



PENNSYLVANIA YOUTH SURVEY

IT PAYS TO ASK. IT PAYS TO KNOW.

PENNSYLVANIA YOUTH SURVEY (PAYS)

PAYS Data Brief

What Our Youth are Telling Us

Presentation to the School Safety and Security Committee

September 30, 2026

The Pennsylvania Youth Survey, Overview

- Anonymous, voluntary survey of students in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12 (Grade 4 added in 2025)
- Administered every other year, in the fall of odd-numbered years, since 1989
- Sponsored by PCCD, DDAP, and PDE; administered by Bach Harrison, LLC and Penn State's EPIS center
- Measures substance use, mental health, school climate, bullying, and the risk/protective factors that drive them
- PAYS assesses youth [behaviors](#), [attitudes](#), and [knowledge](#)
 - Primary source of information **directly from our youth** about what they know, think, and believe about anti-social behavior and alcohol and drug use.
- Collects data across multiple domains that impact students' lives to provide a holistic picture of the risks they face and the protections available to buttress those factors.



Participation Has Grown Across Three Administrations

246,312

Valid surveys, 2021

262,535

Valid surveys, 2023

267,379

Valid surveys, 2025

Modified Participation Rate by Grade	State 2023	State 2025	Change
6th Grade	55.8%	59.1%	+3.3 pts
8th Grade	59.3%	61.6%	+2.3 pts
10th Grade	50.8%	51.0%	+0.2 pts
12th Grade	43.5%	43.3%	-0.2 pts
All Grades	52.3%	53.6%	+1.3 pts



The Persistent Gap: 12th Grade Engagement

12th grade is the one grade moving the wrong direction

While 6th and 8th grade participation both improved from 2023 to 2025, 12th grade participation was essentially flat and remains by far the lowest of any grade (43.3% modified rate in 2025, compared to 59–62% for 6th and 8th grade). This is a consistent, multi-cycle pattern, not a one-year anomaly.

Why This Matters:

- Seniors have the highest rates of substance use, suicide risk, and disengagement from school — exactly the issues this Committee has focused on
- Lower participation means the state's picture of 12th grade risk is likely conservative, not overstated
- Improving senior-year participation is itself a school-climate and engagement question, not just a survey-logistics one

SECTION TWO

School Climate: 2021–2025

Commitment to school across three administrations, statewide



Feeling Safe at School Rebounded After a 2023 Dip

% Answering “Yes/YES!” (All Grades)	State 2021	State 2023	State 2025
I feel safe at my school	82.0%	78.4%	83.2%
Chances to talk one-on-one with a teacher	78.5%	77.4%	78.4%
Chances to be part of class discussions	86.5%	85.8%	86.5%
Teachers praise me when I work hard	51.8%	54.2%	59.0%

Two encouraging signals

“Feel safe at school” dropped in 2023 but fully recovered by 2025, now at its highest point in this window.

“Teachers praise me” has climbed steadily for three straight cycles — up over 7 points since 2021.

For Consideration:

Teacher connection and classroom voice have been essentially flat since 2021. These are two of the most modifiable, low-cost school-climate levers available — and neither has moved meaningfully in three cycles.

Reports of Violence at School Have Declined Since 2023

% Reporting 1+ Times, Past 12 Mo. (All Grades)	State 2021	State 2023	State 2025
Threatened at school	16.7%	18.5%	15.5%
Attacked at school	6.6%	7.3%	6.6%
Brought weapon to school*	n/a	1.4%	1.0%

**Question was revised in 2023 and is not comparable to 2021.*

All three measures moved the right direction from 2023 to 2025

Being threatened at school fell 3 points (18.5% → 15.5%), being attacked at school fell to its lowest point in this window (7.3% → 6.6%), and bringing a weapon to school fell to 1.0% — after both threats and attacks had ticked up in 2023. This is the most direct school-safety indicator in the PAYS dataset, and it is now trending down.

Still worth the Committee's attention

Even with the improvement, roughly 1 in 6 PA students report being threatened at school and 1 in 15 report being attacked — 8th and 6th graders report the highest rates of both. A 2025 low is not the same as a resolved problem.



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SECTION THREE

Mental Health, Depression, Suicide Risk & Bullying

The clearest three-cycle trend lines in the PAYS data



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Statewide Mental Health Is Improving — A Genuine Trend

Indicator (All Grades)	State 2021	State 2023	State 2025
Overall mental health is good (past month)*	n/a	71.3%	76.4%
Felt depressed/sad MOST days	40.1%	37.3%	32.8%
“Life is not worth it” (sometimes)	27.9%	24.4%	19.5%
“I am no good at all” (at times)	38.6%	36.0%	30.4%
Self-harm, past 12 months	17.6%	14.8%	13.5%

**Added to the survey in 2023.*

This is a real, three-cycle improvement — not statistical noise

Every depressive-symptom indicator PAYS tracks has moved in a positive direction for three straight administrations. Persistent sadness is down nearly 8 points since 2021, self-harm is down over 4 points, and “life is not worth it” has fallen by more than a quarter. This is one of the most consistent positive trends anywhere in the PAYS dataset, and it coincides with the statewide expansion of school-based mental health investment since the pandemic.

Suicide Risk Indicators Are Also Declining Statewide

Suicide Risk Indicator (All Grades)	State 2021	State 2023	State 2025
So sad, stopped usual activities (2+ wks)	31.0%	27.3%	24.0%
Seriously considered suicide	18.6%	16.1%	13.9%
Made a suicide plan	14.7%	12.5%	10.7%
Attempted suicide*	10.9%	5.2%	4.5%
Attempt required medical treatment**	26.3%	29.7%	20.2%

**Question format changed in 2023 (frequency scale → yes/no); compare 2021 with caution. **Among students who attempted.*

The headline trend is real

Serious suicidal ideation has fallen nearly 5 points since 2021, and suicide plans are down 4 points. These are consistent, multi-cycle declines that track with the broader mental-health improvement.

Still a significant burden

Even with real progress, roughly 1 in 7 PA students seriously considered suicide in the past year, and severity-of-attempt (medical treatment needed) spiked in 2023 before improving in 2025 — a pattern worth watching, not declaring solved.

Bullying Is Down, and Adult Response Is Up

Indicator (All Grades)	State 2021	State 2023	State 2025
Not bullied in past 12 months	76.8%	73.8%	74.3%
Bullied several times/month or more	5.0%	6.5%	6.2%
Stayed home from school, fear of bullying	4.1%	5.9%	5.9%
Inappropriate sexual contact via technology	19.9%	15.5%	10.8%
Adults at school stop bullying when seen/reported	55.1%	58.4%	62.2%

A genuinely mixed trend the Committee should hear plainly

Frequent bullying and bullying-driven school avoidance both ticked up from 2021 to 2023 and have not fully returned to pre-2021 levels. But two things stand out positively: technology-based sexual harassment has nearly halved since 2021, and student confidence that adults intervene when bullying happens has climbed for three straight cycles — now over 62%, up more than 7 points since 2021.

That rising trust in adult intervention is arguably the single most actionable, positive signal in this section.

SECTION FOUR

Risk & Protective Factors: Perception of Risk & Availability

What students believe about harm and access — a leading indicator for use



Perceived Risk of Harm Has Risen Sharply Since 2021

% Seeing “Moderate/Great Risk” (All Grades)	State 2021	State 2023	State 2025
1–2 drinks nearly every day	65.8%	79.8%	82.0%
5+ drinks once/twice a week	71.4%	83.9%	86.6%
Smoking a pack of cigarettes/day	80.0%	89.0%	89.7%
Trying marijuana once or twice	41.5%	55.1%	60.9%
Using marijuana regularly	71.2%	83.3%	86.5%
Misusing prescription drugs	83.7%	89.3%	89.9%

One of the strongest, most consistent trends in the entire dataset

Perceived risk of harm has climbed for every single substance measured, across all three administrations — in several cases by 15–20 points since 2021. Perceived risk of trying marijuana rose the most (nearly 20 points). Because perception of risk reliably predicts lower use, this is arguably the most encouraging leading indicator in this entire briefing, and it lines up with the declining substance-use trends the Committee has seen in other PAYS reporting.

Substances Are Perceived as Harder to Get

% Saying “Sort of/Very Hard” to Obtain (All Grades)	State 2021	State 2023	State 2025
Beer, wine, or hard liquor	62.3%	67.8%	72.7%
Cigarettes	76.7%	79.9%	82.7%
A drug like cocaine, LSD, heroin	92.7%	93.7%	95.0%
Marijuana	76.3%	79.1%	84.2%
Prescription drugs not prescribed to them	79.4%	81.0%	83.7%
A handgun	87.7%	88.1%	90.4%

Every category moved toward “harder to get” for three straight cycles

Perceived difficulty obtaining alcohol rose the most (+10.4 points since 2021), and perceived difficulty obtaining a handgun also rose modestly but steadily (+2.7 points since 2021, now over 90%). No substance or handgun access measure moved in the wrong direction across this window. Read together with the previous slide, students in 2025 increasingly see these substances as both riskier and harder to access than their 2021 peers did — a favorable, mutually-reinforcing combination for prevention policy.

Summary: What Our Youth are Telling Us

Where the Trend Is Positive

- ✓ Mental health, depression, and suicide-risk indicators have improved for three straight cycles — a genuine, sustained trend
- ✓ Perceived risk of substance use and perceived difficulty of access have both risen sharply since 2021
- ✓ Confidence that school adults intervene on bullying is climbing steadily

Where the Committee Can Focus



Bullying frequency and school avoidance due to bullying have not returned to 2021 levels.

267,379

Pennsylvania students shared their voice in 2025 — the most of the last three administrations.

Three cycles of consistent measurement through PAYS provides something rare in policy: a real trend line, not a single snapshot.

That trend line points to genuine mental-health progress and rising risk awareness — alongside specific, persistent gaps in senior-year engagement and bullying response that remain squarely within this Committee's reach.

Full state, county, and district PAYS reports: www.pays.pa.gov

For Cross-Tab Analysis: www.bach-harrison.com/PAYSWebTool

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