



## NEWS RELEASE

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## Survey finds a decrease in smoking among high school students

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Slightly less than a quarter of Alabama teenagers (23.7 percent) in grades 9 through 12 reported in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey that they were current smokers in 2001. This represents a statistically significant decrease in the percentage of teen smokers in the state compared to 1999 reports of 37 percent.

"This encouraging downward trend brings Alabama teen smoking rates below national rates and below the state's goal of reducing teen smoking to below 25 percent," said Dr. Donald Williamson, state health officer. "For years, the youth prevalence smoking rate in Alabama mirrored national rates. While youth prevalence rates are dropping nationally, Alabama's decrease in prevalence is greater."

"Any time we see a decrease in harmful activities among young people, it's a good sign harmful behaviors are changing," Deputy State Superintendent of Education Joe Morton said.

Janet Windle, chair of the Coalition for a Tobacco Free Alabama, commented, "Overall, when looking at tobacco prevention, experience shows us that stopping children from ever picking up their first cigarette is the most effective way to prevent tobacco addiction. The Coalition for a Tobacco Free Alabama, its members and other involved organizations are working very hard to keep children tobacco free on shoestring budgets. This very encouraging trend shows us our efforts are paying off and clearly demonstrates the need to expand existing programs to reach even more of Alabama's children."

Dr. Morton added, "The Youth Risk Behavior Survey benefits Alabama students in several ways. It serves as one more form of accountability and as a catalyst for the state's health education and prevention programs, including the Alabama Course of Study: Health Education, Safe and Drug-Free Schools, Tobacco Prevention, and the Coordinated School Health Project. Measuring the prevalence of certain risk behaviors through the YRBS can help us design programs custom-tailored to fit student needs."

Other findings of the survey were as follows:

- Twelve percent of Alabama teens reported that they were current frequent smokers--that is, they smoked on at least 20 of the past 30 days. This percentage is below the national rate of 14 percent of teenagers who reported current frequent smoking.

- Smoking was more prevalent among whites (30 percent) than among African Americans (11.6 percent).
- Smoking levels were highest among 12th graders (25.3 percent) and lowest among 9th graders (20.8 percent).

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey is one component of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in collaboration with representatives from 71 state and local departments of education and health, 19 other federal agencies, and national education and health organizations.

Participating in the survey during the spring of 2001 were 1,576 students in 36 public high schools in Alabama. Students completed a self-administered, anonymous, 80-item questionnaire. The results are representative of all students in grades nine through 12, with 61.8 percent being white and 35.5 percent African American.

Dr. Morton said, "In May 2000, the Department of Education, the Department of Children's Affairs and the Department of Public Health signed a Collaboration Agreement. They have been wonderful partners and the survey's positive indicators are a testament to what can be achieved through interagency cooperation, as well as efforts by local school and health officials to meet students' needs."

Survey procedures were designed to protect the privacy of students by allowing for anonymous and voluntary participation. Local parental permission procedures were followed before survey administration.

The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System was designed to focus the nation on behaviors among youth related to the leading cause of mortality and morbidity among both youth and adults and to assess how these risk behaviors change over time.

Numerous studies find that tobacco is the leading cause of preventable death in the nation. According to the Smoking Attributable Morbidity, Mortality and Economic Cost program, smoking costs 7,400 Alabamians their lives each year.

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