

Disability & High School Health Risks (2011)

One in four high school students (25%) in Rhode Island (RI) has a disability.¹ This Brief examines if these students are in greater jeopardy from risk behaviors than their non-disabled peers (Chart 1), and whether those risks have improved or worsened over time (Chart 2). Twenty measures are evaluated,² comprising seven areas of vulnerability (drugs and alcohol, injury, mental health, sex, tobacco, violence, and weight). The findings are intended to inform interested parties and stimulate further research.

In this Brief, the relationship between disability status and risk factors is one of association, not causation (e.g., students with disability were twice as likely to smoke, but having a disability doesn't cause one to smoke). In the text, only those differences in values (over time or between disabled and non-disabled students) that are statistically 'significant' at the 95% confidence level are noted.³ Lastly, with the exception of the 'lesbian, gay or bisexual' measure, all others are unfavorable indicators, so lower/declining values are preferred.

Drugs & Alcohol: Students with disability are more likely to use marijuana (33% vs. 24%), and to abuse legal (prescription and 'over-the-counter') drugs (28% vs. 11%). Alcohol drinking among this group decreased from 51% to 40% (2007-2011), but remained higher than the rate for non-disabled students in 2011 (40% vs. 31%).

Injury: Disabled high schoolers are twice as likely to not wear seat belts (15% vs. 8%) and almost three times more likely to drink and drive (11% vs. 4%). Bike helmet use was similar for both groups.

Mental Health: Acute depression is two and a half times more prevalent in the disabled population (42% vs. 17%), and the attempted suicide rate is over three times higher (17% vs. 5%).

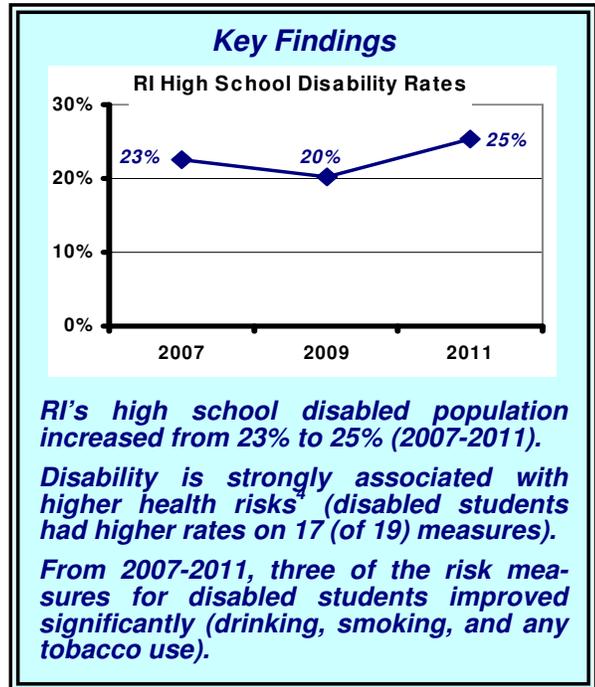
Sex: Lesbian, gay, and bisexual students are more common among the disabled (15% vs. 5%), who are also more likely to be sexually active (35% vs. 29%) and to have unprotected sex (7% vs. 5%).

Tobacco: Cigarette smoking in the disabled population decreased from 27% to 18% (2007-2011), but remained higher than the non-disabled rate in 2011 (18% vs. 8%). Heavy smoking (more than 10 cigarettes a day) is also higher for disabled students (2% vs. 0.5%). The use of any kind of tobacco product among the disabled decreased from 32% to 23% (2007-2011) but remained higher than the non-disabled rate in 2011 (23% vs. 15%).

Violence: Physical fighting is more prevalent among high schoolers with disability (30% vs. 20%), and they are twice as likely to experience dating violence (14% vs. 6%). Sexual assault is almost three times higher for disabled students (13% vs. 5%).

Weight: Obesity rates are similar for both groups, but the disabled are more likely to not exercise (16% vs. 10%), and to have poor nutrition (6% vs. 3%).

Twenty five percent (25%) of RI high schoolers have a disability and this is strongly correlated with higher health risks.⁴ Disabled students can be healthy and well, and reducing their risk disparities is the first step to improving their quality of life.



