Ten-Years of Risk Behavior Results from an Online Survey Assessing Secondary School Norms and Misperceptions

The Pervasive "Reign of Error" Among U.S. 6 -12th Graders

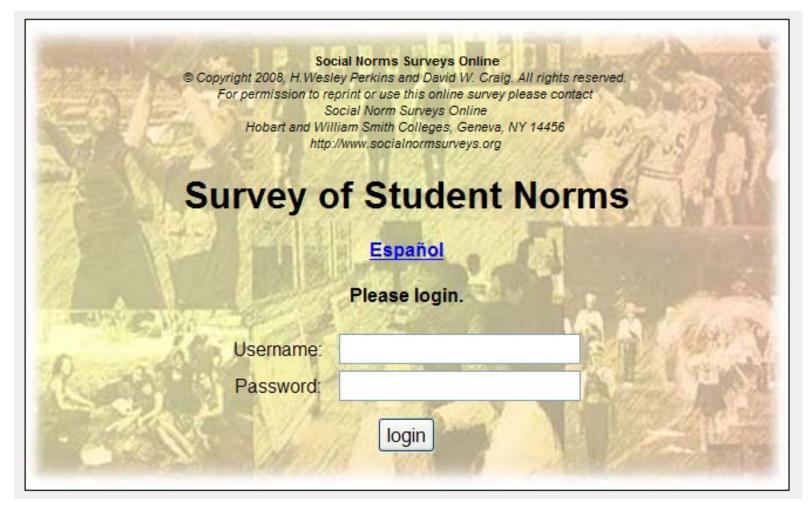H. Wesley Perkins, Ph.D.
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www.AlcoholEducationProject.org   www.YouthHealthSafety.org   www.SocialNormSurveys.org

Abstract

A total of 52,462 secondary students from 78 secondary schools in eleven regionally diverse states have been surveyed using an online instrument measuring actual and perceived norms between 1999-2008.   Measures of tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and other illicit drug use, parental alcohol policies, willingness to report weapons seen at school, and seat belt use all demonstrate a wide discrepancy between actual school norms and students' perceptions of the norms in all instances. This pattern of massive misperceptions is found across time, regions, and school settings (rural, urban, suburban) and schools of varying size/demographic composition. These misperceptions are confirmed as the strongest predictors of personal risk and protective behavior. In predicting personal behavior perceived norms are much more powerful than actual norms in the local school setting and also more influential than student involvement in extracurricular activities.

Web Surveys Online

Survey of Student Norms

Español

Please login.

Username:

Password:

login

http://www.socialnormsurveys.org/hsf
(Enter test for username and password)
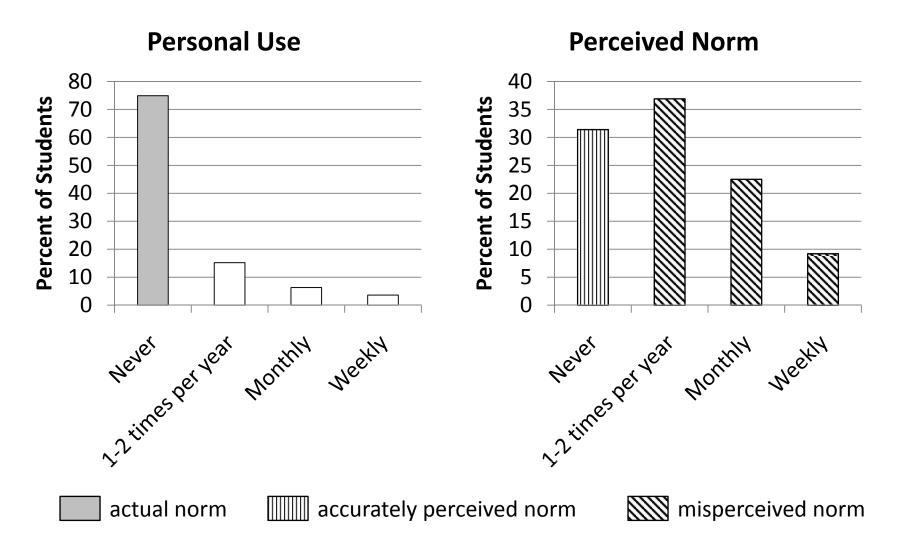
Table 1. Sample Demographics

