

Statement by CDC spokesman Paul Fulton, Jr. to The Fact Checker

We appreciate your noticing the estimated proportionate change in our external data announcement was based on whole numbers. The summary report presented whole numbers in the text to make the findings more accessible to a broader audience, but complete data were used for statistical evaluation of the overall trends. Below, we present the more precise data points you requested:

- In 2017, 15.2% of teen girls reported they had experienced sexual violence in the past year. In 2021, 17.9% of teen girls reported this experience. This represents a 17.8% increase.
- In 2019, 11.4% of girls reported they had been forced to have sex in their lifetime. In 2021, 13.5% of teen girls reported this experience. This represents an 18.4% increase.

These more detailed data will also publish on CDC's YRBS Data Explorer in April. Though overall conclusions do not change, CDC acknowledges the differences in these calculations and those made from whole numbers. The estimated proportionate changes described in communication materials do not appear in the report.

Additional Background Information

CDC's recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report, 2011-202, is a preview of CDC's soon-to-be-released 2021 YRBS data. It includes an assessment of select youth behaviors and experiences over the past decade. Findings help describe the overall direction of the health and wellbeing of U.S. high school students across key areas. More detailed data will be released next month. Additional analyses will be published to provide a more detailed look at some initial findings from the report.

YRBS data are collected two ways. CDC conducts a national survey using a scientific sample that is representative of all public and private school students in grades 9-12 in the 50 states and D.C. CDC also provides funding and technical assistance to state, territorial and tribal governments, and local school districts that conduct their own YRBS surveys. CDC provides these areas with as much flexibility as possible to ask questions that address local needs. These areas have wide discretion in choosing survey questions and are only required to use two-thirds of CDC's standard questionnaire. Some schools are selected to participate in the national YRBS and a state/local YRBS, referred to as overlaps. Typically, in those cases the state/local survey questionnaire takes priority, and as a result, sample sizes for individual questions may vary.

The national data are weighted to adjust for school and student nonresponse and to make the data representative of the population of students from which the sample was drawn. Generally, these adjustments are made by applying a weight based on student sex, grade, and race/ethnicity. Variation between the National YRBS questionnaire and state, territorial, tribal and local questionnaires has been part of the YRBS system since 1991. This variation is accounted for in the analysis, and data quality are not impacted.

2021 YRBS data are in the process of being finalized, and I am happy to share it when it publishes in April. Right now, I can share that the overall sample size was larger in 2021 than 2019 (13,677 in 2019; 17,232 in 2021); and that the portion of schools that asked about experiences of sexual dating violence in the past year and lifetime experiences of forced sex was about the same in the 2019 and 2021

samples. (Forced sex: 82% in 2019; 82% in 2021; sexual dating violence: 75% in 2019; 77% in 2021). Please note CDC analyses have consistently found high YRBS data completion and low missingness.

CDC also acknowledges that the national YRBS has typically been conducted in the spring. The national 2021 survey was fielded in the fall because many schools were still responding to extreme challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic earlier that year. We believe the fall timing is unlikely to affect a student's ability to recall traumatic experiences. However, students are younger and had been in their particular grade for less time when they took the 2021 the survey than in prior years, and bias could have been toward a lower reported incidence of negative outcomes.

Regarding your question about data from the other surveys (ABES) and the NCVS, we would not compare data across surveys that have very different methods. We do not believe those are reliable comparisons. In particular, with regard to the other CDC survey you mention (ABES), the methodology was different, and the sample size is less than half of YRBS.

Our study design cannot assess the reasons for the reported increase in lifetime forced sex. Among other factors, this could be due to differences in the cohort, increases in experiences of forced sex in recent years, and/or increased willingness to report experiences of forced sex. Regardless of the reasons, we believe the reported prevalence of forced sex among teen girls is reason for concern and action.

Additional answers

[The statement said the jump in forced to have sex "this was the "first increase since CDC began monitoring this measure." But looking back, I see other increases: ie, 10.3 to 11.9 in 2001-2003, 10.5 to 11.8 in 2009-2011, 10.3 to 11.4 in 2015-2017. So why did CDC say this was the first increase?]

CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report (DSTR) provides trends over the course of ten years. The recently released report provides insight on the changes that occur from the beginning to the end of the time period (in this case, 2011 to 2021). CDC began monitoring the 10 year trends in the 2017 DSTR (2007-2017). In that report and again for 2019 (2009-2019) there were no significant increases in forced sex across those time periods.

[There are other data that might conflict with the overall presentation which was not released. Being in physical fight has been on a steady decline since 1991 and was 15.3% in 2019. What was it in 2021? Exposure to physical violence was 3.7 in 2019 - what was it in 2021? Exposure to sexual dating violence was 5.5, what was it in 2021?]

CDC's recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report, 2011-2021, is a preview of CDC's soon-to-be-released 2021 YRBS data. The data for the outcomes you mentioned -- Being in a physical fight, exposure to physical violence, and exposure to sexual dating violence -- were not included in the DSTR and will be released with the full data and will publish on CDC's YRBS Data in April.