

Spotlight: The low commitment to school risk factor scale

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The risk and protective factor model of adolescent problem behaviors

The risk and protective factor model of adolescent problem behaviors was developed at the University of Washington’s Social Development Research Group.¹ The model identifies a variety of risk factors (RFs) and protective factors (PFs) that predict 5 problem behaviors in adolescence: substance abuse, school drop out, delinquency, teen pregnancy, and violence. RFs and PFs are organized into 4 domains that encompass the main areas of a young person’s life: community, family, school, and individual/peers. Each RF/PF in the model is connected to at least 1 of these problem behaviors (and most are connected to more than 1). Additional RFs have been added to the model over time as new research connects RFs to the problem behaviors. We are fortunate in Utah to have the Utah Student Health and Risk Prevention (SHARP) Survey,² which collects data that are used by prevention professionals and communities to facilitate the delivery of effective prevention services throughout the state. In this data brief, we take a closer look at the data available for the low commitment to school risk factor. It is one of only a few risk factors that is commonly higher in Utah relative to national comparisons. This risk factor relates to an individual’s level of engagement and interest in school, and has been linked through research to all 5 problem adolescent behaviors in the risk and protective factor model.

The low commitment to school risk factor scale

The low commitment to school risk factor is measured through a 7 question scale that focuses on youth attitudes about school, the work they are assigned at school, and how many school days they have missed during the past year because they skipped or “cut” (see below). The scale score is calculated by averaging the responses across the 7 items, and each participant is categorized as either low risk or higher risk based on the cut points established for each grade level that predict a greater likelihood of problem behaviors.

Youth favorable attitudes toward antisocial behavior risk factor scale items:	
How often do you feel that the school work you are assigned is meaningful and important?	(1) Almost always to (5) Never
How important do you think the things you are learning in school are going to be for your later life?	(1) Very important to (5) Not at all important
How interesting are most of your courses to you?	(1) Very interesting to (5) Not at all interesting
Now, thinking back over the past year in school, how often did you . . .	
- enjoy being in school?	(1) Never to (5) Almost always
- hate being in school?	
- try to do your best work in school?	
During the LAST FOUR WEEKS, how many whole days of school have you missed because you skipped or “cut?”	(1) None to (7) 11 or more days

Figure 1 shows the trend data in Utah for the low commitment to school risk factor scale by grade level from 2017 through 2023. A national norm (orange diamond) is also provided for comparison purposes. Overall, there has been a consistent increasing trend in the percentage of youth in Utah who are categorized as higher risk on the low commitment to school scale. This is particularly true for youth in grades 6 and 8, where the percentage categorized as higher risk has increased by 13.2 and 13.0 percentage points, respectively from 2017 to 2023. Smaller increases have been observed in grades 10 and 12, where the percentages categorized as higher risk increased by 6.5 and 1.5 percentage points during the same timeframe. In addition to increasing trends, the percentage of Utah youth categorized as higher risk exceeded the national comparison rate for grades 6, 8 and 10 in 2023 (the rate for Utah 12th graders was similar to the national comparison), making it one of only a few risk factors that show elevated levels of risk in Utah vs. the nation. Risk status did not differ substantially between male and female students (across all grades, 51.7% of female students were categorized as higher risk vs. 53.3% of males in 2023).

Figure 1. Youth categorized as higher risk for the low commitment to school risk factor by grade: Utah vs. national comparison 2017-2023 (SHARP)