School Characteristics

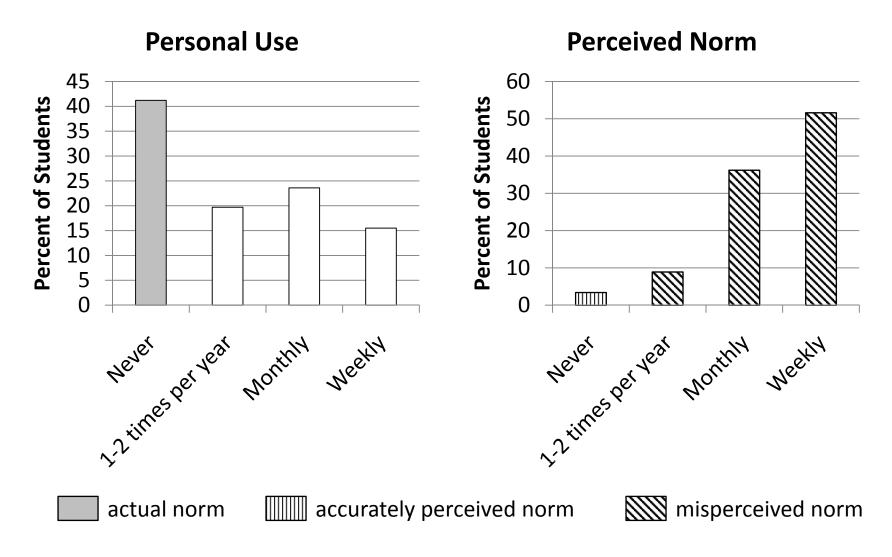|	
Number of Schools	78 (25 conducted surveys multiple times) 119 school cohorts surveyed
States	AZ,CO,ID,IN,IA,ME,MA,MT,NJ,NY,UT,WA
School Size - mean (range)	732 (42 – 2,092)
Sample Sizes - mean (range)	444 (22 – 1588)
Cohort Response Rate - mean (range)	66% (9% – 100%)
Percent on free lunch - mean (range)	19% (0% – 54%)
Percent White - mean (range)	78% (23% – 100%)
Percent Hispanic - mean (range)	10% (0% – 66%)
Percent Black - mean (range)	7% (0% –50%)
Percent Asian - mean (range)	3% (0% – 37%)
Student-Teacher Ratio - mean (range)	15% (9 – 25)

Respondent Characteristics

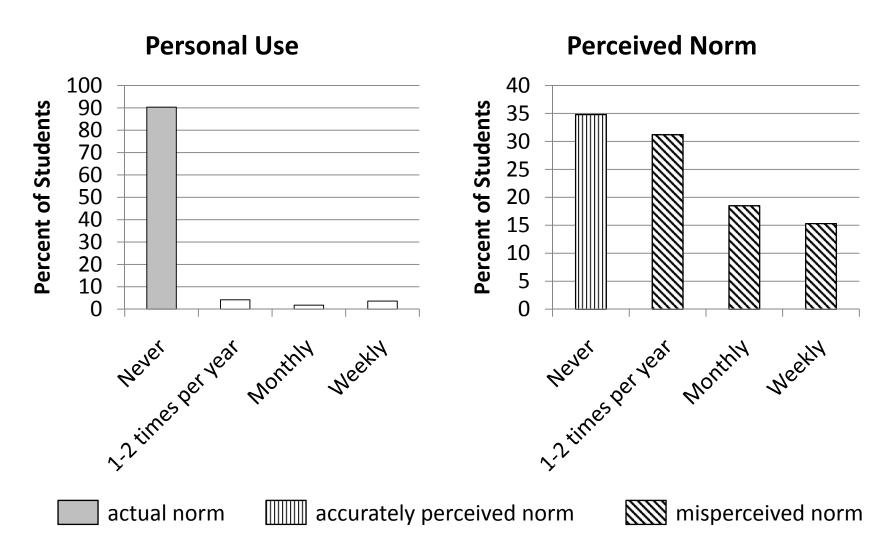|	
Number of Respondents	52,462
Females / Males - %	51% / 49%
Grade Levels	
6	7%
7	7%
8	8
9	23
10	21%
11	18%
12	15%
Age – mean (range)	15.0 (9 – 21)
Geographic Area	
Urban	21%
Urban/suburban	18%
Suburban	20%
Rural	42%

