

## Data Story:

# Early Warning Signs - Substance use in Middle and High School



**Essential Question:** Substance abuse and disaffection are closely linked. Both can lead to dropping out. What do we know about substance use that can help us choose where to target interventions?

## Description:

A story in our Early-Warning Systems Data Story Series. Here we'll examine student reports of substance use.

Data Sources: Rhode Island Department of Education

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## Introduction

The national data show Rhode Island with higher than average substance use.

According to the National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (SAMHSA), Rhode Island youth ages 12-17 were more likely to report illicit drug use (15.1%), cigarette use (6.2%), and binge alcohol use (21.2%) in the past month than the national average in 2012-13. Meanwhile, according to the 2013 Youth Risky Behavior Survey (YRBS), Rhode Island students in grades 9-12 were also above the national average in the percentage reporting they had at least one drink of alcohol on at least one day in the past month (31%).

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## About the Data Sources

Regardless of where Rhode Island ranks nationally, any number of students involved with substances is disturbing. Any cigarette, alcohol, or drug use is an early warning of children beginning to develop habits that can impede learning, social connection, and successful involvement with school.

In this story, we'll examine student reports of substance use using data from the SurveyWorks! survey, an opinions-and-perceptions survey that is administered annually to all RI public school students in grades 4-12. Since this survey is offered to every student, participation rates are usually in the low 90s (similar to attendance rates). Conversely, both the YRBS and SAMHSA national surveys sample their student populations which is to say, they take a portion of the population to represent the whole.

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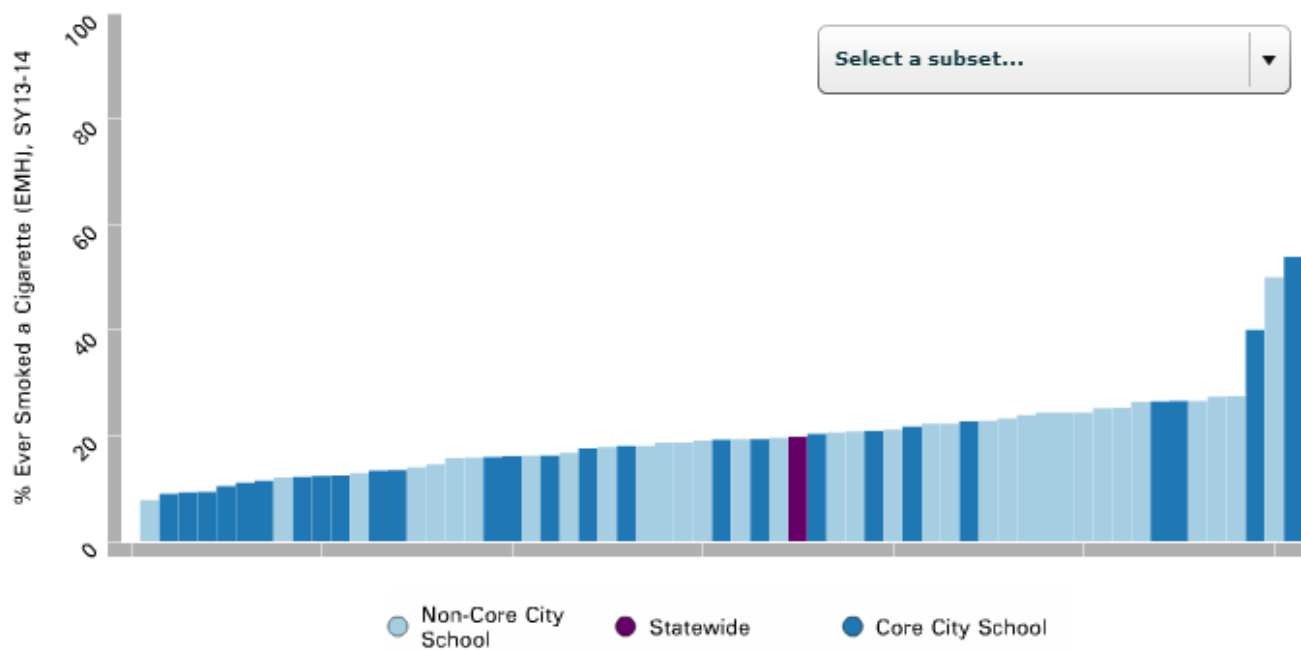
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## Cigarette Use

Bar Chart of % Ever Smoked a Cigarette (EMH), SY13-14



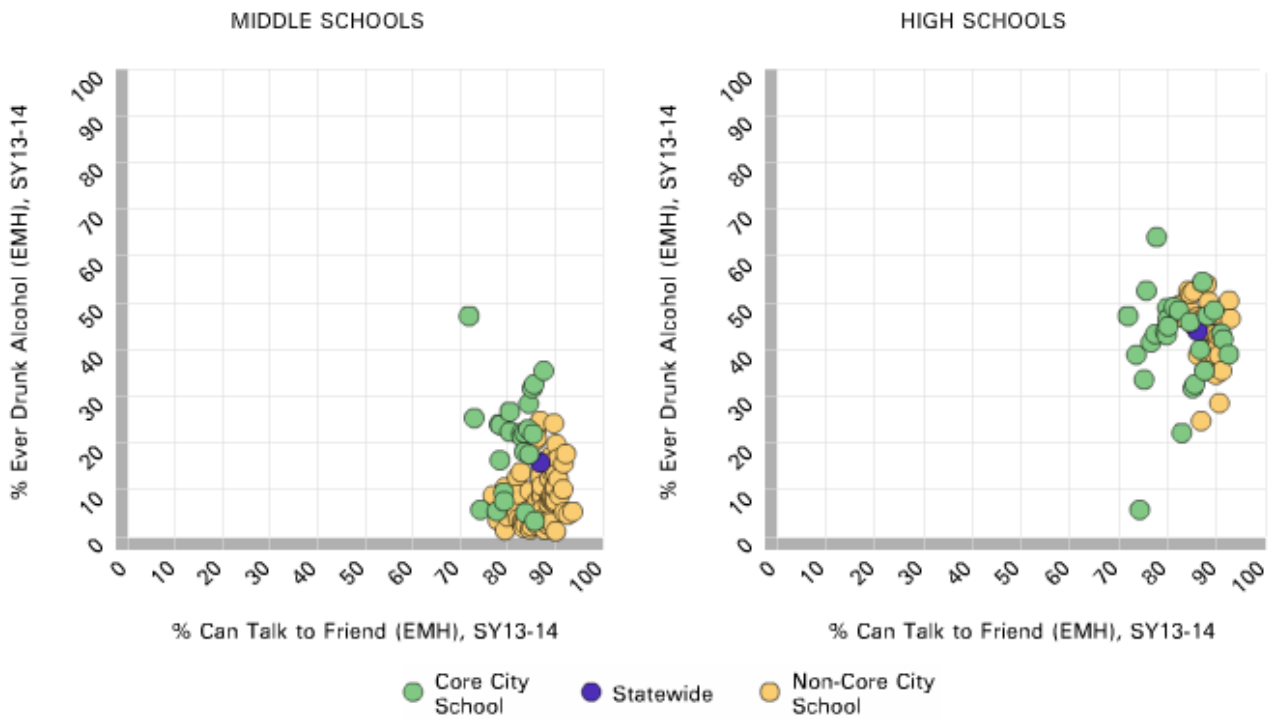
- According to the [CDC](#), more than one-third of all youth who ever try a cigarette become regular smokers before leaving high school and adults who smoke lose an average of 13-14 years of their lives ([2004 Surgeon General's Report](#)).
- The bars on the graph indicate the percentage of students in each school who reported ever smoking cigarettes.

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## Alcohol Use



Reports of alcohol use suggest it is less prevalent in suburban middle schools.

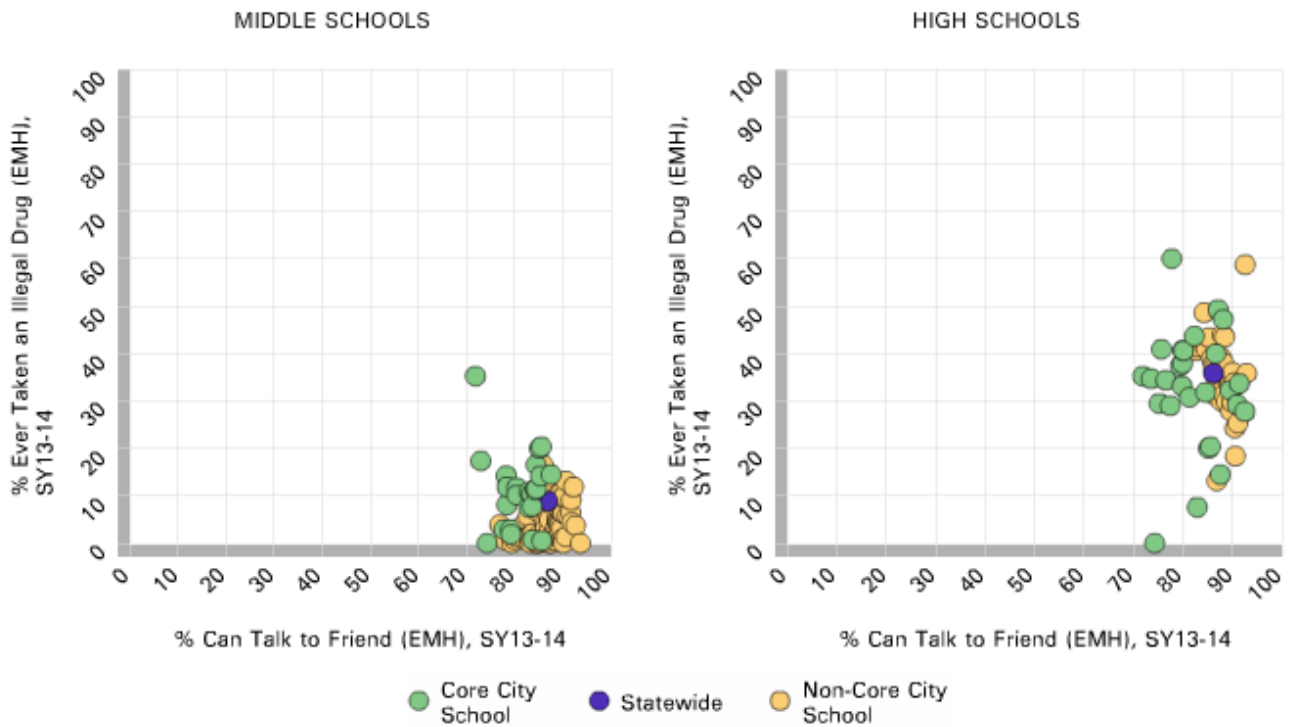
According to the charts, core urban middle school students appear to be experimenting with alcohol more than their suburban peers. Middle school students who experiment with alcohol are less likely to have a friend they can talk to at their school. However, by high school, alcohol use is about as common in suburban as in core urban schools. For high school students, having a friend they can talk to appears more aligned with attending school in a suburban area than with alcohol use.

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## Drug Use



Drug use increases dramatically from middle to high school.

Drug use is more common in urban middle schools, but the difference between urban and suburban schools balances out in high school. The percentage of students who have a friend they can talk to about problems appears not strongly related to illegal drug use in middle and high schools.

