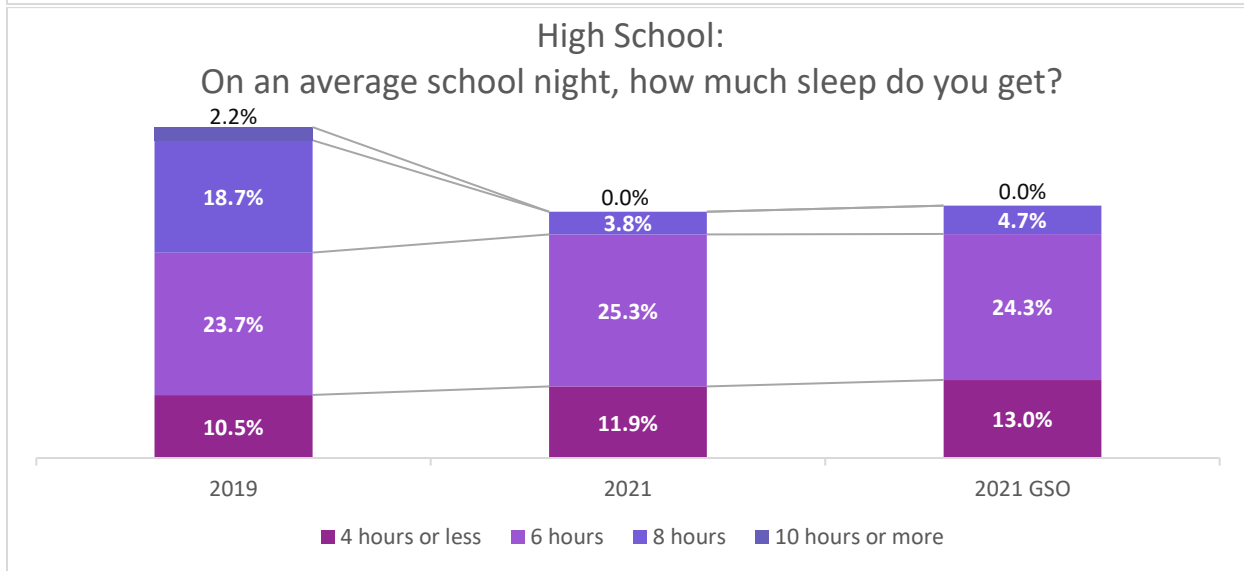
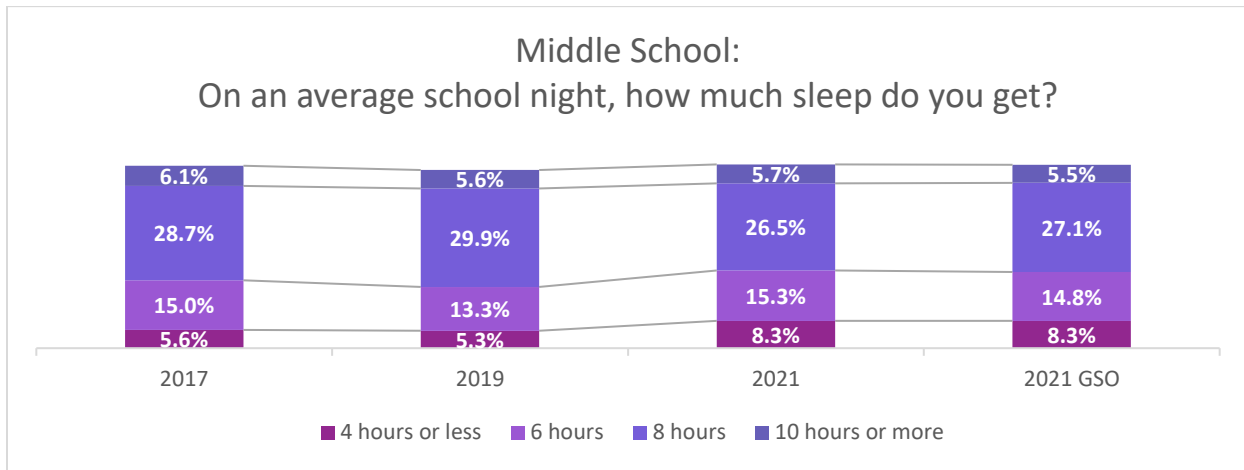
Greater Worcester Regional Youth Health Survey, in 2017, 1 in three middle school girls reported eating breakfast every day (35.6%), in contrast, 48.7% of boys report they eat breakfast every day. In 2021, 28.0% of middle school girls report eating breakfast every day, compared to 42.3% of boys. While both are less likely to be eating breakfast every day, boys are more likely to be eating breakfast.



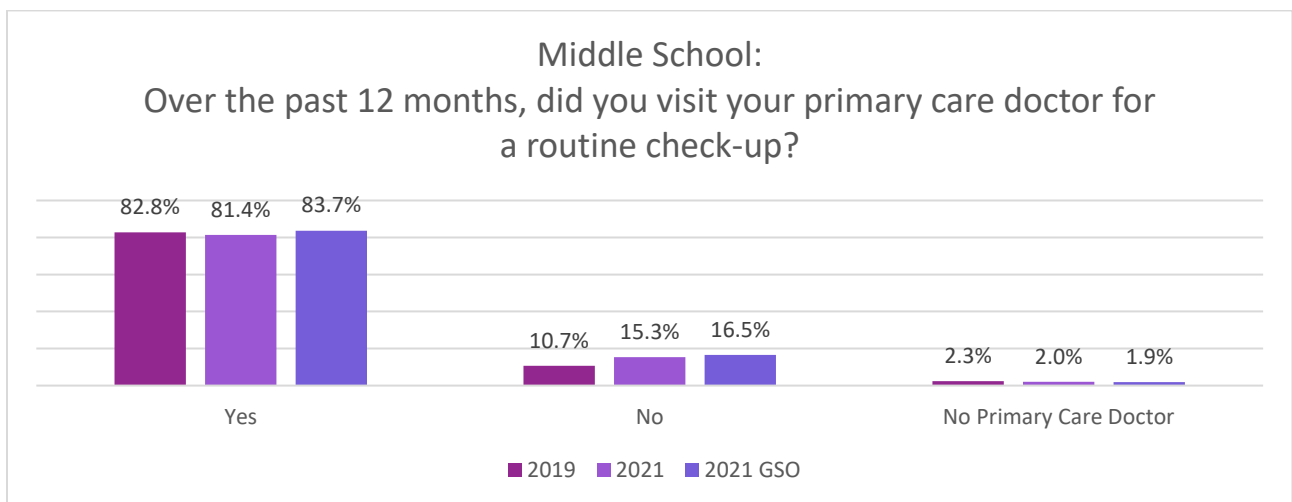
The final area IIGA explored in relation to physical health is girls' sleep behavior. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine has recommended that children aged 6–12 years should regularly sleep 9–12 hours per 24 hours and teenagers aged 13–18 years should sleep 8–10 hours per 24 hours.<sup>iii</sup>

In 2019, we found that over half of middle school-aged girls in greater Worcester are getting 8 hours or less of sleep on a school night, this remains consistent in the 2021 survey results. However, as we look at sleep in high school girls, the number that gets six hours or less is sharply higher in both 2019 and 2021, and the continuing rise is concerning. Only 3.8% of our high school girls report getting eight hours or more.

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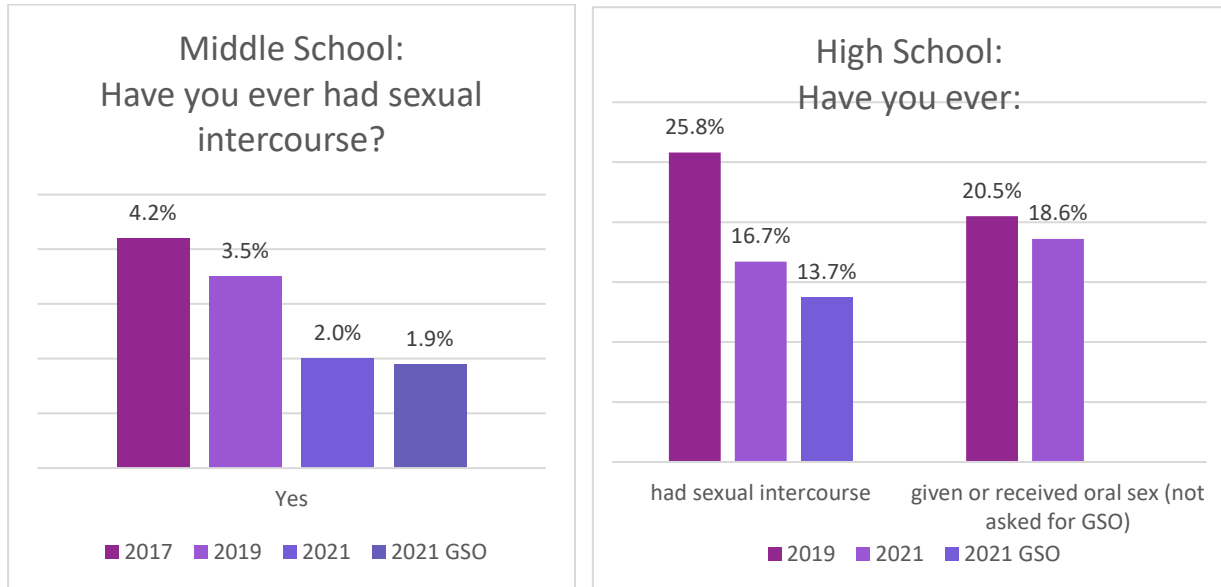
The final question that relates to overall physical health is middle school aged girls visit their primary care doctor for routine checkups. As you can see in the chart below, most girls do, but it is concerning that some do not do so even though they have a primary care provider.



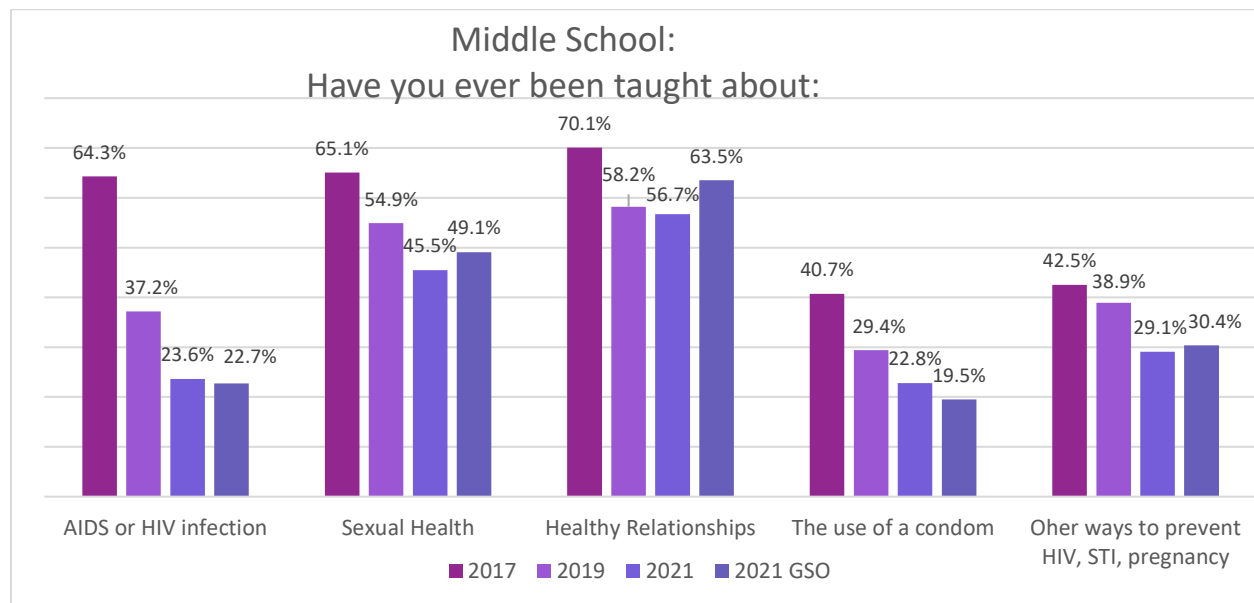
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### Sexual Health

There is a marked decrease in the number of girls reporting they were taught about sexual health topics from 2017 to 2021. In 2021, the Worcester Public Schools implemented a new comprehensive sexual health and healthy relationships curriculum. This is concurrent with the time of the most recent YRBS survey, so the impact is not yet evident.