Figure 1. Alcohol Personal Use and Perceived Norm for Grades 6 - 8
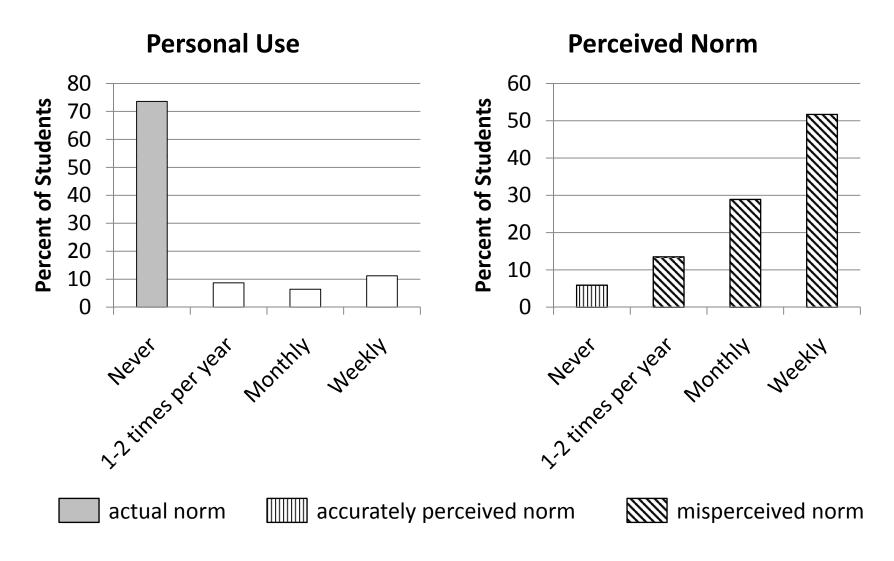
Figure 2. Alcohol Personal Use and Perceived Norm for Grades 9 - 12
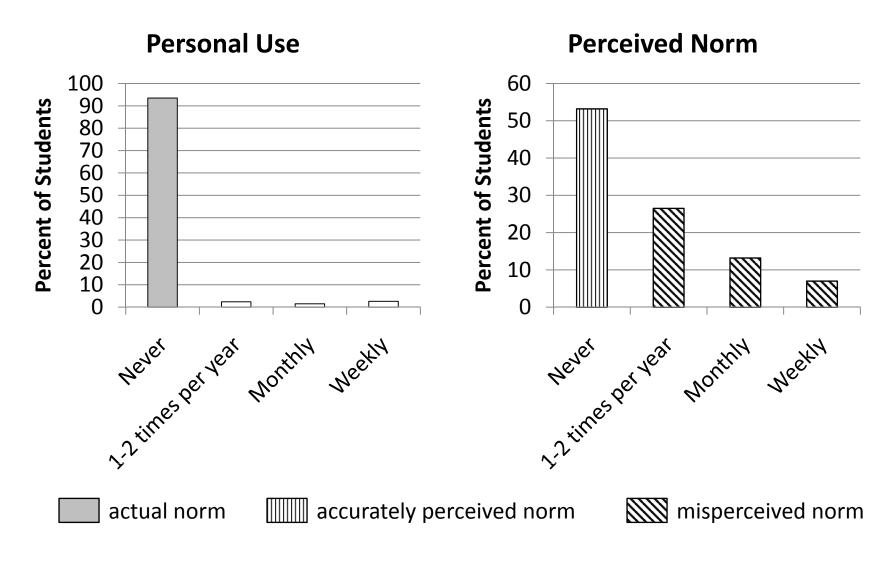
Figure 3. Tobacco Personal Use and Perceived Norm for Grades 6 - 8