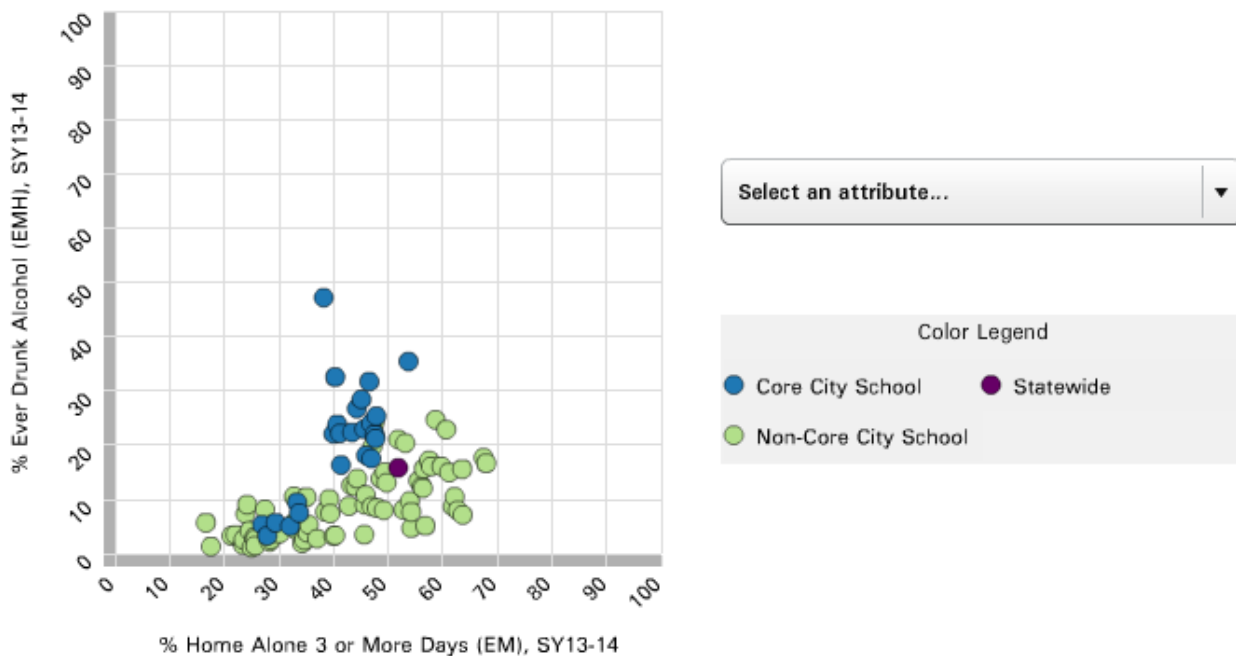
**Caveat:** Schools which include more than one of elementary, middle and high school students as defined by grade number have not been disaggregated by level, meaning schools which appear in both charts will have the same value in each them.

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## Substance Use - Any



Middle schools with more students who report ever drinking alcohol also tend to have students who are more likely to be left home alone after school at least three days a week.

The correlation appears stronger in core city schools than in suburban schools. Use the indicator selector drop-down to see results for smoking cigarettes, using illegal drugs, and for using any alcohol or drugs.

*Note: High school students are not included because they were not asked how often they are home alone.*

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## Conclusions

Throughout this story, we've looked at substance use as related to school-connectedness and after-school supervision.

Because there are no data that explain why students are using drugs, schools -- especially at the high-school level -- need to discuss with their own students the reasons for substance use. Are students self-medicating depression? Is the peer culture normalizing substance use? In any case, closer relationships with the students themselves is probably the most efficient road for understanding and preventing substance use.

The need for closer relationships holds true for parents and guardians as well. Too many students are left unsupervised after school. Schools and parents need to work together to provide adequate after-school activities and to make sure students willingly engage with them.

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# APPENDIX

## Early Warning Signs - Substance use in Middle and High School

story link: <http://ridatahub.org/datastories/student-reports-of-substance-use>

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### Data Sources



Rhode Island Department of Education  
<http://www.ride.ri.gov/>

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### Related Terms

- **KEYWORDS**
  - Early-Warning
- **Tags**
  - Early-Warning