

Risk Behaviors and Problems Among Youth in Nontraditional Schools

While precise figures are unavailable, 2007 estimates by California's Legislative Analyst suggest that California's nontraditional or alternative school system serves between 10% and 15% of the state's 6,300,000 students yearly. In the first large-scale study of its kind, analysis of recent California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) data show a sharply higher prevalence of high-risk behaviors and problems among 25,600 students in alternative continuation and community day schools than among 11th graders in California's traditional or comprehensive high schools. Nontraditional students also appear to have fewer developmental supports or protective factors in their lives.

By statute, districts serving high school students must to operate at least one continuation school. Enrollment in continuation schools requires students to be at least 16 years of age, in danger of not completing their education, and in need of a high school program designed to provide a more flexible schedule and a more intimate, supportive learning setting than is typically available in a traditional high school. Prior to enrollment, students in these schools typically exhibit patterns of poor attendance, lack of credits, an inability to perform academically, and often disruptive behavior. Currently, about 4% of California high school students (and 35% of all nontraditional school students) are enrolled in continuation schools.

Community day schools, which are optional and may be operated by either a school district or a county office of education, primarily serve high-risk students who have been expelled or are under disciplinary sanction, as well as students referred by a School Attendance

Review Board or other district selection process. As separate schools, physically removed from traditional school campuses, CDS programs are intended to offer low student-teacher ratios providing individualized student attention focusing upon academics. They are also required to provide a broad range of support services and opportunities to develop appropriate social skills, self-esteem, and resilience. Although districts may choose to establish community day schools for any grade level, enrollment primarily occurs in the middle and high school grades. Currently, about 1.4% of the state's students (and 30% of nontraditional students) are enrolled in these schools.

Design of effective academic and life skills programs for struggling nontraditional students requires an understanding of how they differ from their peers in traditional schools, particularly in regard to risk and protective factors. However, such research among California's continuation students has been limited and there has never been a systematic study of community day students.¹ This fact sheet, funded by the James Irvine Foundation, addresses this information gap.

The results reveal that across risk behaviors and problem indicators, nontraditional students (NTS) in both continuation and community day schools reported prevalence rates at least twice those of 11th graders in a traditional school setting. They also exhibited lower perceived school safety, school connectedness, and developmental supports in their environment. NTS are a highly vulnerable population in need of a wide range of academic, social, emotional, and behavioral supports and intervention services. For the most part, there is a

clear progression in problem prevalence rates, with the highest rates among community day students (CDS) and continuation students (CS) in the mid-range. In a notable exception, CDS rates of substance use and related problems are *similar or lower* than for continuation students (CS).

Sample Characteristics

The data were derived from all school districts that administered the CHKS between fall 2004 and spring 2006. Since 2003, biennial administration of the CHKS has been required of all California school districts to comply with the requirements of the *No Child Left Behind Act*. Except for the few large districts that sample schools (about 15%), districts are required to include all their continuation and community day schools in the survey, and to survey all the students in these schools regardless of age or grade (whereas the CHKS in traditional high schools is administered only in grades 9 and 11). As shown in Table 1, in the 2004-06 school years the CHKS was administered at 364 continuation high schools and 96 community day schools. Although not a randomly-selected sample, it included 70% of all the state’s continuation schools (and 82% of continuation student enrollment) and 33% of its community day schools (52% of enrollment), widely dispersed throughout the state. The final student sample consisted of about 23,000 continuation students (33% of enrollment), 2,600 community day (26% of enrollment), and 182,000 11th graders. The CHKS dataset thus comprises the largest source of current information about the behavior of nontraditional students and their risk and protective factors.

Table 1. Student and School Sample Size

	11th	CS	CDS
Students	182K	23K	2.6K
School	964	364	96

Compared to 11th graders in the sample, both NTS groups were more likely to be male and Hispanic, and less likely to be White. Only 15% of the CDS were White, compared to 36% of 11th graders. CDS were also almost

twice as likely to be Black than either 11th graders or continuation students (19% vs. 11% for both). CS were older and CDS were younger, reflecting the eligible age ranges. NTS were also three times more likely than 11th graders to be living with a relative other than a parent or in foster care (11-12% vs. 4%), and 2.5 times more likely to have moved two or more times in the past year (17-19% vs. 7%).

School Engagement and Performance

Both NTS groups reported prevalence rates about two times those of 11th graders on measures of poor school attendance and performance, as well as school connectedness for CDS. Almost one-fourth of CS (24%) and 20% of CDS had skipped school or classes more than once a week within the last 12 months, and over one fourth of both had low grades less than “mostly C’s” (26% CS & 28% CDS), compared to about one tenth of 11th graders (11% & 14%, respectively). Low *school connectedness* occurred among 23% of CS and 36% of CDS, compared to 17% of 11th graders, less than half the CDS rate. Conversely, only 19% of CDS and 27% of CS reported high school connectedness, compared to 32% of 11th graders.

Substance Use

Rates of regular and heavy substance use (including use at school) were generally at least three times higher among NTS than 11th graders, with the group differences increasing with the severity of involvement. For example, methamphetamine use and daily marijuana use were about five times higher. They also reported almost twice the rates for use-related problems. Overall, CDS reported percentages slightly lower or about the same as CS.

- **Alcohol Use.** Current regular alcohol use (on 3 or more of the past 30 days) was reported by 32% of CS, twice as high as the 11th graders (17%), with CDS in the mid-range at 26%. Regular binge drinking (consumption of five drinks in a row) occurred among 25% of CS and 19% of CDS, compared to 10% of 11th graders.

- **Marijuana Use.** Current marijuana use was reported by about four of ten NTS, 2.5 times higher than 11th graders. Current daily marijuana use among the NTS was about five times higher (15% CS, 12% CDS, and 3% 11th graders).
- **Other Drug Use.** For current use of other drugs, about one twelfth of NTS (7% CS & 10% CDS) were current inhalant users, compared to 3% of 11th graders. For LSD or other psychedelics, NTS rates were three times higher (6% vs. 2%). About one tenth (10% CS & 12% CDS) were methamphetamine users, five times the 11th graders (2%).
- **Frequent Intoxication.** NTS were about twice as likely to have been “very drunk or sick from drinking alcohol” seven or more times (27% CDS & 20% CS vs. 12%). They were over five times more likely to have been high or loaded on drugs on seven or more occasions (47% CS & 38% CDS vs. 7%).
- **AOD Use at School.** Almost one-fifth of NTS had been drunk or high at school on seven or more occasions, more than three times as high at 11th graders (24% CS & 22% CDS vs. 7%). Any substance use at school means willingness to take serious risks, but doing so frequently signifies both heavy substance use involvement and possible estrangement from school (since expulsion would be the usual result of being caught).
- **Use-related Problem and Dependency Indicators.** CS were almost twice as likely as 11th graders to report two or more problems from AOD use, as well as two or more dependency-related indicators (18% for both vs. 10%-11%). CDS percentages were in the mid-range for both (14% & 13%), but they reported the highest percentages for two specific AOD-problems (four times the 11th graders): trouble with the police (21%) and trouble at school (17%). Both NTS groups were at least three times more likely to report that their AOD caused them to get into trouble at school and that it interfered with a normal activity, such as school.
- **Cessation Efforts.** Consistent with their higher level of use, NTS were three times more likely to have

attended a program to help stop AOD use than 11th graders (6-7% vs. 2%).

Violence

There was a clear progression of rising prevalence of school violence and delinquency moving from 11th graders to CS and then CDS. In contrast to the results for substance use, CDS tended to report 1.5 to two times higher problem rates than CS on these measures.

- **Fighting at School.** Almost one-fourth of CDS had been in four or more physical fights at school in the past 12 months, six times the 11th graders (24% v. 4%), with the CS in the mid-range at 13%.
- **Weapons Possession.** Carrying a gun to school was reported by 22% of CDS, seven times more than 11th graders (3%), with CS in the mid-range at 13%. For carrying another weapon, the rates were 40% CDS, 29% CS, and 11% 11th graders. Reflecting this, CDS were twice as likely as 11th graders, and CS 1.6 times, to have seen a weapon at school more than once.
- **Gang Membership.** Similarly, 22% of CDS and 14% of CS had ever been a gang member, three and two times the percentage for 11th graders (7%).

Victimization, Safety, and Mental Health Problems

CDS were the most likely to be victims of violence and harassment and report symptoms of depression risk. CS differed little from 11th graders in regard to harassment and depression risk, but did have higher rates for physical victimization.

- **School Harassment and Victimization.** Over one-third of CDS (35%) had experienced hate-related harassment at school for reasons of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or disability, 1.3 times more than either CS (26%) or 11th graders (27%). For physical victimization, the same progression of rates across groups as seen for violence is evident. For being “pushed, shoved, or hit at school” more than once, rates were 27% CDS, 17% CS, and 13% 11th grade. Similarly, 15% of CDS and 9% of CS

reported being threatened/injured with a weapon at school more than once, compared to only 4% of 11th graders.

- **Relationship Violence.** NTS were twice as likely to be victims of violence in their personal relationships, with 14% of both CS and CDS reporting having been hit, slapped, or physically hurt by their boy or girlfriend in the past 12 months, compared to 7% of 11th graders.
- **Incapacitating Sadness.** CDS, at 42%, were somewhat more likely than either other group (36% for CS and 35% for 11th graders) to report feeling so sad and hopeless for two weeks or more that they stopped doing some usual activities, such as going to school, work, or recreational activities — an indicator of depression risk.

Learning Supports: Environmental Assets and Safety (Protective Factors)

Environmental Assets. In contrast to their higher rates of risk behaviors, NTS were *lower* in positive assets in their school and community environments, as measured by three scales assessing Caring Adult Relationships, High Expectations from Adults, and Opportunities for Meaningful Participation. These three environmental assets have been shown to be protective factors that promote positive educational and behavioral outcomes.

- There was a clear progression in the percentages for *low* in Total School Assets (the combined score across the three scales), from 19% for 11th graders, to 24% CS, and 30% CDS, an increase of 1.5 across groups.
- Concomitantly, percentage *high* in Total School Assets was 1.5 times greater among 11th graders than CDS.
- The biggest difference among the three school-related scales was for High Expectations, with low scores about twice as great among CDS than 11th graders.

School Safety. Results for perceived school safety were mixed but indicate the majority of NTS feel less safe in school than their 11th-grade peers. There was a moderate progression in the percentages feeling unsafe or very unsafe at school, rising from 8% of 11th graders to 10% of CS and 14% of CDS. Perhaps most significant, less than half of NTS reported feeling safe or very safe. Yet a minority of NTS also were slightly more likely to report feeling very safe at school (19% for both CS & CDS vs. 16% 11th grade).

Discussion and Conclusion

Compared to their 11th-grade peers in traditional or comprehensive high schools, students in continuation and community day schools are at substantially more elevated risk of a wide range of not only school problems but also risk behaviors such as substance use and violence — behaviors that for a large proportion were no doubt among the principle reasons for referral into the alternative educational system. They are also more likely to be victims of physical violence, to have fewer environmental supports at school, to feel less connected to the school, and, in the case of CDS, to be more likely to experience harassment and incapacitating feelings of sadness and hopelessness. Regarding school safety, the differences were less clear-cut but overall indicate that the majority of NTS do not feel safe, a percentage higher than for 11th graders.

Although only a very small percentage of students are enrolled in community day schools, they are a particularly troubled population even though younger than students in continuation schools. For the most part, CDS reported school problems and substance use rates similar or only slightly lower than CS, and they tended to be higher on measures of school violence, victimization, and feeling unsafe. For example, CDS were more than 1.5 times as likely as CS to be have been a gang member, and at least twice as likely in the past year to have damaged school property, been in a physical fight on multiple occasions, or to have carried a gun to school. Some of this difference may be explained by the higher percentage of males in the CDS sample. But these results also reflect the purpose and nature of community day schools. By statute, they give

admission priority to students who have been expelled or are under disciplinary sanction. In California, violence related offenses – including weapons possession – require mandatory expulsion. That the majority of CDS are there under some form of sanction also helps explain why they reported the highest percentages for being low in school connectedness.

The higher rates of substance use among CS compared to either 11th graders or CDS may be explained partly to the older age of this sample, as levels of substance use increase markedly with age. But this doesn't explain all of it. When we examined differences between CS and 11th graders who were the same ages, the group differences held. CDS also reported results similar to CS, even though they are much younger than either other group.

That NTS report so many school problems and risk behaviors is certainly related to the many known risk factors in their lives, as revealed by this analysis: more victimization, fewer caring relationships and other environmental assets, poorer school connectedness, and higher levels of transience and foster/relative care.² These are highly vulnerable youth with few developmental supports. To re-engage them in learning, to reconnect them with school and keep them from dropping out, alternative school programs need to be prepared to address these multiple problems with comprehensive and supportive prevention and intervention services. The high percentages of NTS that reported substance use at school, use-related problems at school, and use interfering with normal activities like school is illustrative of how inter-related are these problems. Similar, school environments need to be made safer.

Nontraditional schools, by design, intend to address student academic, behavioral and developmental problems not often dealt with in traditional high schools. Reflecting this, the CS and CDS in this study were more likely than their 11th-grade peers to report attending an AOD cessation program. But their low rates for caring adult relationships and other developmental supports in their lives, school safety, and school connectedness, particularly those of CDS, also reveal that there is much more to be done to create the intimate, nurturing atmo-

sphere that nontraditional schools need to ensure these high-risk youth are reconnected with school and graduate. This also points to the need to provide a caring and supportive school environment early in the lives of at-risk youth to help mitigate the many risk factors that they face and promote resilience to help them effectively navigate their lives. Research consistently shows that school connectedness and caring relationships are protective factors associated with low risk behavior and higher school achievement and attendance. As over one-third of California students who drop out of school exit between grades 9 and 10, youth who are struggling academically or having behavior problems need to be assessed at least in middle school to determine the full range of learning-support services they may need.

Table 2. Key Results

	11 th (%)	CS (%)	CDS (%)
Student Demographics			
17/18 years of age	30	55	23
Male	47	55	68
White	36	27	15
Hispanic	41	55	58
Black	11	11	19
In relative care	4	9	8
In foster care	0	2	4
Moved 2 or more times	7	17	19
School Variables			
Truant once a week or more	11	24	20
Grades lower than mostly C's	14	26	28
Low in school connectedness	17	23	36
Current AOD Use (Past 30 Days)			
Alcohol, daily	2	5	5
Binge drinking, regular (5 or more drinks in a row, 3+ days)	10	25	19
Marijuana	16	42	39
Marijuana, daily	3	15	12
Inhalants	3	7	10

	11 th (%)	CS (%)	CDS (%)
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Methamphetamine	2	10	12
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Substance Use at School (Past 30 Days)

Alcohol use, 3+ days	3	6	9
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Marijuana use, 3+ days	3	11	13
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Been drunk/high, 7+ times	7	24	22
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Other AOD Use and Problem Indicators

Prescription painkillers, ever 4+ times	8	18	12
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Very drunk/sick from alcohol, 7+ times	12	27	20
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High on drugs, 7+ times	7	47	38
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2 or ore problems from AOD use	11	18	14
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2 ore more dependency indicators	10	18	13
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Problems/trouble with police from AOD use	6	18	21
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Trouble at school from AOD use	4	13	27
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AOD use interfered with normal activity (school, work)	4	13	12
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Attended program to help stop use	2	6	7
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School Violence/Crime (past 12 months)

Damaged school property, 2+ times	8	13	24
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Been in physical fight at school, 4+ times	4	13	24
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Carried gun at school	3	13	22
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Carried another weapon at school	11	26	40
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Seen a weapon at school, 2+ times	20	32	40
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Victimization/Harassment on School Property

Been pushed, shoved, hit at school, 2+ times	13	17	27
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	11 th (%)	CS (%)	CDS (%)
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Been threatened with a weapon at school, 2+ times	4	9	15
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Experienced any hate-related harassment at school	27	26	35
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Other Problem Indicators

Physical violence from boy/girlfriend, past 12 months	7	14	14
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Incapacitating sadness (depression risk), past 12 months*	35	36	42
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Ever been a gang member	7	14	22
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Perceived School Safety

Feel very safe	16	19	19
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Feel safe	38	29	26
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Feel unsafe/very unsafe at school	8	10	14
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Low in School Environmental Assets

Total Assets	19	24	30
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Caring Adult Relationship	14	17	25
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High Expectations	11	15	21
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Opportunities for Meaningful Participation	37	46	44
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*Felt so sad and hopeless for two weeks or more that stopped doing some usual activity (school, work, recreation).

Key:

CS — Continuation high school students

CDS — Community day school students

11th — 11th Grades in traditional (comprehensive) high schools

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The full set of tables reporting the results of this analysis, along with this factsheet, can be downloaded from the "Research" section of the CHKS website: (www.wested.org/pub/docs/chks_factsheets.html).

Endnotes

1 Data drawn from the Attorney General's California Student Survey conducted in 1997 and 1999 did indicate that continuation students had significantly higher rates of substance use and violence than their 11th-grade peers. See: Austin, G., & Abe, Y. (2002.) *Continuation schools report: Findings on the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs from the Eighth Biennial Survey of California Students in Grades 7, 9, and 11*. Sacramento: Office of the Attorney General.

Austin, G., & Wong, M. (2000). *Comparison of substance use among continuation and comprehensive high school students, 1997-89*. Report prepared for the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs. Los Alamitos, CA: WestEd.

2 As shown in CHKS Factsheet #6, youth in foster and relative care are similarly in themselves at elevated risk of engagement in risk behaviors and experiencing a wide range of other problems than youth who live with one or more parent.