Personal Use

Perceived Norm

actual norm
accurately perceived norm
misperceived norm
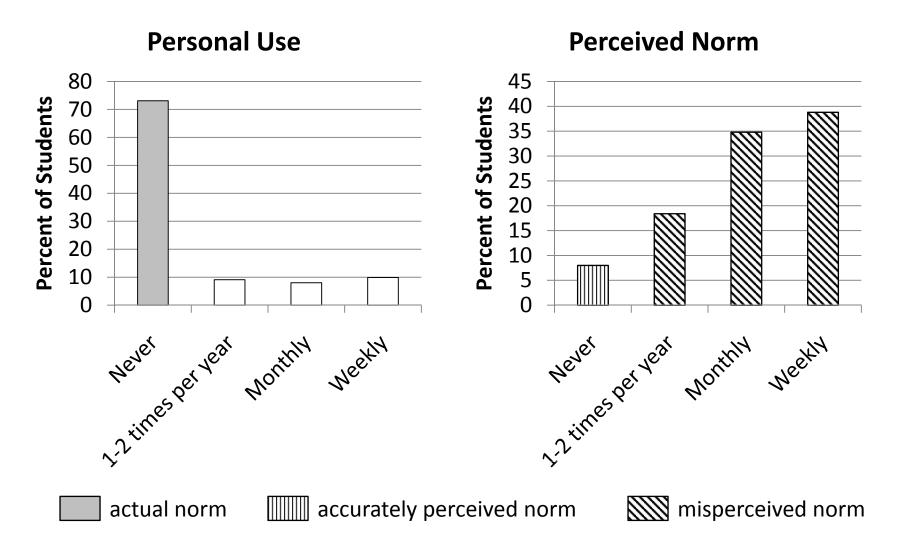
Figure 4. Tobacco Personal Use and Perceived Norm for Grades 9 - 12

Personal Use

Perceived Norm
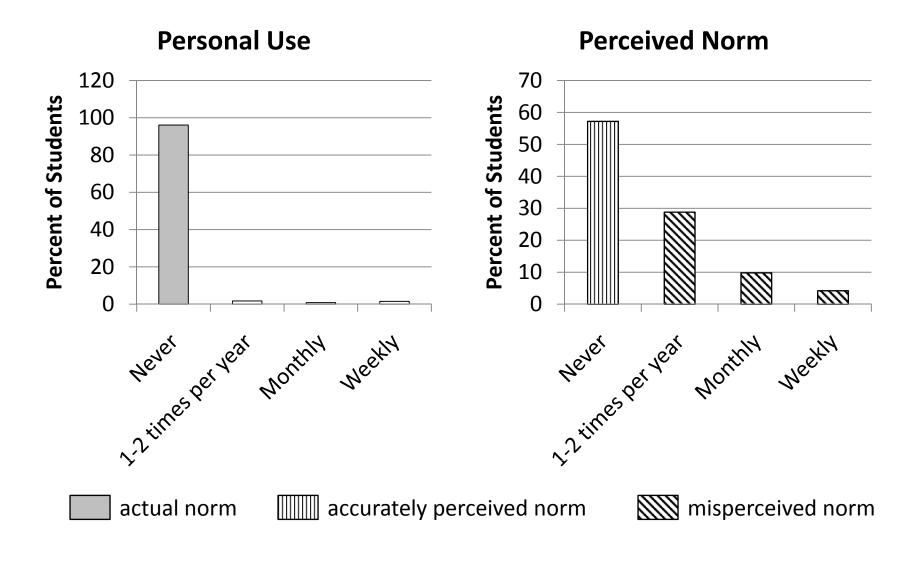
Figure 5. Marijuana Personal Use and Perceived Norm for Grades 6 - 8

Figure 6. Marijuana Personal Use and Perceived Norm for Grades 9 - 12

Personal Use

Perceived Norm

Percent of Students

Never | 1-2 times per year | Monthly | Weekly

actual norm | accurately perceived norm | misperceived norm

Figure 7. Other Illicit Drugs Personal Use and Perceived Norm for Grades 6 - 8

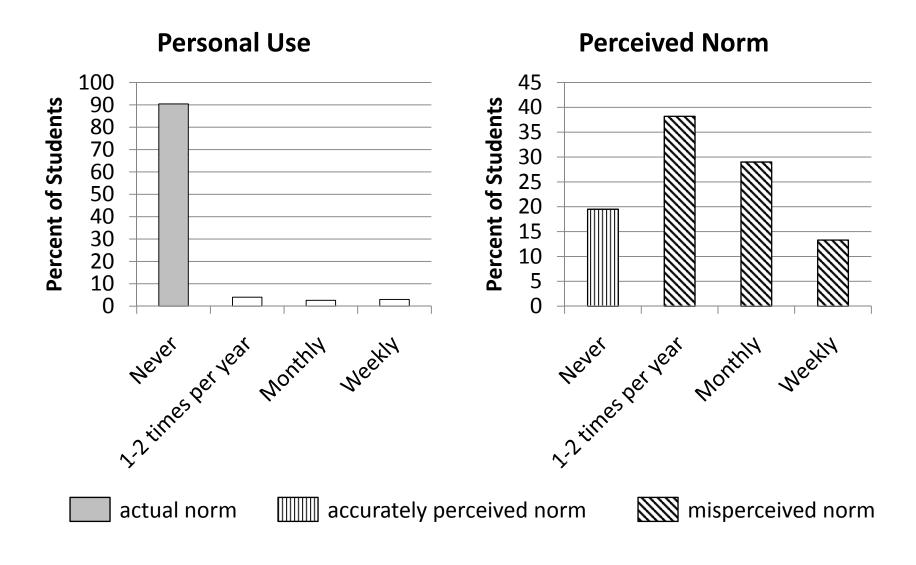Figure 8. Other Illicit Drugs Personal Use and Perceived Norm for Grades 9 - 12

Table 2. Parental Limits to Student Drinking and Perceived Parental Norms among Middle and High School Students by Grade

		6	7	8	9	10	11	12
	(N)	(1,876)	(1,875)	(1,978)	(8,879)	(8,245)	(7,127)	(5,803)
Type of Limits (%)								
No drinking except few sips at family/religious gathering or some drinking with parent when only family present		95.4	94.3	91.6	87.9	85.6	80.1	74.6
Some drinking with friends if parent present		1.9	2.1	4.4	5.4	5.7	7.0	7.8
Drinking allowed without parent if not drunk or driving		0.7	1.2	2.1	3.1	4.8	7.9	11.5
No limits		2.0	2.3	1.9	3.6	3.8	4.9	6.1
Percent of Students Perceiving Norm to be No Drinking or Some Drinking with Family Only but Not with Friends		92.8	90.4	84.1	74.5	67.6	61.6	56.5

No drinking or some drinking with family but no friends norm

Table 3. Personal and Perceived Seat Belt Use among Middle and High School Students by Grade

		Grade						
		6	7	8	9	10	11	12
	(N)	(2,470)	(2,698)	(2,830)	(10,164)	(9,412)	(8,095)	(6,742)
Mean percentage of time								
Personal seat belts use (actual norm)		77.1	74.1	73.9	73.9	79.3	82.6	84.3
Perceived seat belt use by peers (perceived norm)		61.8	57.5	57.5	56.6	61.1	65.1	69.1

Table 4. Personal and Perceived Seat Belt Use among Middle and High School Students by Gender