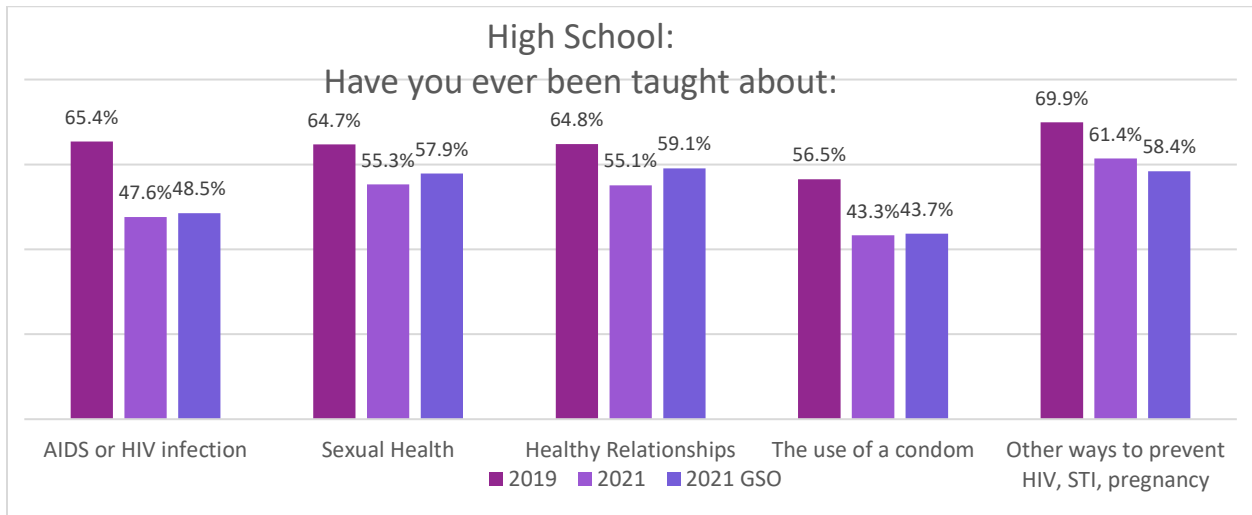


It is important to note that girls who are in middle school and who participate in after school girl serving programs (GSO) are more likely to report having learned about health relationships (63.5% GSO vs 56.7% girls at large); and more likely to report have been taught about sexual health (49.1% GSO vs 45.5% girls at large).



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The responses from high school girls are similar.

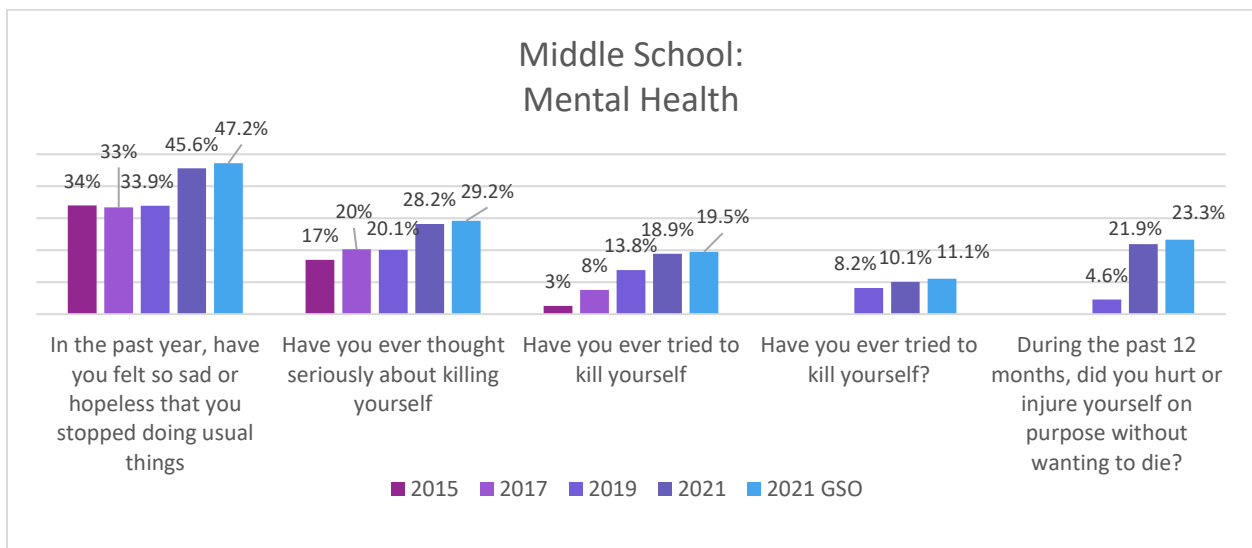


**Behavioral Health**

Behavioral health concerns have escalated during the pandemic, with girls being a group that has raised concerns in many studies both nationally, and in regions across Massachusetts.

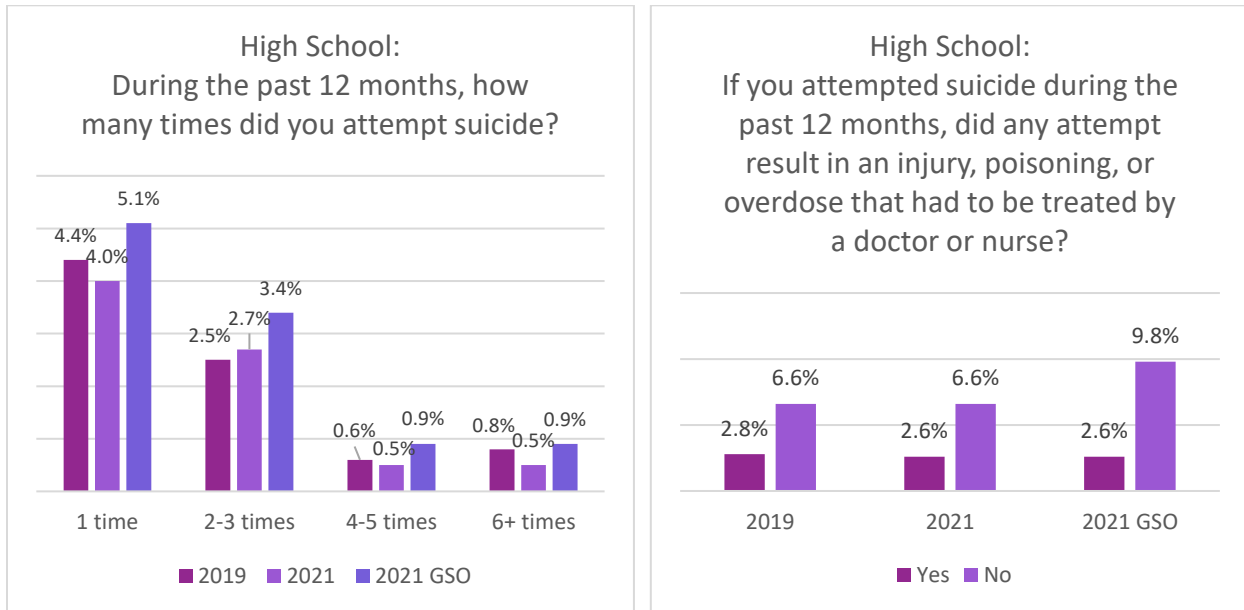


The biggest concern is the rising rates of girls’ depression and anxiety. While we identified these concerns in 2019, they have increased in the most recent survey, especially for middle school girls. While the lethality has not increased for high school girls, there are increases for middle school-aged girls, and increases are consistent across all girls and girls engaged in GSOs.

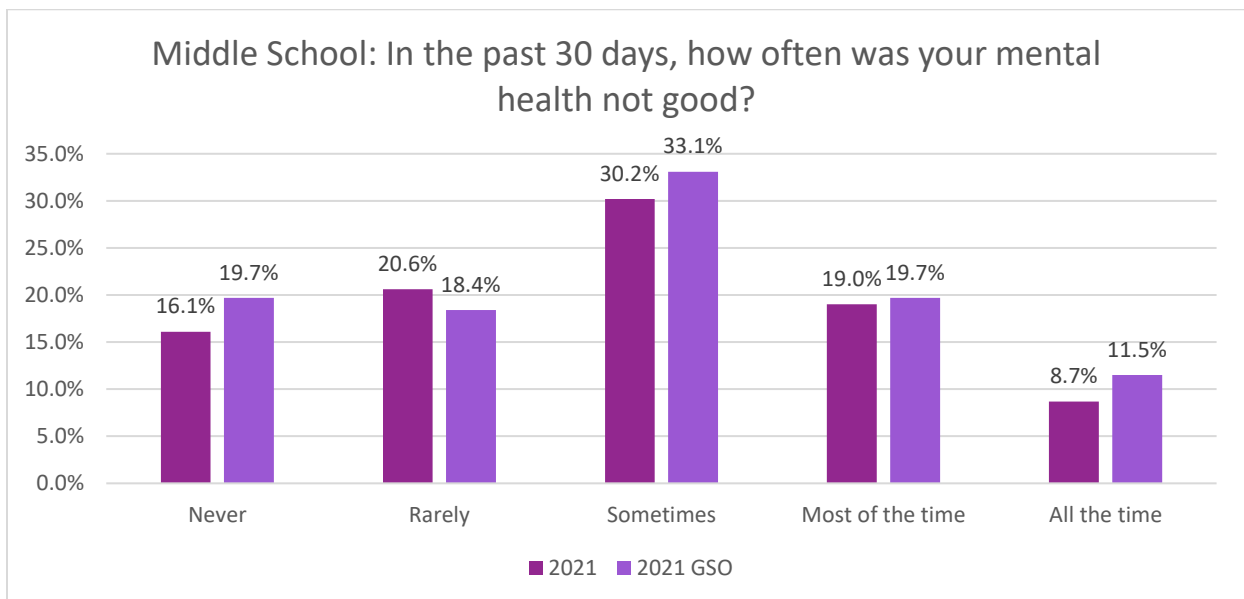


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In high school, the questions are asked a little differently, however, there is no significant change since 2019.

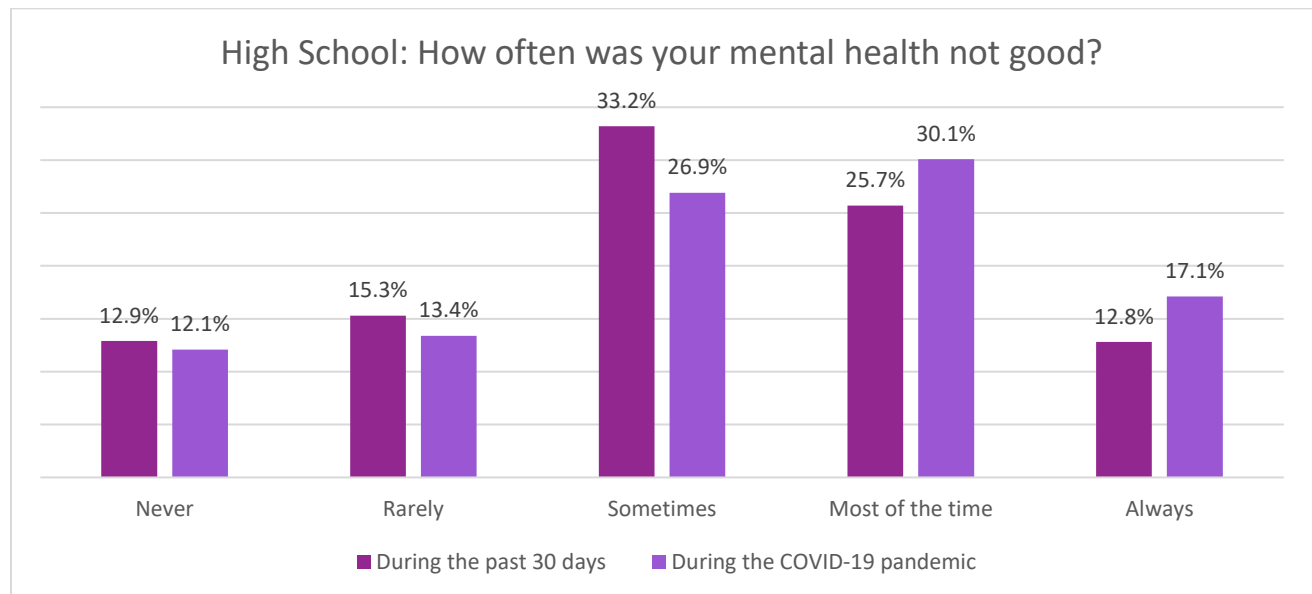


A new question in the Greater Worcester Regional Youth Health Survey for 2021 was “In the past 30 days, how often was your mental health not good?” The results show a bell curve – with the largest group (30.2%) of middle school girls in the middle at “sometimes”. When looking at the two extremes of the scale – “never” and “all the time” we see those middle schoolers engaged in girl-serving organizations are both more likely to report an extreme. One possible cause might be the acceptance of sharing about mental health within the peer groups and supportive adults in the GSO; other explanations are still to be explored.



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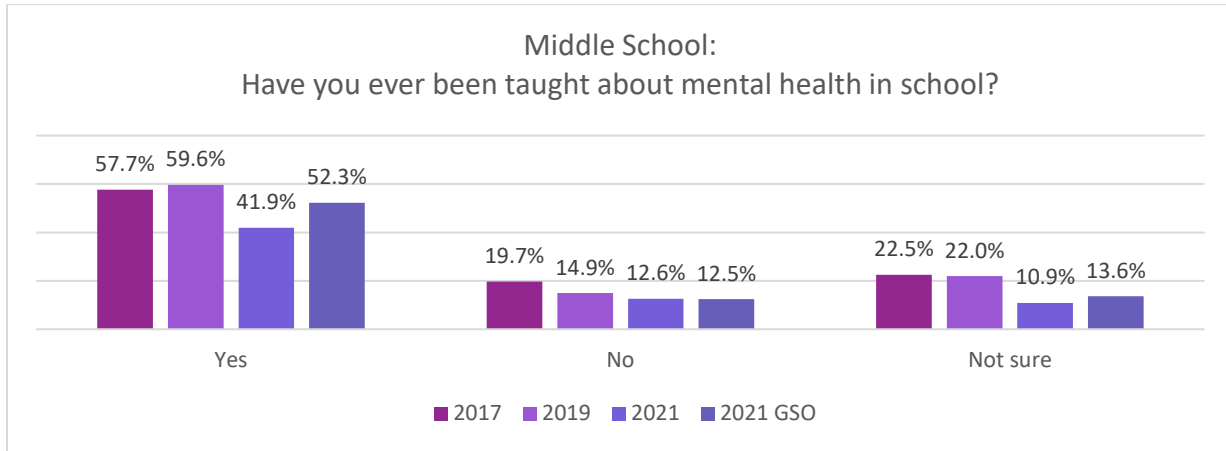
At the high school level, the question was asked in two ways; in the past 30 days, and during the COVID 19 pandemic. In the high school data, we can see the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health, in the swing of the bell curve toward “most” and “all the time”. It is somewhat reassuring to see a return to the more typical bell curve when the same question asks high school girls to answer for the past 30 days only. \*Note: this data was collected in the late winter and early spring of 2021-2022.



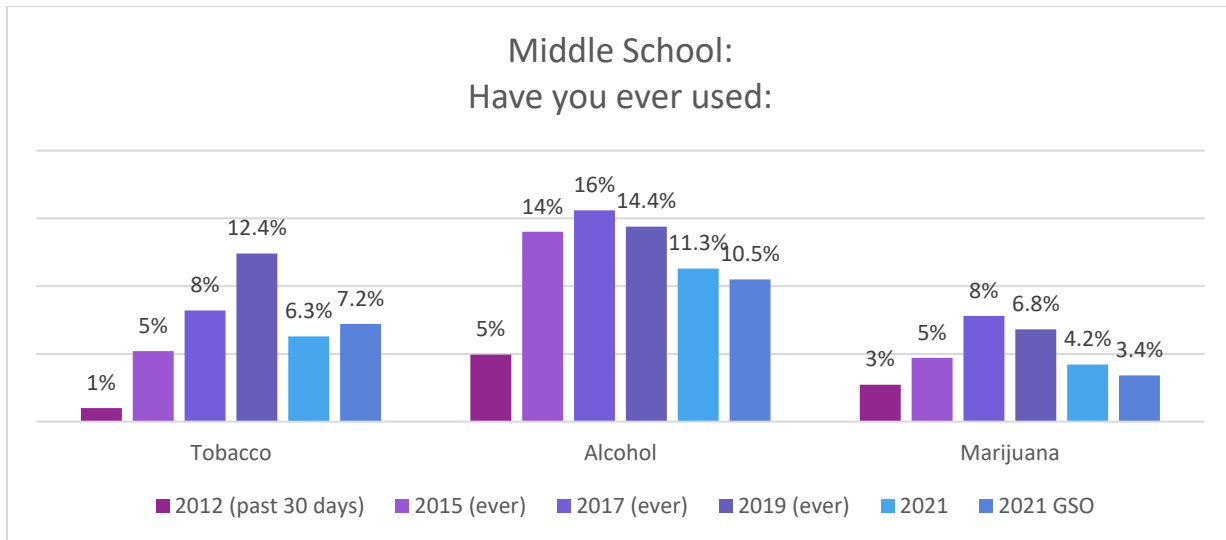
Since 2018 the greater Worcester area has invested in providing Mental Health First Aid to teachers in school and youth workers in out of school time programs. Additionally, organizations such as the SHINE Initiative, have emerged with the goal of providing mental health education. From the data, there is a sharp decline in middle school girls reporting having been taught about mental health – this learning would have taken place during the remote learning of the pandemic and may explain the sharp drop.

Of note is the strong showing of middle school girls in Girls serving organizations who tell us they were taught about mental health *in school* – 52.3% of GSO girls versus 41.9% of girls at large. The implication here is that the GSO experience may have reinforced the lessons of the school; or taught it specifically and girls remembered the original lessons from school. Whatever the case, the girls in GSOs are more likely to report having been taught about mental health.

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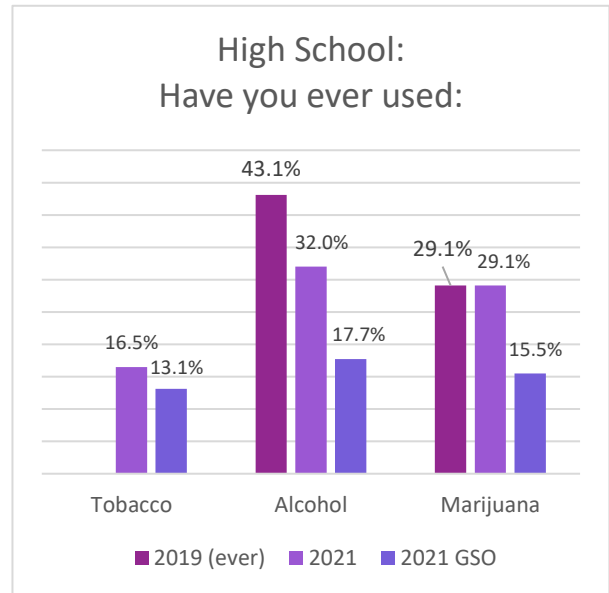
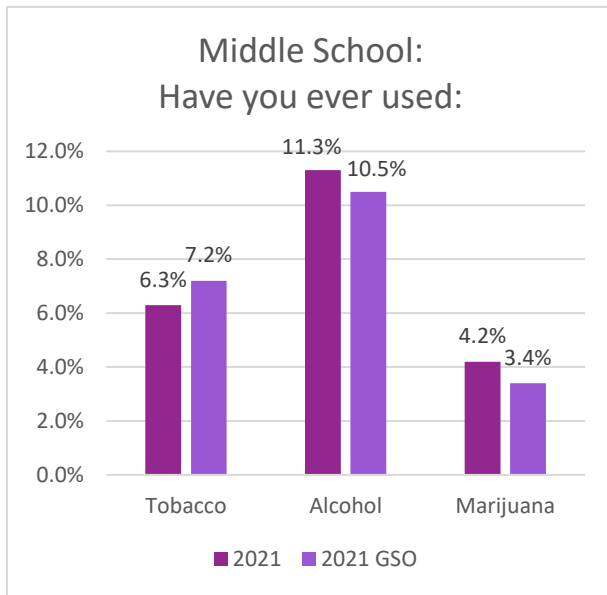
One of the more positive outcomes from the period of COVID 19 is the reduction in self-reported substance misuse among middle school and high school students. The protective factor of engagement in a girl serving organization (GSO) is seen in lower reported use as well.



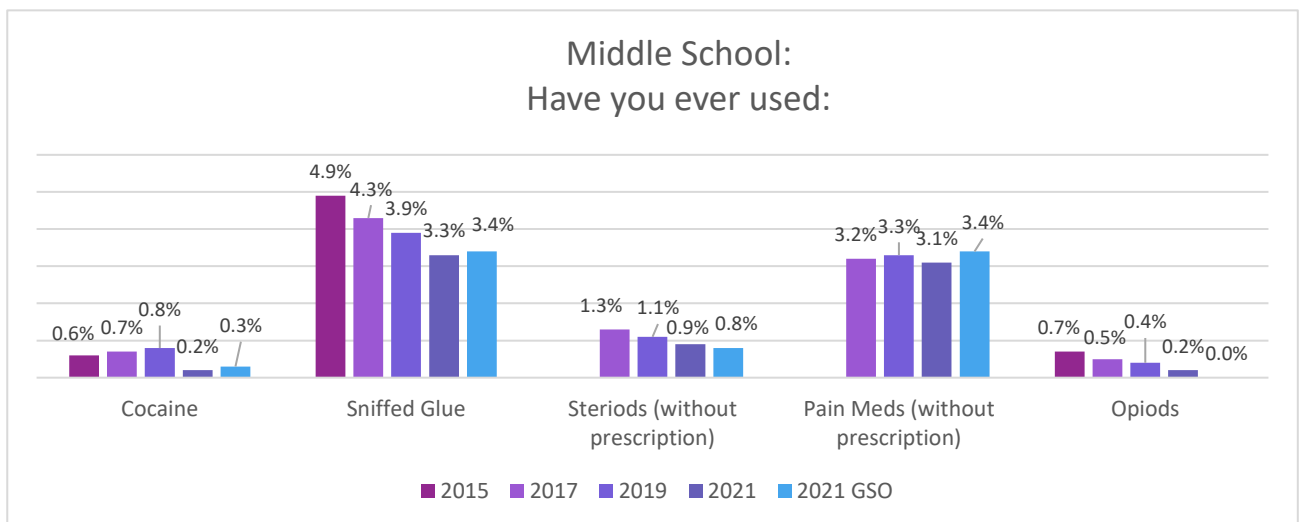


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The survey asks middle school girls if they have ever used cocaine, sniffed glue, steroids and pain meds without a prescription and opioids. The numbers are very small, so we cannot see any large change, however, there is a clear downward trend in glue sniffing over the time we have been collecting this data. There is not a clear indication of a difference for girls in GSOs.



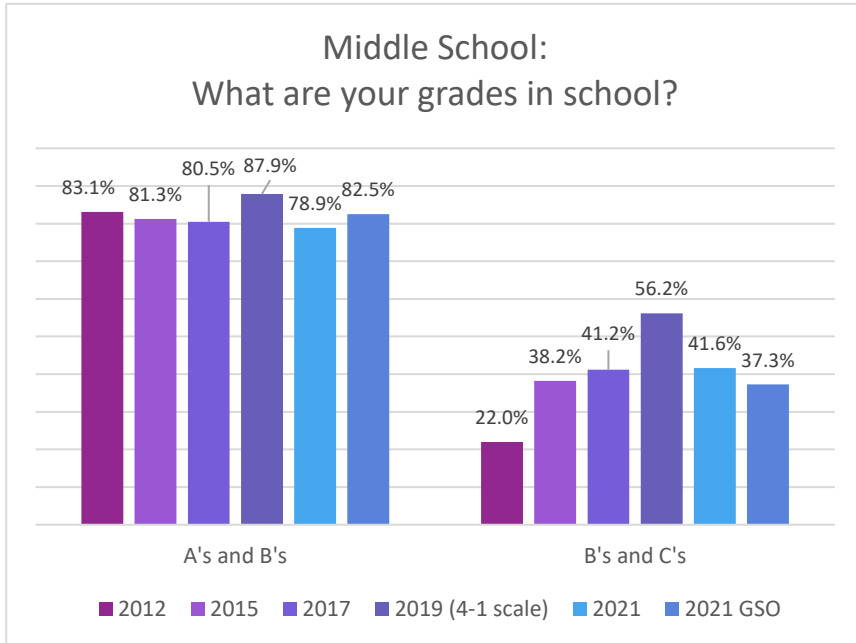
This new equity in substance misuse for girls and boys is a local, as well as global concern. In fact, recent studies find teenage girls in the United States now start to drink alcohol sooner than boys do.<sup>iv</sup> Comparing data from middle school boys in 2021 data shows that 10.2% have tried nicotine (compared to 7.2% of girls), 2.4% have tried marijuana (3.4% of girls); 8.5% have tried alcohol (compared to 10.5% of girls).



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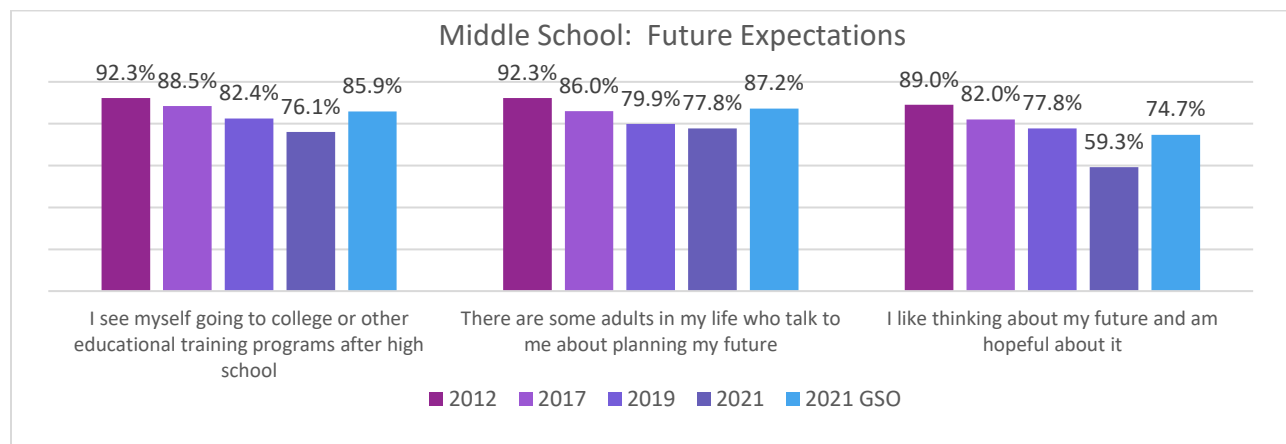
ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

IIGA has been looking at data related to future expectations and education for middle school aged girls as indicators of economic empowerment since 2012. Recent data continues to show that 4 out of 5 middle school girls report earning As and Bs on their report cards; this percentage is slightly higher for those girls who participate in GSOs. This may have been impacted by COVID-19, but we will need to look over time to really see if these changes are shorter or longer term.



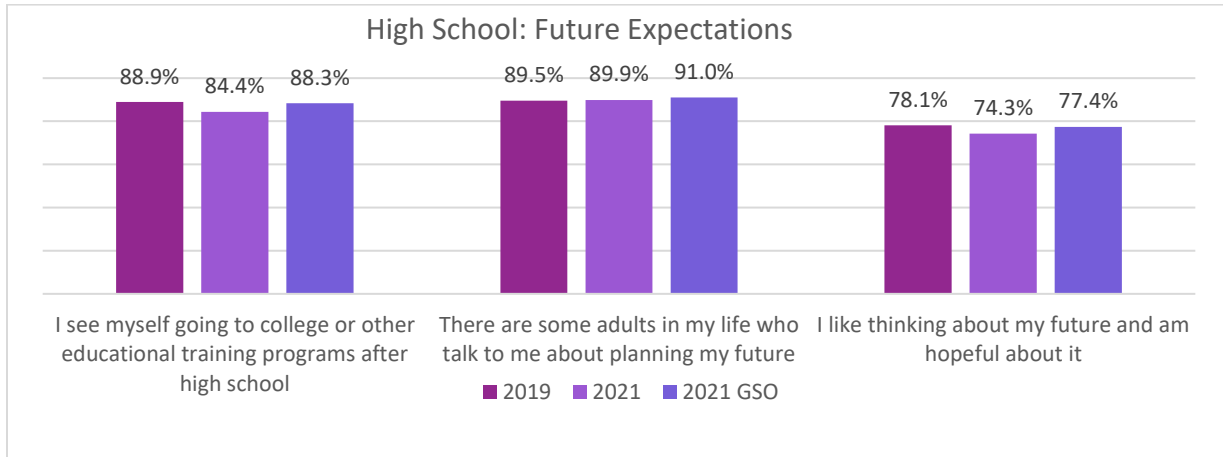
Overall, more girls report receiving A and B grades compared to boys. While 78.9% of middle school girls report getting As and Bs in school, 72.5% of boys report the same grades. 90% of girls in a previous survey reported feeling like they were “doing their best” at their schoolwork. (2007, 2011). These positive trends in education imply that school is a safe space for girls, that they believe education is valuable and they are connecting academics to future careers.

A look back over seven years of IIGA data shows an overall decline in the future expectations of middle school girls. In 2021, fewer middle school girls reported aspirations of attending college or other training, having someone to talk with about their future, and thinking about their futures with hope. However, there is a clear and powerful impact for girls engaged in out-of-school time programs on their future expectations, and it is most impactful at the middle school level.



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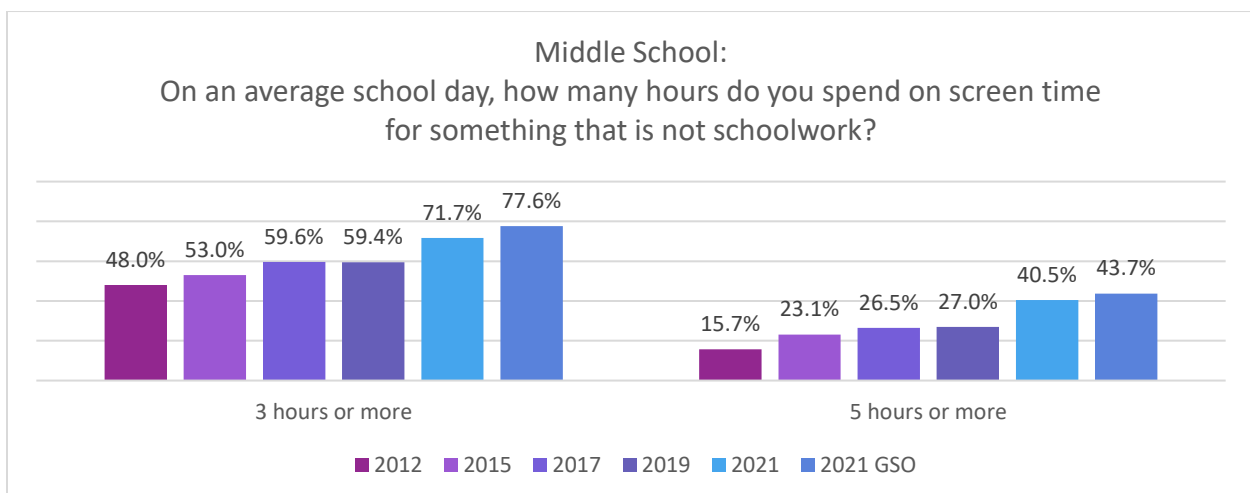
High schoolers also show a slight drop in their future aspirations, and girls engaged with a GSO show a slight benefit in this area. At the high school level, more girls are reporting participation in high school clubs and government, and in holding a job in 2021 than in 2019; participation in sports and in volunteer work shows a decrease, most likely to the “in person” nature of these opportunities which was curtailed through the start of the 2021-22 school year.



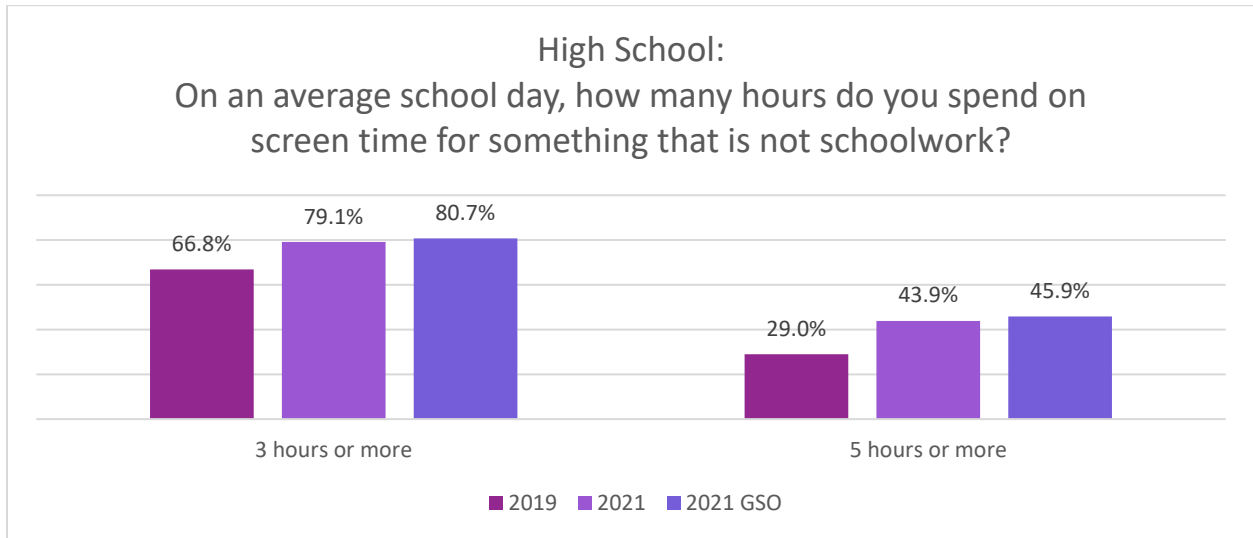
## VIOLENCE AND SAFETY

Since the beginning, IIGA has kept a steady focus on violence and safety for middle school-aged girls. The Greater Worcester Regional Youth Health Survey measures violence and safety across a spectrum of factors; from time spent online (or on screens), texting and sexting, bullying, dating violence, and weapon use and fighting.

Overall, we see a rise in girls’ use of technology not for schoolwork across the seven years of data. There is a significant increase in 2021, likely due to engagement in virtual activities during the pandemic. GSOs increased the availability of online activities for girls, and that may account for the higher numbers. This increase is more evident in our middle school girls.

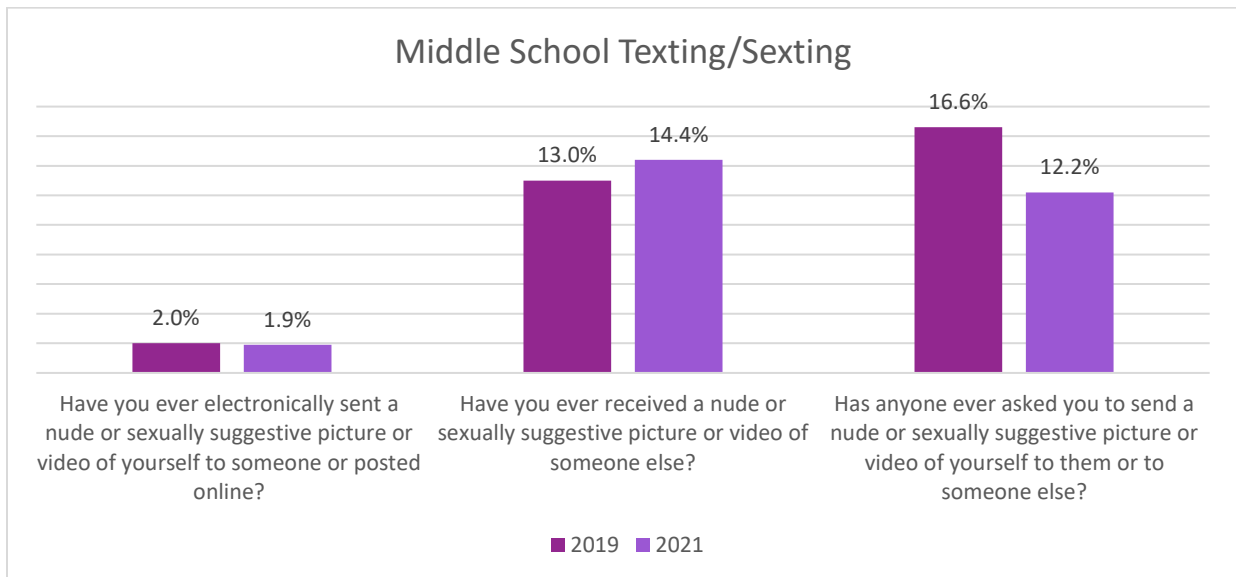


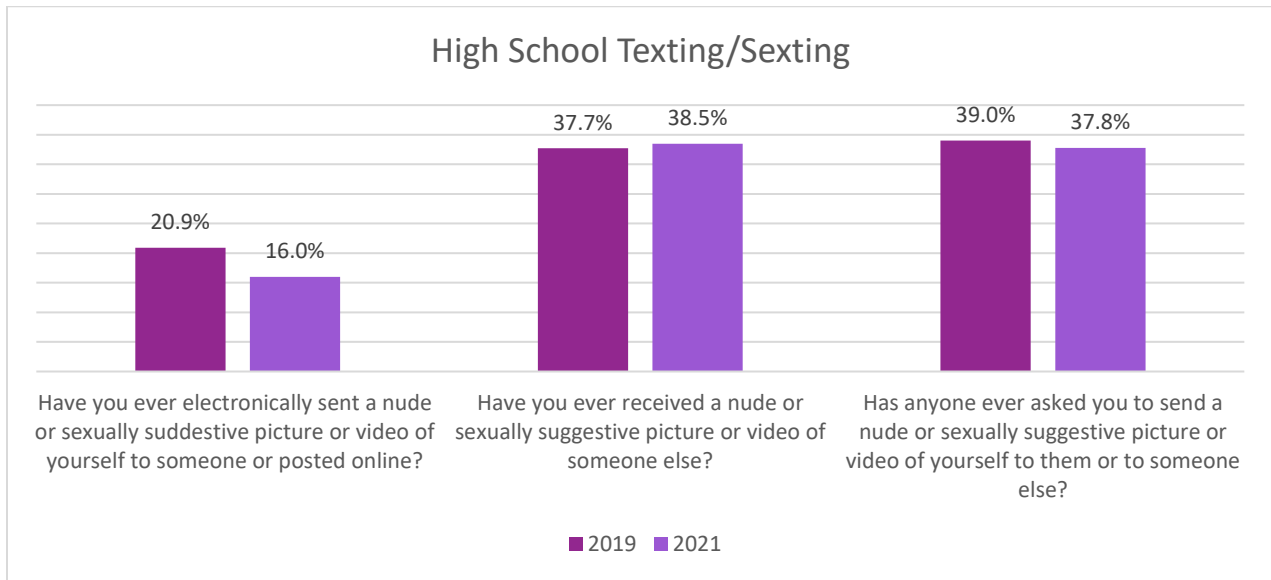
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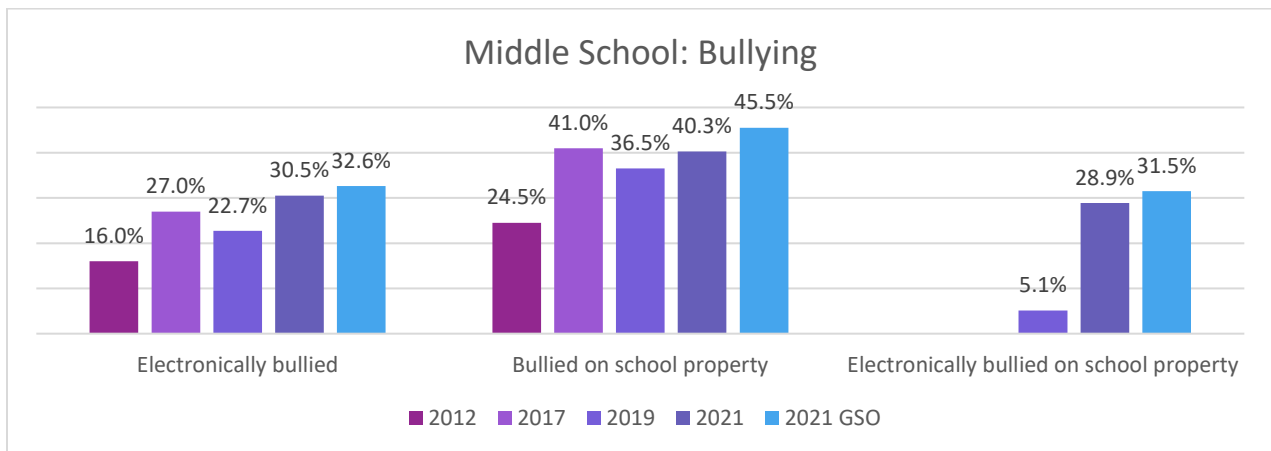
Questions regarding texting and sexting behaviors have been asked of both middle school and high school students since 2019. While online time increased over the span of the data, it is interesting that the reported data around texting and sexting has remained fairly steady at the middle school and high school levels. There is a significant increase in sexting and requests for nude and sexually suggestive photos as girls enter high school. While about 1 of 7 middle school girls (12.2%) report being asked for nude or suggestive photos; more than 1 of 3 girls in high school (37.8%) report being asked.

By comparison, just 3.4% of middle school boys (about 1 in 28) report having been asked to send a nude or sexually suggestive picture of themselves to another person; 19.1% of high school boys (less than 1 in 5) report being asked.

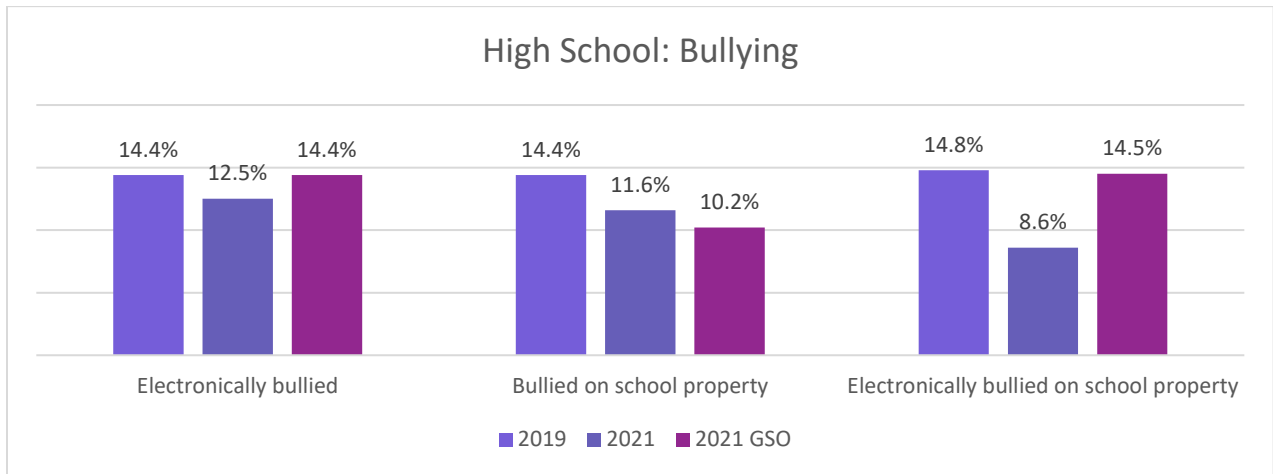




Bullying continues to be a major concern for our girls; as seen in the chart below. With the increase of online time, the increase in electronic bullying continues to increase as well. Our middle school girls engaged in GSOs are not immune to bullying. For high school girls, we see a decrease in electronic bullying, although among high school girls with GSO participation there seems to be a different story emerging.

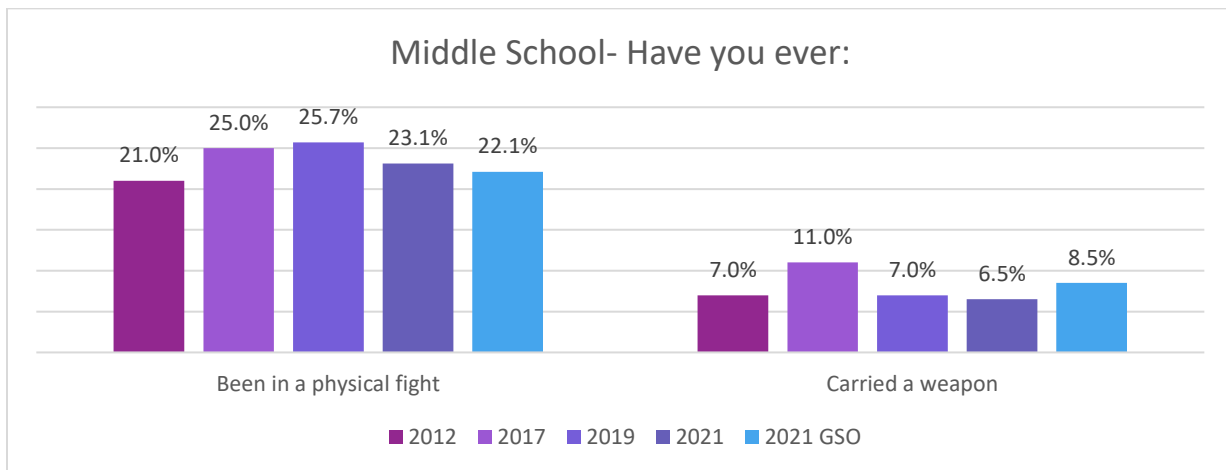


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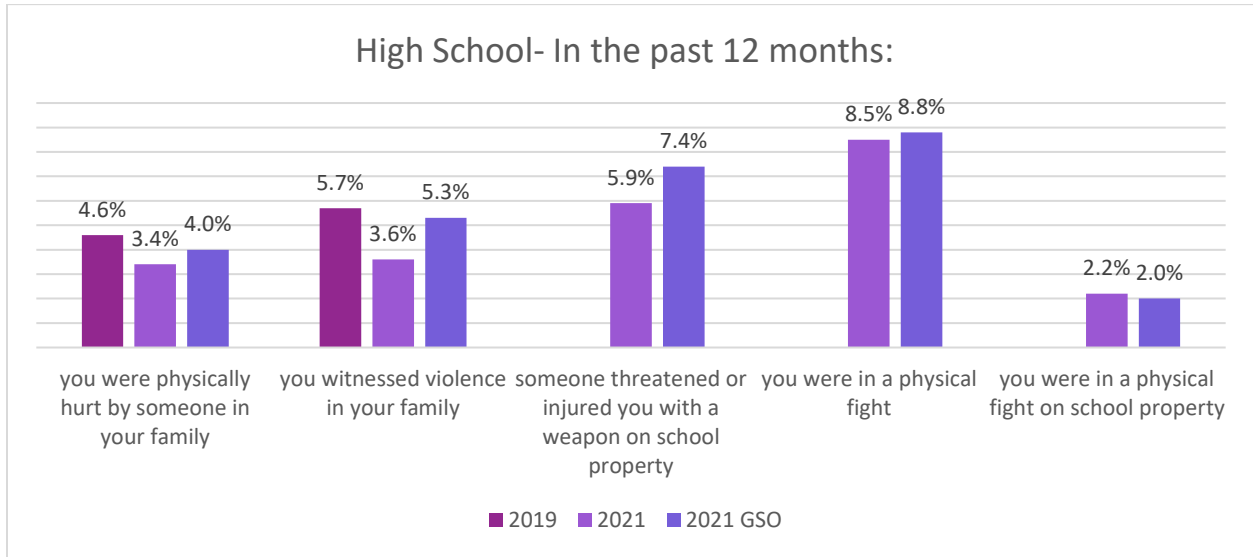


Dating violence questions are only asked of high school girls, and we have only gathered them for two years. We do see a decrease between 2019 and 2021.

Regarding fighting and weapons, there is a slight decrease in 2021 of middle schoolers telling us they have been in a physical fight, although the number is still over 1 in five girls; similarly, the number of middle school girls telling us they have carried a weapon has decreased from 7.0% in 2019 to 6.5% in 2021.



Among high schoolers, we can see similar information in the context of the past year; remembering that the year would be late fall/early winter 2020 – winter/spring 2021 based on the timeline of the survey. What does seem important here is that we have girls and girls who are participating in GSOs, who face serious issues of violence and safety.



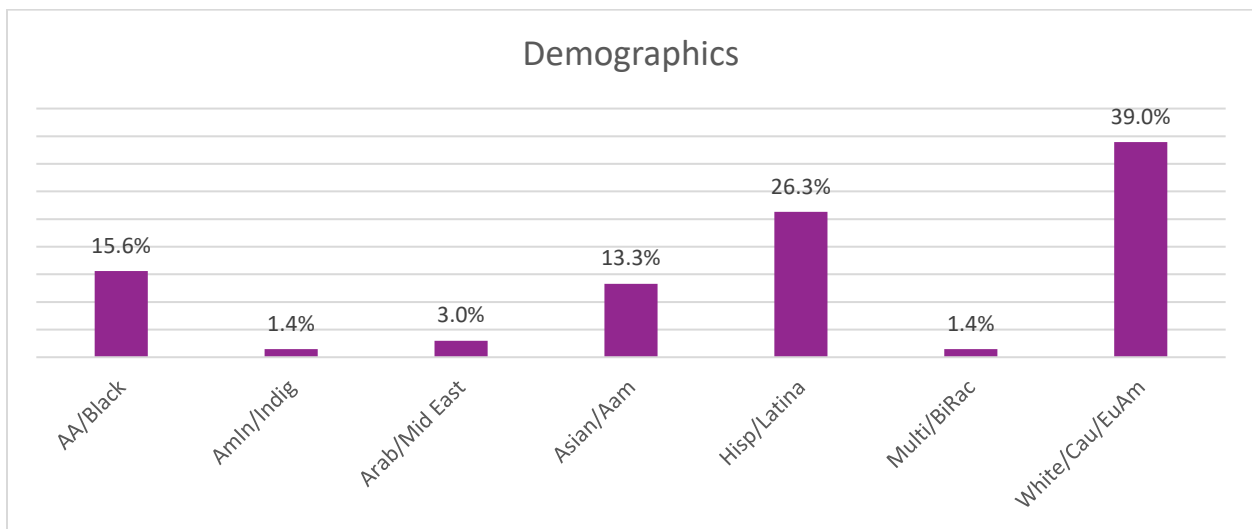
## 2022 Status of Girls in Greater Worcester

### MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRLS RACE/ETHNICITY/GENDER IDENTITY BREAKOUTS

This final section provides data on middle school girls with data broken out by how they identified themselves in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender identity. This data comes from 2,207 middle school girls who identify as female and who were ages 12-15 in 2021, the year the survey was given.



The demographics of the girls taking the Greater Worcester Regional Youth Health Survey and the identifying options for identification are seen in the chart below:



For the purposes of presenting the most accurate and reliable data, IIGA will present data from the largest groups in relation to our priority areas. The size of the groups of students identifying as American Indian/Indigenous; Arab/Middle Eastern, and Multi/BiRacial are comparatively small, and in some cases may be too small to accurately reflect the group they represent for the type of questions being asked.

The data that follows focuses on the areas where differences can be seen between the identified groups. The responses that did not have any significant differences by race/ethnicity are not included in this section, those charts would be consistent with those reported above. The following findings are also broken out by topic area; Health (including physical, mental, and sexual health), Economic Empowerment, and Violence and Safety.

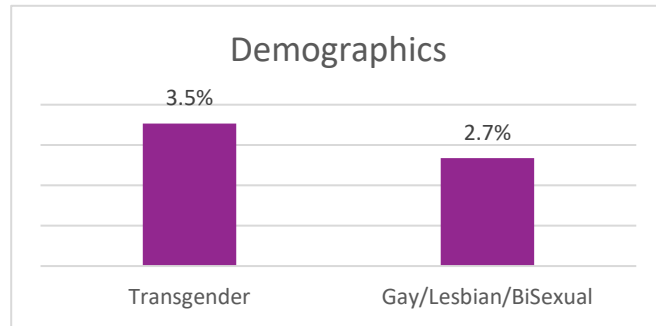


## 2022 Status of Girls in Greater Worcester

Among Middle School student who identify as female, 3.5% (78) also identify as transgender; and 2.7% (59) also identify as Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual.

Compared the group of middle school girls (2207) this is a very small percentage of girls and may lead us to conclusions outside the scope of the data due to the small sample size. For this reason, this

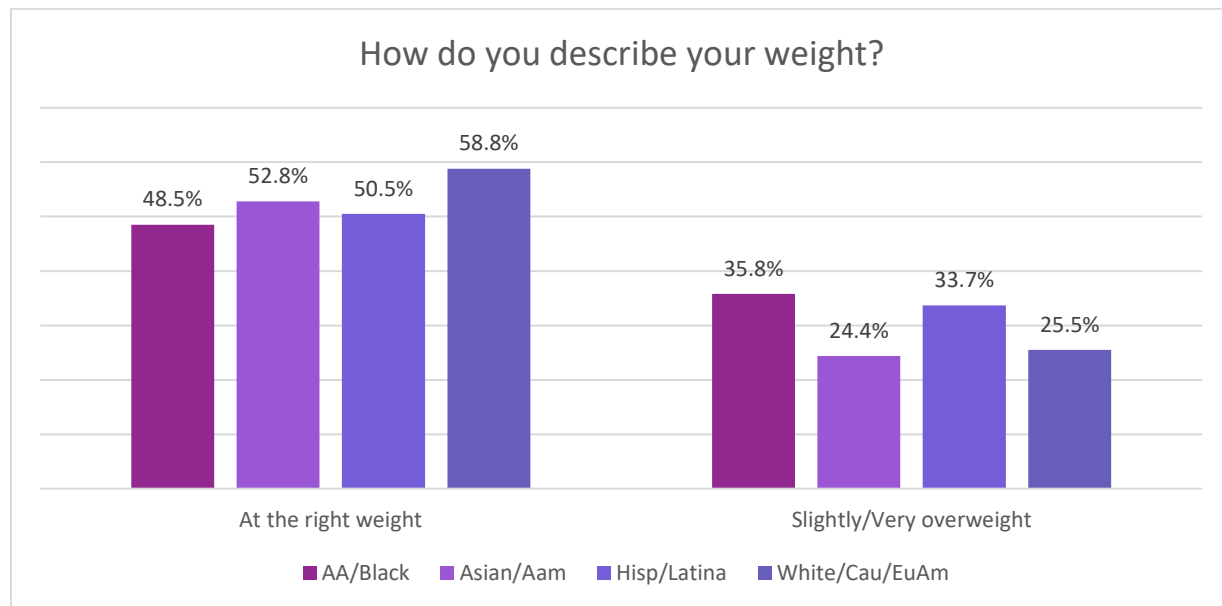
data may be reported by IIGA only as a possible difference in the responses of this small group of students, compared to the group at large. While we are unable to report the exact difference in responses mathematically, we will note when the difference is worth taking note to those who work with middle school girls in the final paragraph of each section.



## HEALTH

### Physical Health

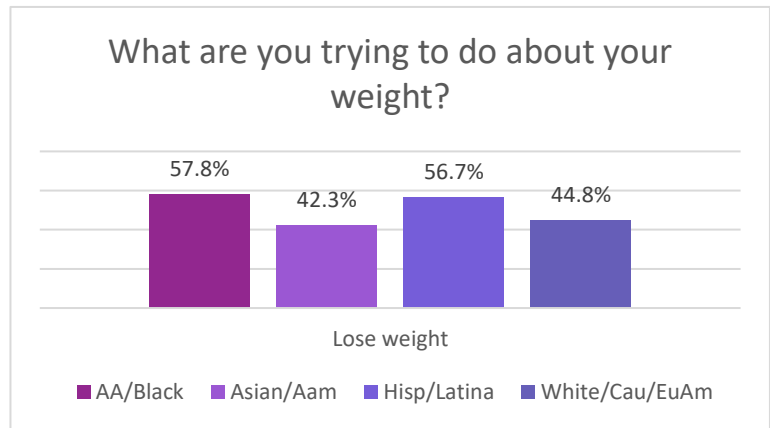
In the below charts, we look at how girls describe their weight, whether they are trying to lose weight and how much physical activity they get.



Girls who identify as White/Caucasian report the highest percentage who feel they are at the right weight, while those identifying as African American/Black report the lowest percentage. African American/Black girls report the highest percentage of girls who describe their weight as slightly to very overweight, followed by Hispanic/Latina. Asian/Asian American girls report the lowest percentage of slightly to very overweight, followed by White.

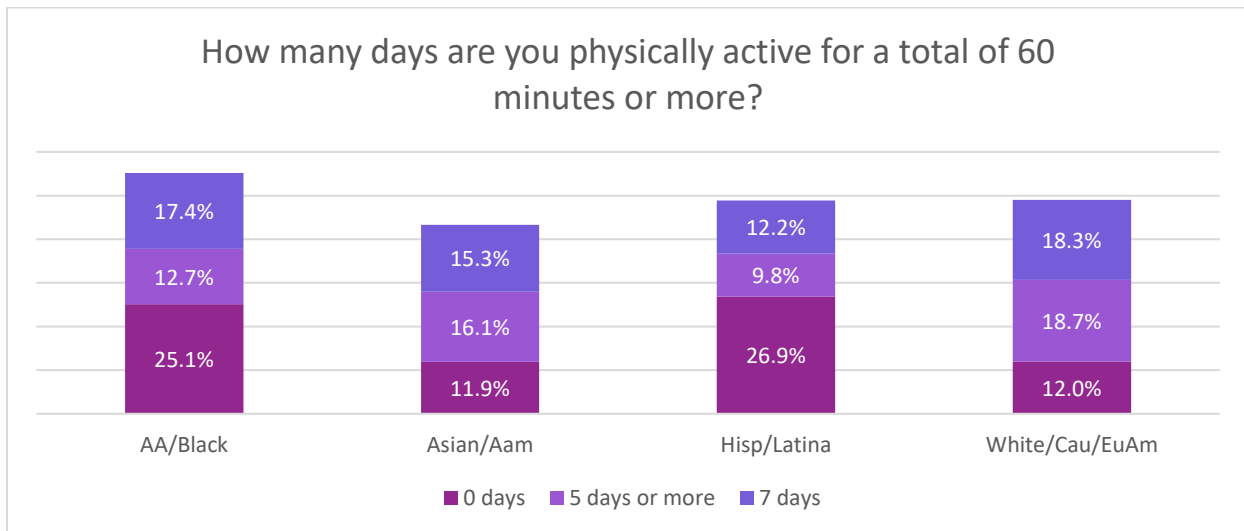
## 2022 Status of Girls in Greater Worcester

The next question looks at girls who say they are trying to lose weight. Across the board more girls report trying to lose weight than those who report being slightly to very overweight. This difference ranges from over 15% between girls who identify as African American and girls who identify as Asian/Asian American.



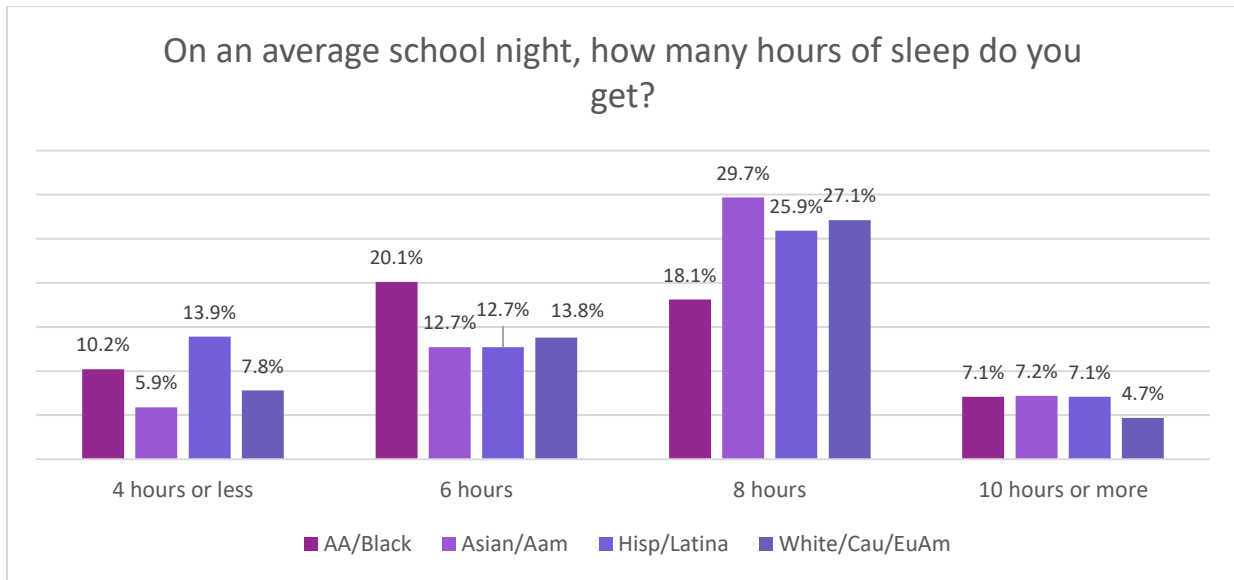
The next physical health section looks at levels of physical activity. The highest percentages of girls having no days where they are physically active are in this order; Hispanic/Latino girls and girls who identify as African American or Black.

The highest percentage of girls reporting five or more days of physical activity identify as White, followed by Asian/Asian American. The highest percentage of girls reporting 7 days of physical activity are girls who identify as White, followed by girls who identify as African American or Black.



The last section under physical health with significant differences when looking at race/ethnicity is sleep.

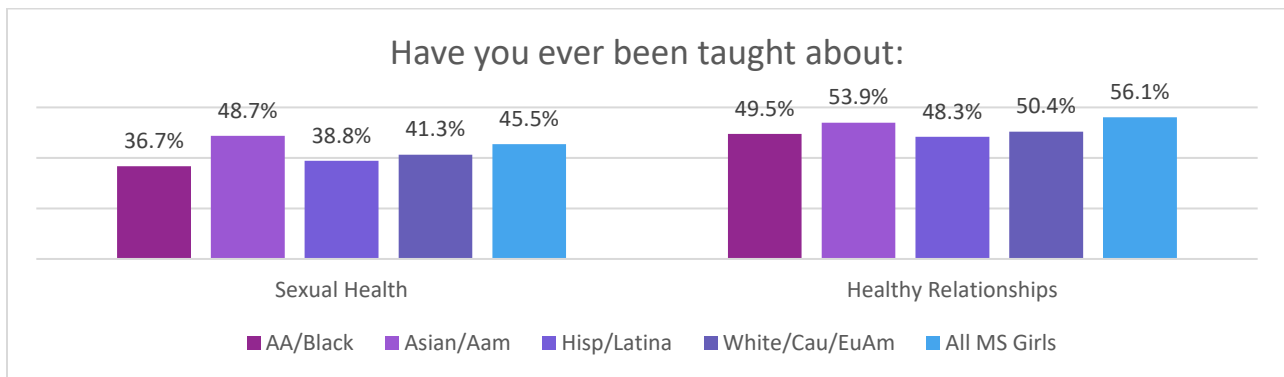
2022 Status of Girls in Greater Worcester



The highest percentage of girls who get an average of four or less hours of sleep on a school night identified as Hispanic/Latina girls. The largest percentage of girls that average six hours of sleep identify as African American/Black. Almost 30% of girls who identify as Asian/Asian American, followed by White girls and Hispanic/Latina girls report an average of eight hours of sleep on a school night.

**Sexual Health**

The data regarding sexual health behavior, “ever had sexual intercourse” did not show significant differences when looked at through the lens of race/ethnicity. However, there were interesting differences reported in being taught about sexual health and healthy relationships. In both areas, girls who identified as Asian/Asian American had the highest percentages. Girls who identified as White, followed by Hispanic/Latina-identified girls also reported higher percentages of having been taught about sexual health. The highest percentage of girls being taught about healthy relationships identify as White followed by Asian/Asian American girls, then Black. In both groups, the lowest percentages were in girls who identified as Hispanic/Latina. Over half (56.1%) of all Middle School girls report learning about healthy relationships.



2022 Status of Girls in Greater Worcester



Middle schoolers who identify as female and also identify as gay/lesbian/bisexual are just as likely as all MS girls to say they have been taught about sexual health (45.5% and 46.0%; however, MS girls who identify as transgender are far less likely to say they have been "ever been taught about sexual health".

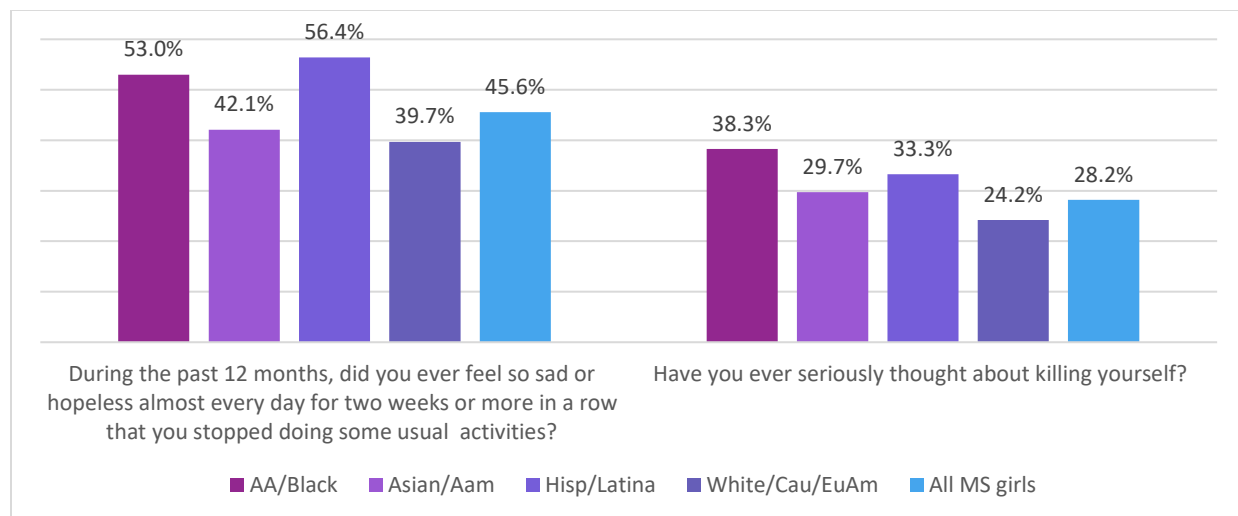
While 56% of middle schoolers who identify as female say they have "ever been taught about healthy relationships"; girls who identify as transgender or gay/lesbian/bisexual are far less likely to say they have ever been taught about healthy relationships.

**Mental Health**

In this section, we will look at mental health data that revealed differences when disaggregated by race/ethnicity and gender identity. The first looks at depression and suicidal ideation. The second chart covers self-reporting of mental health status. We are not including substance use in this section of the report, because no significant differences were revealed when the lens of race/ethnicity/gender identity is applied.



The first chart shows that girls who identify as Hispanic/Latina have the highest percentage of depression (defined in the question as feeling so sad over two weeks that they withdrew from usual activities), followed by African American/Black girls. African American/Black girls reported the highest percentages of suicidal ideation than all other categories. This is followed by Hispanic/Latina girls reporting the next highest percentage for depression and African American/Black girls reporting suicidality. Girls who identify as White have the lowest percentages in both areas. Overall, almost one-half (45.6%) of middle school girls report depression, and almost one-third (28.2%) report suicidal ideation.

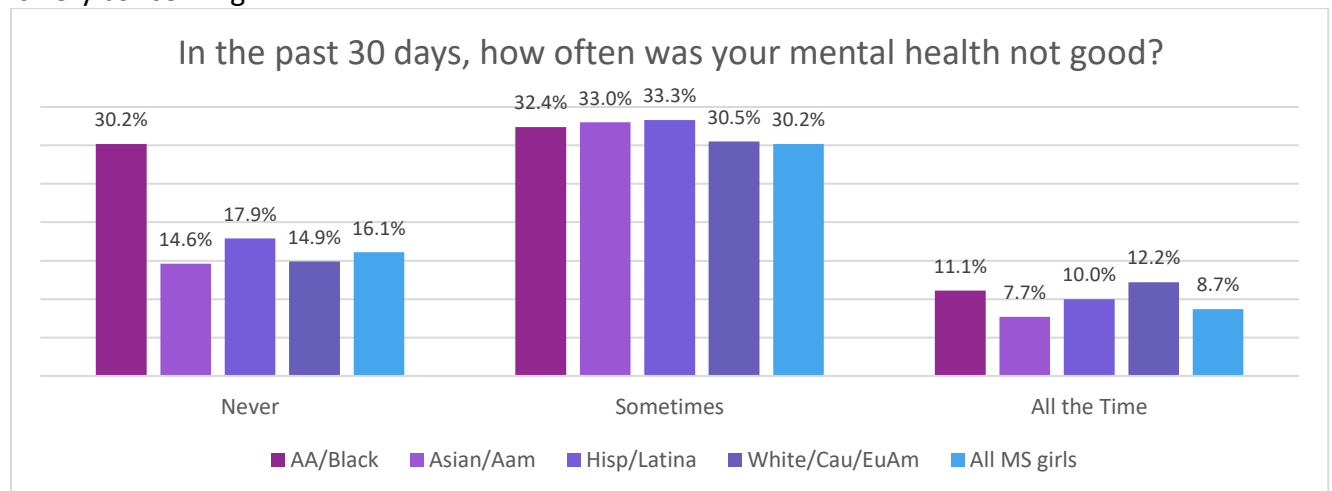


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Among middle schoolers who identify as female, 45.6% report feeling so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities in the past year; among those who also identify as transgender or gay/lesbian/bisexual, that percentage is as high as 75%.

Among Middle Schoolers who identify as female, 28.2% report having serious thoughts about killing themselves; among those who also identify as transgender or gay/lesbian/bisexual, that percentage nearly doubles.

The next question requires some unpacking. In the first set of responses, we see girls who identify as African American/Black with the highest percentage of “never” in the past 30 days. The lowest percentage of girls reporting “never” identify as Asian/Asian American. In the “sometimes” all groups of girls all cluster around 30%. In the “all the time” response, girls who identify as White are the highest percentage. Overall, almost 9% of Middle School girls, or one in eleven, say their mental health is “not good” all the time. Together with the data above, this is very concerning.

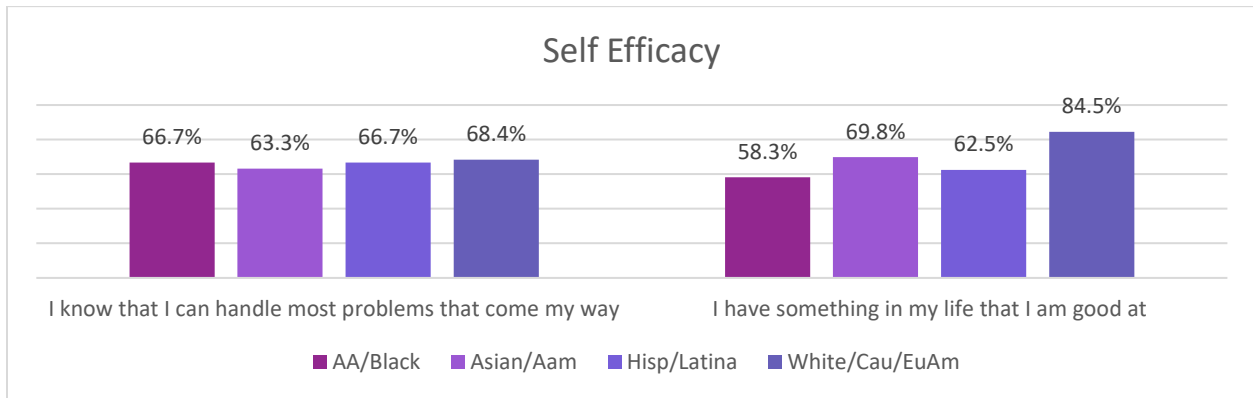


While 8.7% of all middle schoolers who identify as female say, "in the past 30 days their mental health was not good 'all the time'"; among Middle School girls who also identify as transgender or gay/lesbian/bisexual this percentage quadruples to more than 1 in 3 of these girls saying their mental health is not good 'all the time'.

## ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

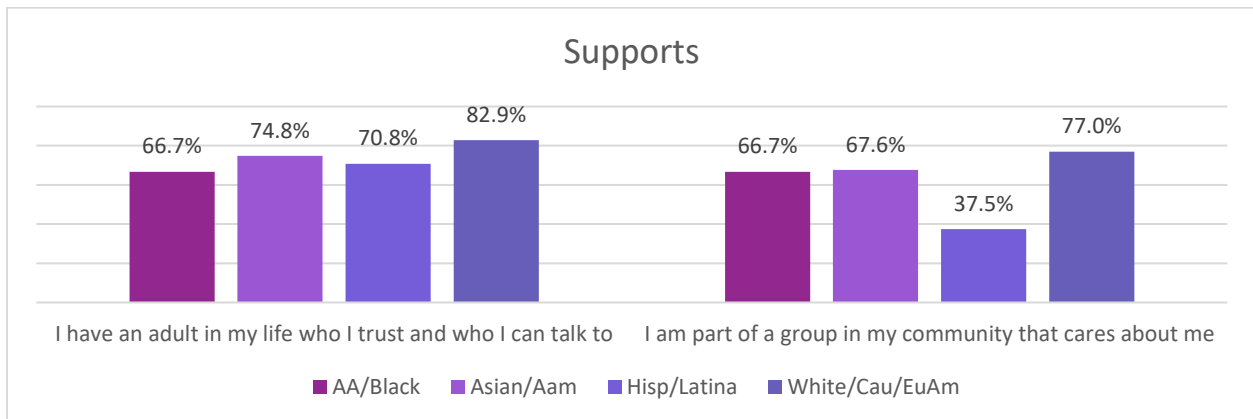
This section of the report looks at grades, future expectations, self-efficacy, and supports. No differences were found in the grades and future expectations responses. The self-efficacy and supports questions are only given in some of the region’s communities, not all. Therefore, the numbers are smaller and the demographic breakdown is different. However, we found these differences worth reporting on.

## 2022 Status of Girls in Greater Worcester



While approximately two out of three girls across race/ethnicity report feeling they can handle problems, there are differences in responses to the next question. White girls have a much higher response rate to feeling they are good at something in their lives, followed by Asian/Asian American girls. African American girls report the lowest percentage.

