

Trading Sex and Sexual Exploitation among High School Students: Data from the 2022 Minnesota Student Survey



Trading sex presents many harms to young people.

This brief reports an updated population-based prevalence estimate of high school students who report trading sex for something of value. In 2022, the Minnesota Student Survey (a tri-annual census of young people in Minnesota's schools) asked this question of 9th and 11th graders for a second time:

Have you ever traded sex or sexual activity to receive money, food, drugs, alcohol, a place to stay, or anything else?

NO YES **1.3%** answered "yes"

At least 4,800 youth in Minnesota, who were high-school aged in 2022, have traded sex¹

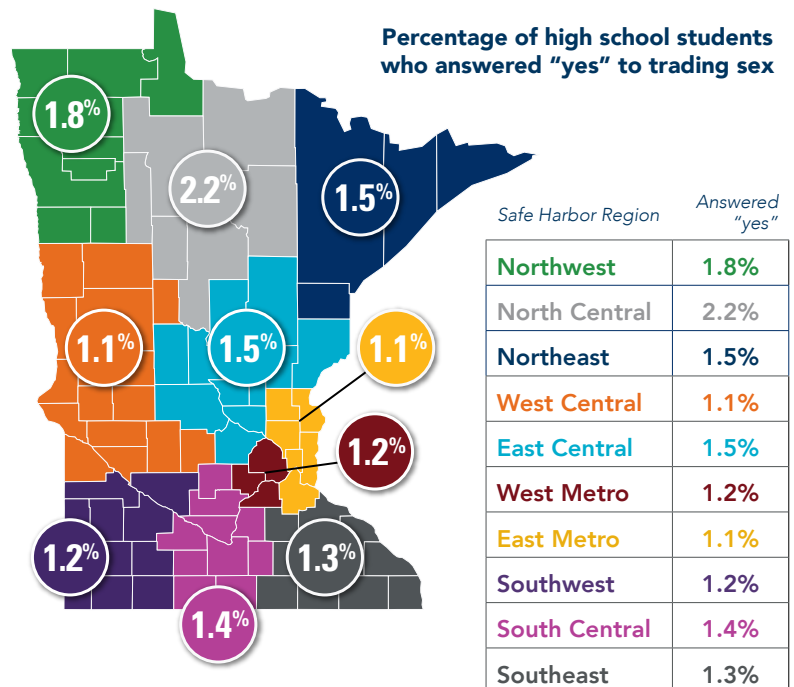
This is likely an underestimate because the MSS is completed by students enrolled in school. It does not include youth who were not in school on the day of the survey or who do not attend school. Young people may also be reluctant to answer "yes" for many reasons, including shame or fear.

¹ This estimate of 4,800 young people is based on the 2022 Census number of 15-19 year-olds in the State of Minnesota. We used this formula: 1.3% of 373,716 = 4,858. This number was updated in July 2024 using recently released 2022 Census data. A previous version of this brief used 2019 Census data.

MINNESOTA'S RESPONSE: SAFE HARBOR

Youth who trade sex are considered sexually exploited under Minnesota's Safe Harbor law. Sexual exploitation is a public health issue that harms individuals, communities, and populations across the state. The Minnesota Department of Health Safe Harbor program receives state and federal funds to support a comprehensive response through regional navigators, service providers, and tribal governments. In addition to services, training, and protocol development, the Safe Harbor system supports specialized housing, outreach, and investigations through partnership with public health, human services, and public safety.

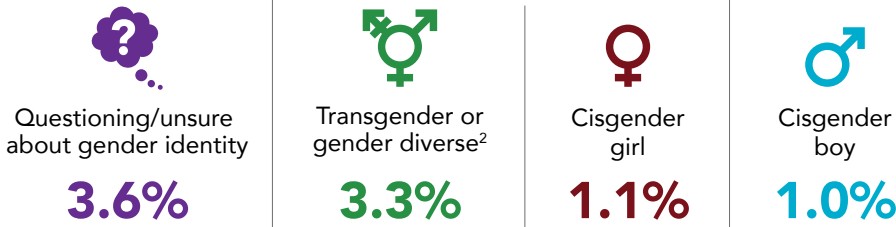
The map shown here reflects the Safe Harbor ten regional navigator areas as of August 2023.



WHO IS MOST IMPACTED BY TRADING SEX AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION?

GENDER

Students of all gender identities reported trading sex. For example, among students who are transgender or gender diverse, 3.3% reported trading sex.



² Transgender is a term that describes individuals whose gender identity differs from social or cultural expectations of their birth-assigned sex. Cisgender is a term for those whose gender identity aligns with their birth-assigned sex.



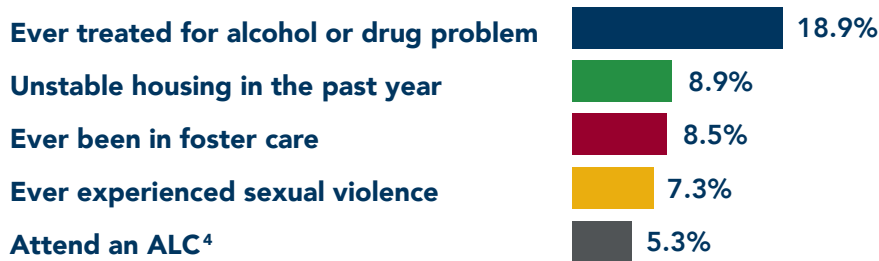
LGBTQ+2S
8.9%

Native+ students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer and Questioning (LGBTQ+) and/or 2-Spirit (2-S)³ report rates far exceeding rates of other youth.

³ "Two-Spirit" or "2-Spirit" refers to a person of a culturally and spiritually distinct gender exclusively recognized by Native American Nations. See our 2022 Native+ infographic brief – <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/254163>

RELEVANT EXPERIENCES & CONTEXTS

Some groups of young people are more likely to be impacted by trading sex and sexual exploitation. For example, among youth who indicated they had ever been treated for an alcohol or drug problem, 18.9% reported trading sex.



⁴ ALC includes alternative schools and area learning centers. This estimate is derived from a separate sample of students attending ALCs.

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

Sexually exploited youth are in our high school classrooms and some are connected to other systems (e.g., foster care, juvenile corrections). We can build relationships and help them thrive. Minnesota's Safe Harbor network of services offers a statewide response for youth aged 24 and under who are at risk of or experiencing sexual exploitation. Youth, families, and service providers can find assistance and resources at <https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/safeharbor>.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The Minnesota Student Survey is coordinated by the Departments of Education, Health, Human Services, and Public Safety. In 2022, 70% of public school districts participated. Throughout the state, 51% of 9th and 41% of 11th graders completed the MSS. The primary MSS sample used here is 52,428 students who answered the question about sex trading. Smaller samples of students in alternative schools, ALCs, and juvenile correctional facilities are also available.

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RACE & ETHNICITY

Students from many different backgrounds reported trading sex.

Percentage of youth who answered "yes" within each category.

Native+ ⁵	4.3%
Asian, South Asian, or Asian American	0.5%
Black, African, or African American	1.2%
Hispanic or Latino/Latina	1.2%
Middle Eastern or North African	2.5%
White	1.1%
Multiple Races	1.8%

⁵ This category includes all students identifying as American Indian or Alaskan Native (AIAN) only or AIAN plus additional races/ethnicities or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (NHPI) or NHPI plus another race/ethnicity.

PLANS FOR AFTER SCHOOL

Like all young people, those impacted by trading sex have hopes and dreams for their future. Among those who said "yes" to trading sex, here is what they want to do after graduation:

