

Presenting the Results of Your 2009 PAYS

The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) has received a number of questions from PAYS data users about how to interpret the 2009 survey results. The PAYS continues to offer timely data that accurately reflect students' responses. The data provide indicators on important measures that are unavailable from other sources, which can be extremely valuable for prevention planning efforts.

This memo describes what changes were made from the 2007 to 2009 instrument version, discusses the potential impact of those changes on the data, and provides some guidance on how to discuss the 2009 results with your schools and key community stakeholders.

What changed and why?

A number of changes were made to the 2009 PAYS survey instrument in order to improve completion rates, respond to data users' suggestions, and reflect societal changes. Here is a general overview of those changes:

- **The survey questions were reordered to improve the completion rates on key items.** Due to the large number of questions on the survey (the "with family" version of the instrument contains over 210 questions), some students may have difficulty completing it within the allotted time period. Shortening the instrument was not feasible, as each proposed cut was opposed by stakeholders who found utility in the data. Thus, the decision was made to "front-load" those questions judged most important to prevention planning efforts at the beginning of the instrument in order to have the greatest number of responses, especially among younger students.
- **Some questions were updated for the 2009 administration.** The questions dealing with prescription drugs used in the 2007 and earlier versions were outdated, focusing on drugs that are not as widely used today (e.g., barbiturates, tranquilizers, etc.). These questions were updated with the newer, shorter versions used on the Communities That Care Youth Survey.
- **The layout of the survey was changed to incorporate all the questions for the 2009 version.** This resulted in a difference in appearance and the availability of white space which may have impacted how the youth completed the survey.

What were some of the results of the changes?

Unfortunately, we are unable to specifically delineate the impact of the changes on each of the questions. We suspect that the reordering of questions contributed to the differences in the

2009 data because, in some cases, it changed the tone of the lead-in to certain questions. Question context can predispose respondents to answer in certain ways, and a student's response to a question can depend, in some part, on the tone of the items leading up to that question. This is known as a "priming effect."

Because of the number of changes to the instrument, as well as changes in the world from 2007 to 2009 (especially economically), there is not an appropriate statistical method to adjust the 2009 data to allow for a direct comparison to prior years' PAYS data. The greatest impact appears to be in these scales:

- Universally, the scales "*Community Opportunities for Prosocial Involvement*" and "*Community Disorganization*" showed large and unanticipated changes across all counties and districts.
- A number of other scales show unusually large changes across many counties and districts. These scales include "*School Rewards for Prosocial Involvement*," "*Parental Attitudes Favorable toward Antisocial Behavior*," and "*Low Perceived Risks of Drug Use*."

The questions comprising these scales ask for a subjective response from the youth and were therefore more likely subject to the priming effect. On a positive note, the surveillance measures (such as 30-day use or age of onset) show much less variation from the 2007 data, likely due to the more objective nature of those questions (i.e., "Did you drink in the last 30-days?" is a more straightforward question than "How wrong do your parents feel it would be for you to drink?"). In particular, this is true for data used to meet the Drug Free Communities requirements.

How should I present the data?

When looking at the risk and protective factor scales for 2007 and 2009, you may notice differences attributable, in part, to changes to the survey instrument made between those two survey administration years. Because of these changes, you should exercise caution when drawing major conclusions for those scales based on comparisons to past years. For those scales, it may be more appropriate to compare your 2009 local data against the 2009 state results to determine whether your community is above or below the average, rather than comparing to past survey administrations. This is especially the case where a large swing in the trend line occurred.

In some instances, it may prove useful to compare the degree of difference between your local data and the state sample in each administration. For example, if you find a survey result in your local data that changed significantly from 2007 to 2009, further analysis of the differences

in the state sample for those periods may provide useful insight. If your data displays a large change, while the state data does not, that is likely an indication that you have had a true change in your community that is being identified through the 2009 data.

As with any survey data, the PAYS represents just one source of important information for interpreting your local conditions. We recommend that you consult multiple data sources – typically at least 3 – to confirm information indicated by the PAYS. For example, you could utilize school records, records from the Department of Public Welfare, Juvenile Probation statistics, Uniform Crime Report data, Census Bureau data, etc. to provide a more balanced and thorough picture of your local community.

Thank you for your participation in the Pennsylvania Youth Survey. If you would like more assistance in helping to present the results of your 2009 data or if you have specific questions in interpreting the data, PCCD and our partners at the Prevention Research Center will be glad to help! Please contact Geoff Kolchin at 717-265-8483 or gkolchin@state.pa.us. If you would like to view the 2007 and 2009 versions of the instrument, this information is posted on the PCCD PAYS website at www.pays.state.pa.us.

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