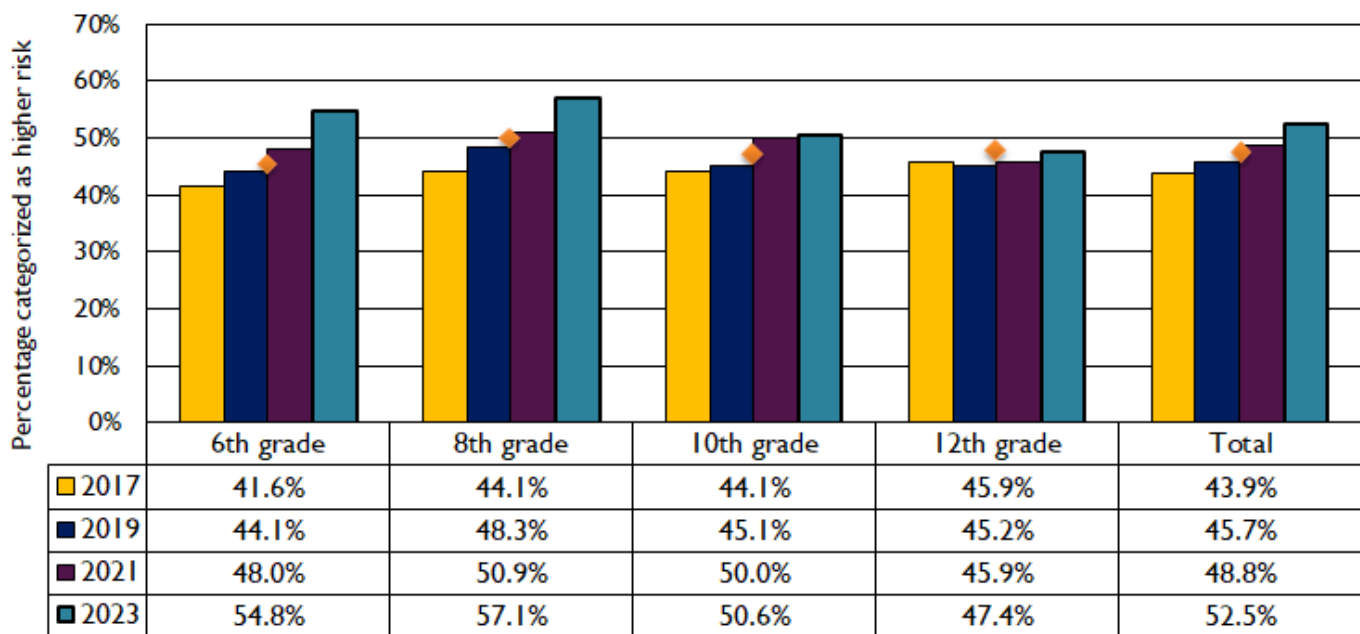
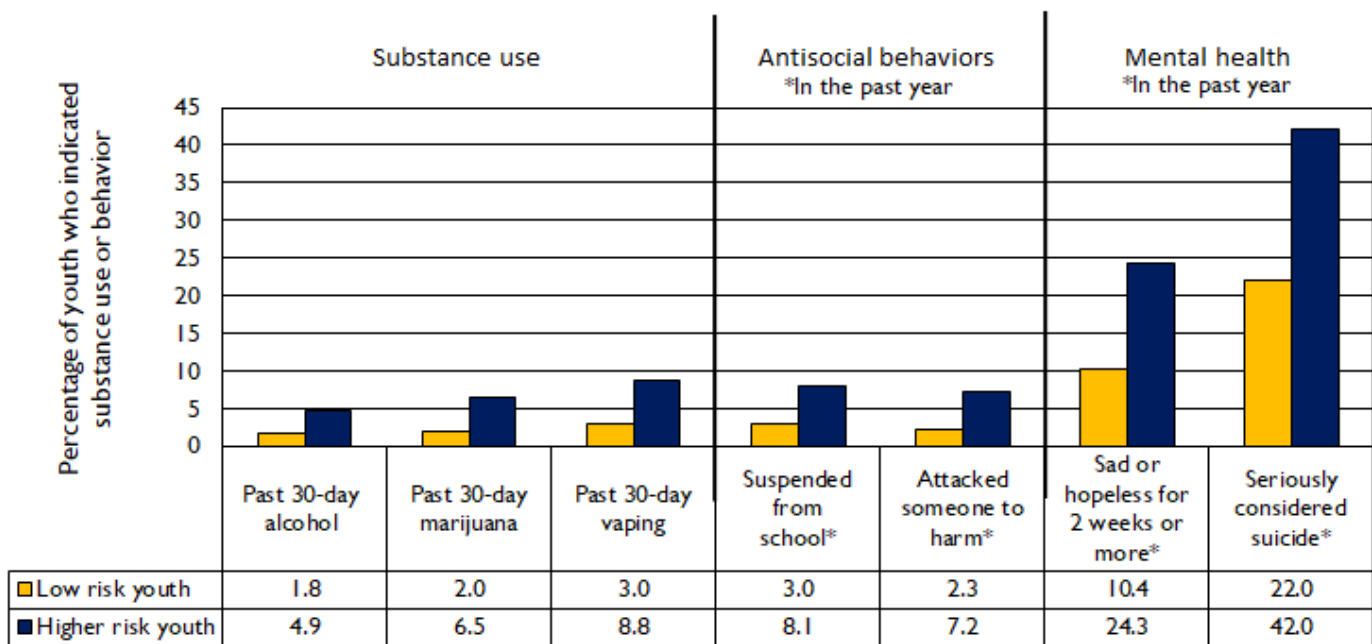