		Male	Female
	(N)	(20,620)	(21,478)
Mean percentage of time			
Personal seat belts use (actual norm)		76.2	80.9
Perceived seat belt use by peers (perceived norm)		61.6	61.7

Table 5. Personal and Perceived Seat Belt Use among Middle and High School Students by School Location

		Urban	Urban/Suburban	Suburban	Rural
	(N)	(5,781)	(9,005)	(9,706)	(18,002)
Mean percentage of time					
Personal seat belts use (actual norm)		76.3	79.0	82.2	77.1
Perceived seat belt use by peers (perceived norm)		58.1	60.6	65.2	61.3

Table 6. Personal and Perceived Intention About Reporting of Weapons Seen at School among Middle and High School Students

	Middle School	High School
	N = 2,197	N = 14,838
	%	%
Personally would tell administrator (actual norm)	84.3	64.5
Believe most peers would tell administrator (perceived norm)	72.4	42.6
Personally would tell teacher (actual norm)	81.9	76.4
Believe most peers would tell teacher (perceived norm)	69.5	51.6
Personally would tell police or security officer (actual norm)	76.7	66.6
Believe most peers would tell police or security officer (perceived norm)	62.6	42.2
Personally would tell parent or adult relative (actual norm)	68.5	52.6
Believe most peers would tell parent or adult relative (perceived norm)	55.9	33.9

Table 7. Unstandardized and Standardized Regression Coefficients Predicting Percent of Time Students Use Seatbelts (N = 41,382)

Independent Variables	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	
Perceived percent of time peers in grade use seatbelts	.59	*	.55	*
Actual percent of time peers in grade use seatbelts (mean)	.36	*	.10	*
Gender (female vs male)	4.51	*	.08	*
Age (years)	-.07	ns	-.01	ns
Personally drives to school	.04	ns	.00	ns
(R squared)			(.36)	

* Coefficient is significant at p < .001.
ns Coefficient is not significant (p > .05).

Table 8. Standardized Regression Coefficients Predicting the Number of Days per Year Using Alcohol, Tobacco, Marijuana, and Other Illicit Drugs for All Students and Users Only

Independent variables	Alcohol		Tobacco		Marijuana		Other illicit drugs	
	All (n = 33,260)	Users (n = 17,374)	All (n = 33,280)	Users (n = 7,249)	All (n = 33,153)	Users (n = 7,762)	All (n = 33,109)	Users (n = 2,775)
Perceived number of days peers in grade are using (perceived norm)	.32 ***	.40 ***	.16 ***	.24 ***	.30***	.36 ***	.38 ***	.61 ***
Average number of days peers in grade use (actual norm)	.17 ***	.14 ***	.18 ***	.17 ***	.15***	.14 ***	.10 ***	.10 ***
Gender (female vs male)	-.04 ***	-.08 ***	-.04 ***	-.05 ***	-.07***	-.15 ***	-.05 ***	-.10 ***
Age	-.01	-.03 **	.03 ***	.03 *	.00	-.01	-.02 **	-.04 *
Participation in athletics	-.01	-.02 ***	-.09 ***	-.16 ***	-.06***	-.11 ***	-.01	-.02
Participation in performing arts	-.03 ***	-.03 ***	-.04 ***	-.04 ***	-.02***	-.03 **	-.00	.01
Participation in religious group	-.02 **	.01	-.03 ***	-.03 **	-.02***	-.02	.00	.03 *
Participation in school club or student government	-.04 ***	-.03 ***	-.08 ***	-.09 ***	-.05***	-.05 ***	-.01	.01
Year survey taken	-.01	.00	-.06	.03 *	-.01	.02	-.01	.03
(R squared)	(.16)	(.20)	(.11)	(.18)	(.16)	(.22)	(.16)	(.43)

 * Coefficient is significant at $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

For additional detailed analysis of a subset of this data click below

More Analyses

http://www.alcoholeducationproject.org/current/ATOD2005web.pdf