In the below set of questions, a similar difference is seen, with girls who identify as White having higher percentages of youth with adults they trust and can talk to, and a community that cares for them. Hispanic/Latino girls report the lowest percentage of those who feel they have a community that cares for them.



Middle school girls who also identify as transgender or gay/lesbian/bisexual are less likely to report they "have an adult in my life whom I trust and whom I can talk to" and they are "part of a group in my community that cares about me"; but they are much more likely to report they "have something in my life that I am good at", signifying a strong sense of self-efficacy in the face of daily challenges.

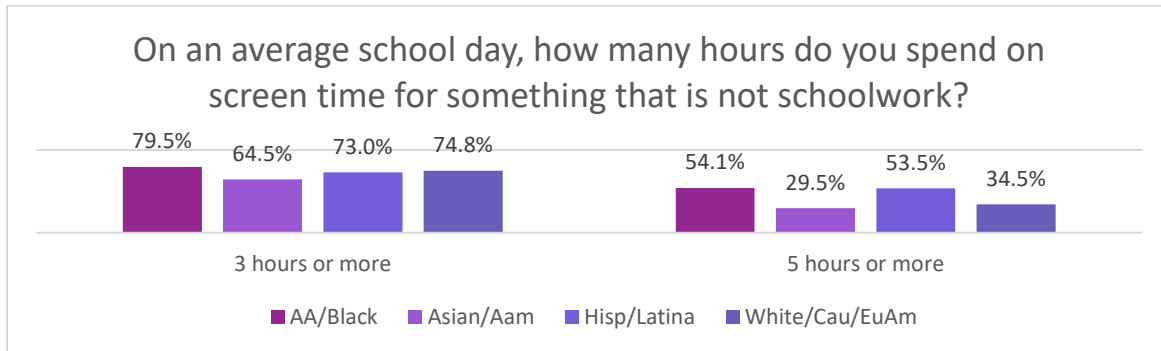


## VIOLENCE AND SAFETY

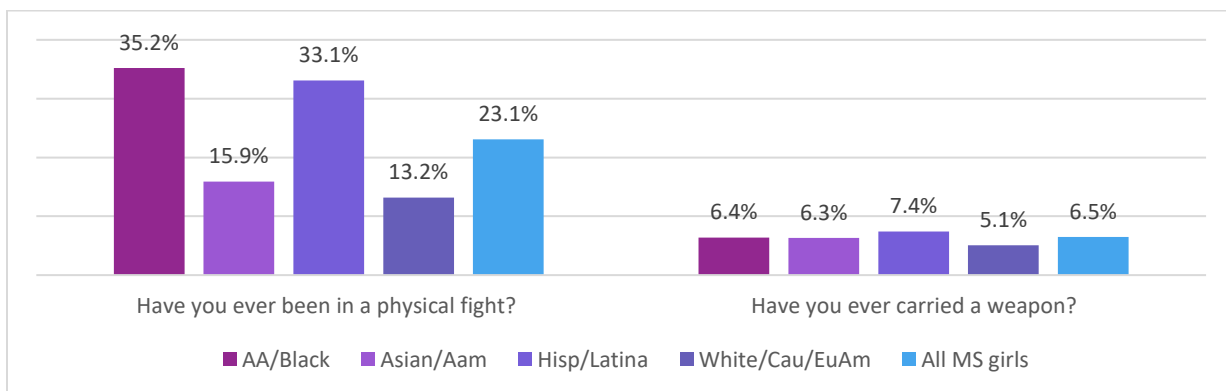
The increase in screen time for middle school girls is measured under our focus on violence and safety. There are differences when we look at screen time by race/ethnicity/gender identity

## 2022 Status of Girls in Greater Worcester

categories. While smaller differences are seen in girls who report being on screens for three or more hours, larger differences are seen in those who report five or more hours of screen time on things not identified as schoolwork. Over half of the girls that identified as African American/Black and Hispanic/Latina girls report five or more hours, while the percentages for White and Asian/Asian American girls are much lower.



These two questions addressing violence in middle school; physical fights and carrying a weapon show some differences when looked at through the lens of race/ethnicity/gender identity. The highest percentage of girls reporting having been in a physical fight identified as African American/Black, followed by Hispanic/Latina. The lowest percentages were reported by girls identifying as White and Asian/Asian American. The percentages of girls who report carrying a weapon in Middle School are very small, with very small differences among the categories.

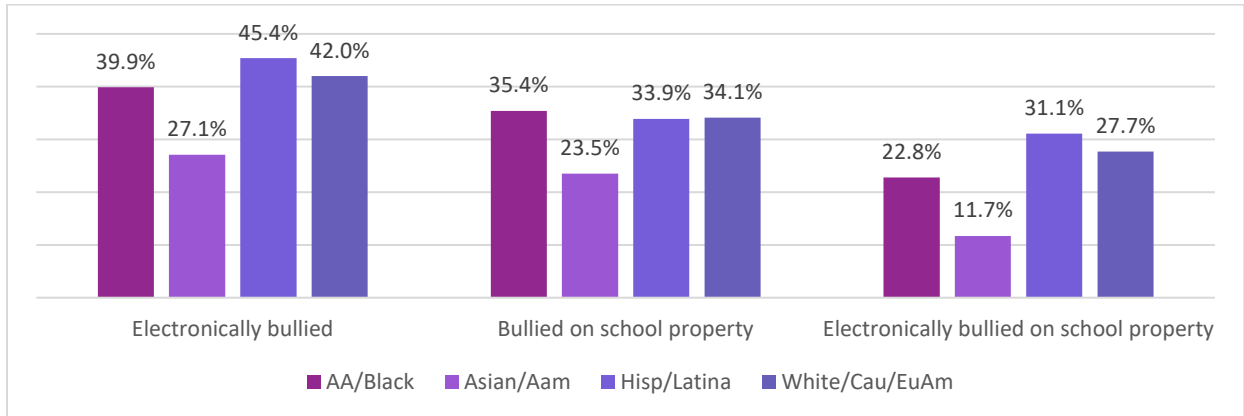


Among Middle schoolers who identify as female, 23.1% report they have never been in a physical fight. Those who also identify as transgender are less likely to have been in a physical fight; however, those who identify as gay/lesbian/bisexual are much more likely to report they have ever been in a physical fight.

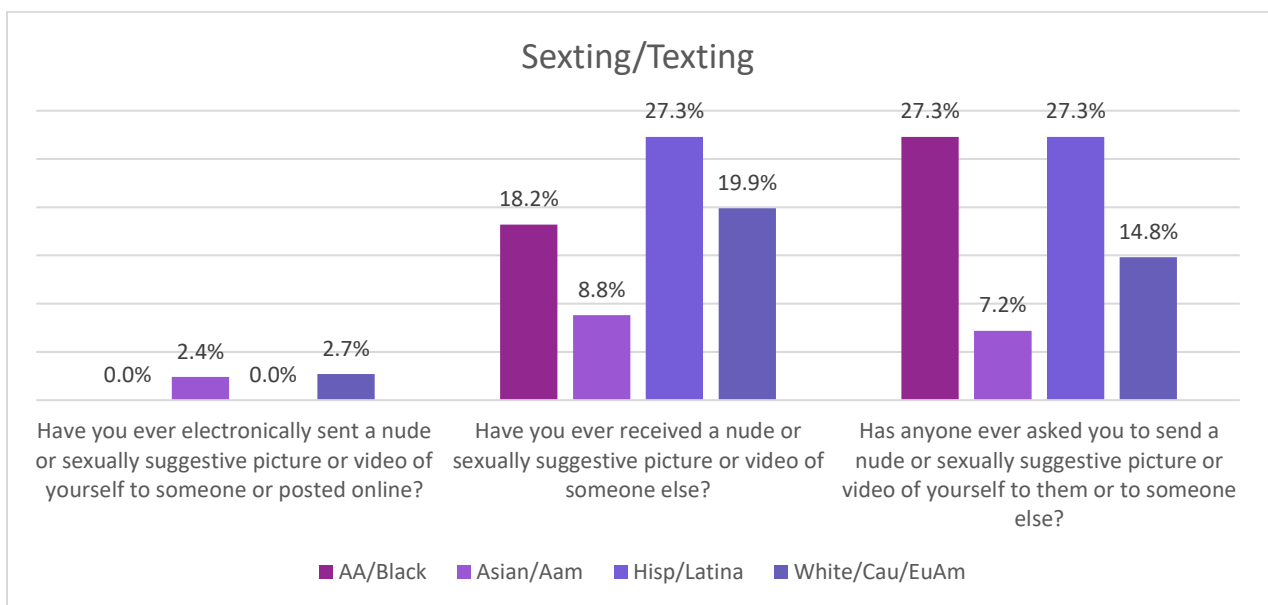
Among Middle schoolers who identify as female, 6.5% report they have ever carried a weapon; among those who also identify as transgender that percentage is the same. Middle School girls who identify as gay/lesbian/bisexual are four times more likely to say they have ever carried a weapon.

## 2022 Status of Girls in Greater Worcester

The next set of responses is on bullying and electronic bullying, texting/sexting. When asked if they had been electronically bullied, girls identifying as Hispanic/Latina reported the highest percentage, with Asian/Asian American girls reporting the lowest. The same is true for being electronically bullied on school property. Being bullied on school property shows African American girls, closely followed by White and Hispanic/Latina girls with percentages in the 34-35% range, with Asian/Asian American reporting being bullied at school at 23.5%.



Three questions ask about sexting and texting experiences. The number of girls who report sending or posting sexting content is very small, under 3% across all categories. However, this changes when asked if they have received sexting content from others. The highest percentage reporting receiving content is by girls who identify as Hispanic/Latina, with the lowest percentage reported by Asian/Asian American girls. The last question in this section asks girls if they have been asked to provide sexting content. African American and Hispanic/Latina girls report the same percentage at just over 27%. Again, Asian/Asian American girls report the lowest percentage at just over 7%.





## REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Being able to see the impact of two years of coping with Covid-19, including job and food insecurity, through the lens of our middle school girls is a powerful insight into those aspects of their lives and the adult issues they are working through. As Investing in Girls Alliance, we have an extraordinary insight into the lives of our middle school girls, and the chance to impact their current and future selves.

Within this report, we have focused on middle school girls, occasionally comparing their data to that of high school girls, and middle school boys to highlight where our impact can make the most positive impact. In the final section, we look at race/ethnicity/gender identity breakouts. These show us that there are differences when we look through the lens of these identifiers. These differences are helpful to understand when building programming for specific populations.

Use this report to open conversations, open doors to those with influence, and illustrate the need for policy and programs, and funding for girls in Greater Worcester.

Investing in Girls Alliance has a companion document: *Girls Who Thrive: Benchmarks for Success*, which uses research and best practices to share aspirational measures that organizations and programs can use to ensure the positive and lasting impact of that GSO experience on each and every girl; and create conditions for her to thrive now and into her future. Using the benchmarks will allow IIGA to show the collective impact of GSO experiences for girls, and data collected from organizations and programs using the benchmarks will be added to this report to further illustrate the positive impacts of GSOs on middle school girls.

### Additional reports that align with work:

The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women- [Report on the Status of Girls in the Commonwealth and Related Recommendations](#)

[Bullying, Cyberbullying, Anxiety, and Depression in a Sample of Youth during the Coronavirus Pandemic](#) by Elizabeth Englander

[Dreaming Big: Examining the Career Aspirations of Girls of Color](#) Center for Gender in Organizations at Simmons School of Management. 2015

[Dreaming Big-What's Gender For to Do with It?](#) Center for Gender in Organizations at Simmons School of Management. 2012

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> <https://foodhelpworchester.org/learn-and-advocate/worcester-data-2/>

<sup>ii</sup> Aepli A, Kurth S, Tesler N, Jenni OG, Huber R. Caffeine Consuming Children and Adolescents Show Altered Sleep Behavior and Deep Sleep. *Brain Sci.* 2015 Oct 15;5(4):441-55. doi: 10.3390/brainsci5040441. PMID: 26501326; PMCID: PMC4701022.

<sup>iii</sup> Paruthi S, Brooks LJ, D'Ambrosio C, et al. Consensus statement of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine on the recommended amount of sleep for healthy children: methodology and discussion. *J Clin Sleep Med* 2016;12:1549–61.

<sup>iv</sup> Chen, C.M.; Yoon, Y-H.; Faden, V.B. Surveillance Report #107: Trends in Underage Drinking in the United States, 1991–2015. Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, March 2017

<https://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/surveillance107/Underage15.htm>. Accessed July 30, 2019.