Figure 2 illustrates how the low commitment to school risk factor predicts a variety of negative outcomes in youth, including: substance use, antisocial behavior, mental health distress, and suicidal ideation. Youth categorized as higher risk on the low commitment to school scale were more likely to report 30-day use of alcohol, marijuana, and vaping than those who were categorized as low risk (4.9% of higher risk youth indicated alcohol use vs. 1.8% of lower risk youth; 6.5% vs. 2.0% for marijuana use, etc.). In fact, higher risk youth were 3.3 times more likely to report past 30-day marijuana use, 2.7 times more likely to have used alcohol, and 2.9 times

more likely to have vaped than their low risk counterparts. In regard to antisocial behaviors, mental health distress and suicidal ideation, similar relationships were observed. Higher risk youth were more likely to have been suspended from school (8.1% for higher risk youth vs. 3.0% for low risk youth), and to have attacked someone to harm in the past year (7.2% for higher risk youth vs. 2.3% for low risk youth), as well as report feeling so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row (24.3% for higher risk youth vs. 10.4% for low risk youth), and to have seriously considered suicide in the past year (42.0% for higher risk youth vs. 22.0% for low risk youth).

Figure 2. Substance use, antisocial behaviors & mental health outcomes based on low commitment to school risk factor status-Utah 2023 (SHARP)



Understanding Utah's increasing trends for the low commitment to school risk factor

A deeper dive into the low commitment to school risk factor data provides some insight regarding why risk levels in Utah have increased in recent years. Table 1 presents the percentage of youth who indicated the more favorable/desirable responses to each of the 7 items in the low commitment to school risk factor scale for both 2017 and 2023. Unfortunately, the percentage of youth who indicated favorable responses decreased for all 7 items in the low commitment to school scale between 2017 and 2023, suggesting that the increase in risk over time is not linked to one or two specific items. The largest declines in response favorability were associated with: a) how youth feel about the importance of things they learn in school (a decrease of 7.3 percentage points), b) how much they hated being in school in the past year, and c) how often they tried to do their best work in school (both with a decrease of 6.2 percentage points). Moreover, the majority of youth gave either a neutral or

negative rating to 5 of the 7 low commitment to school items. The only items that received favorable ratings from a majority of participants (over 80% for both items) were: “How often did you try to do your best work in school,” and “How many days of school have you missed because you skipped or cut?” Taken together, these data suggest that many youth don’t feel that what they learn in school is interesting, nor do they feel that it is particularly important for their future. Just as concerning is the fact that a large majority of students report that they often don’t enjoy being in school, and most say they hate being in school “often” or “almost always.”

Table 1. Changes in the percentage of youth indicating favorable responses to items in the low commitment to school risk factor scale 2017 to 2023.

Item (<i>Selected response options</i>)	% indicating selected response options		Change
	2017	2023	
How often do you feel that the school work you are assigned is meaningful and important? (<i>Often or Almost Always</i>)	41.6%	35.7%	-5.9
How important do you think the things you are learning in school are going to be for your later life? (<i>Very or Quite Important</i>)	50.6%	43.3%	-7.3
How interesting are most of your courses to you? (<i>Very or Quite Interesting</i>)	39.3%	33.8%	-5.5
Now think back over the past year in school, how often did you: enjoy being in school? (<i>Often or Almost Always</i>)	48.6%	43.5%	-5.1
Now think back over the past year in school, how often did you: hate being in school? (<i>Never or Seldom</i>)	36.6%	30.4%	-6.2
Now think back over the past year in school, how often did you: try to do your best work in school? (<i>Often or Almost Always</i>)	86.5%	80.3%	-6.2
During the LAST FOUR WEEKS, how many (if any) whole days of school have you missed because you skipped or cut? (<i>None</i>)	86.8%	83.5%	-3.3

Given the importance of this risk factor in predicting academic success, as well as a variety of other adolescent problem behaviors, it is important for communities with high levels of risk to address the low commitment to school risk factor. Registries of evidence-based interventions such as Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development (www.blueprintsprograms.org) can provide lists of both model and promising programs to address specific risk and protective factors, including the low commitment to school risk factor.

[1]Hawkins, J. D., Catalano, R. F., & Miller, J. Y. (1992). Risk and protective factors for alcohol and other drug problems in adolescence and early adulthood: Implications for substance abuse prevention. *Psychological Bulletin*, 112(1), 64–105. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.112.1.64>

[2]The SHARP survey measures the health of Utah youth and the risk and protective factors that predict these health and problem behaviors in adolescents. The survey is administered across the state every other year to Utah students in grades 6 through 12.

This data brief was prepared for the Utah State Epidemiological Outcomes Workgroup by Bach Harrison, LLC. Visit <https://utahprevention.org/> to learn more about prevention efforts to reduce substance abuse and misuse.