¹ Students self-reported having a physical disability and/or a long-term (6+ months) emotional disability.
² Data are from RI's Youth Risk Behavior Survey, part of a biennial national survey of high school students on the major causes of disease and injury morbidity and mortality. For more information contact Bruce Cryan, 401-222-5111, www.health.ri.gov/data/youthriskbehaviorsurvey/.
³ As the RI-YRBS is a sample survey, if the 95% Confidence Intervals of two values do not overlap, one may conclude (with 95% certainty) there was a 'real' difference between the two values (i.e., the difference was not likely due to sampling bias).
⁴ The Phi Coefficient (r_{ϕ}) measuring the correlation of disability and higher health risks is 0.900 ('0' is no correlation and '1' is perfect correlation).

Chart 1: 2011 RI High School Health Risks by Disability Status

(* statistically significant differences)

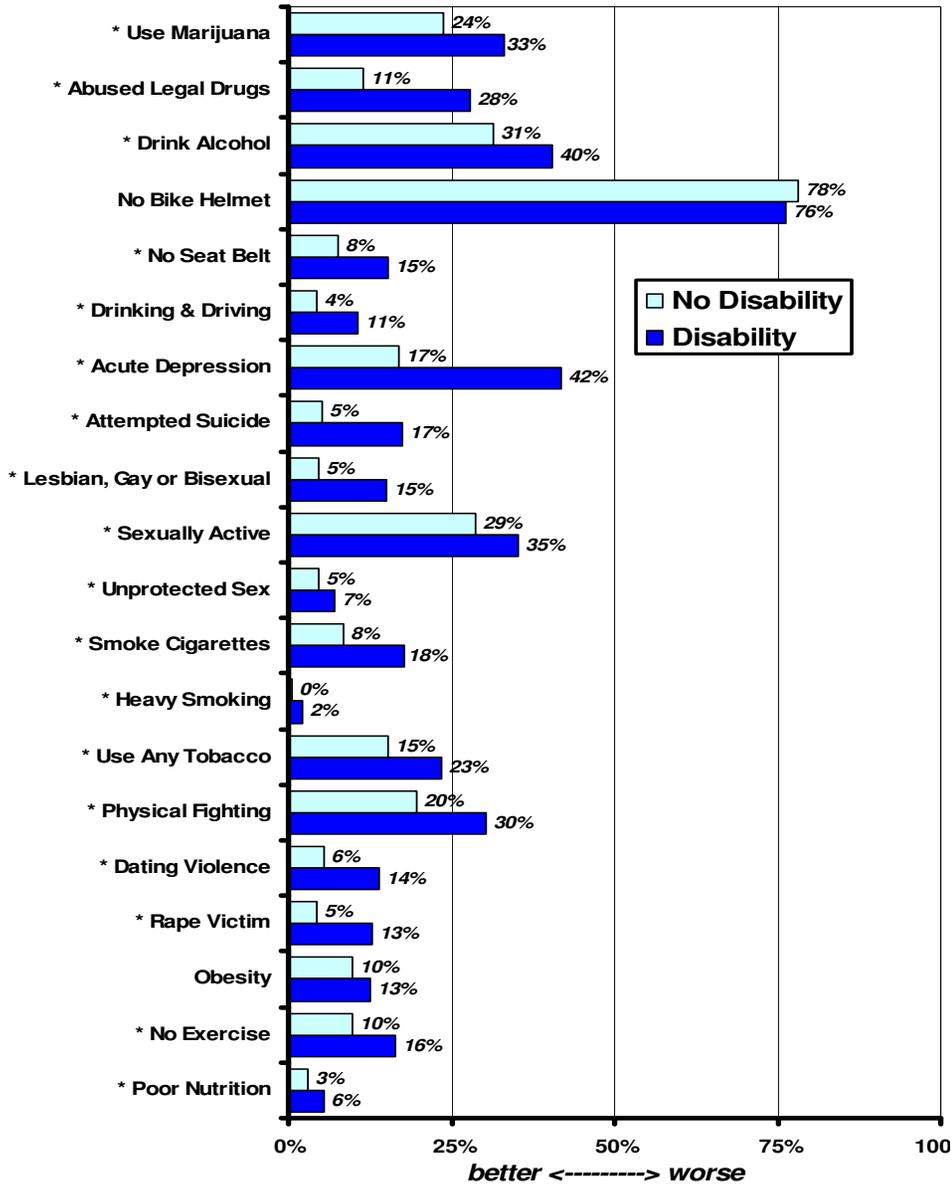
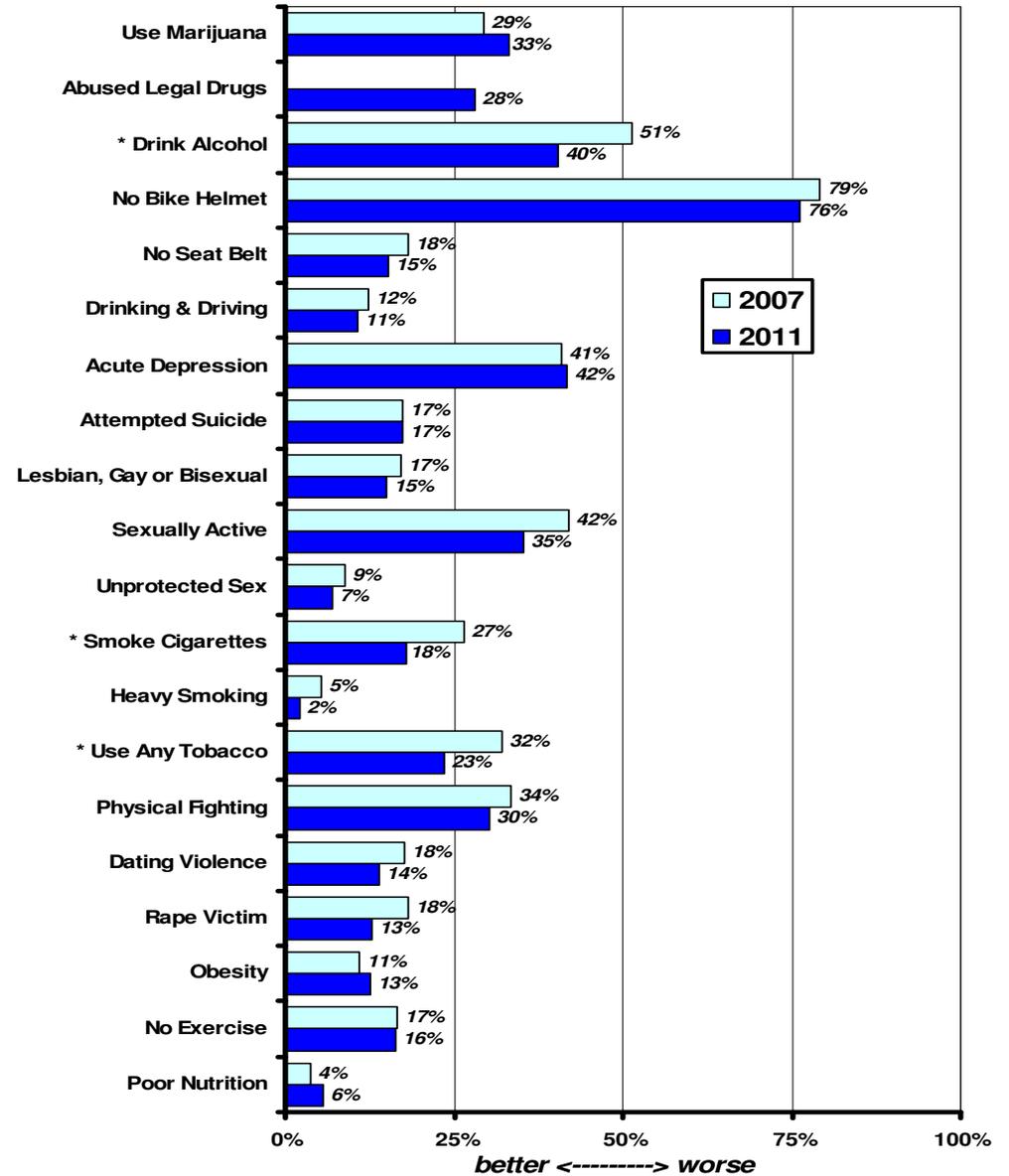


Chart 2: 2007 & 2011 Health Risks for Students with Disability

(* statistically significant changes)



DRUGS & ALCOHOL MEASURES: Use Marijuana (1+ times, past mo.); Abused Legal Drugs (abused prescription and/or 'over-the-counter' drugs 1+ times, ever); Drink Alcohol (1+ days, past mo.); **INJURY MEASURES:** No Bike Helmet (never or rarely wore, past yr.); No Seat Belt (never or rarely wore, past yr.); Drinking & Driving (1+ times, past mo.); **MENTAL HEALTH MEASURES:** Acute Depression (for 2+ weeks, past yr.); Attempted Suicide (1+ times, past yr.); **SEX MEASURES:** Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual (sexual self-identity); Sexually Active (1+ partner, past 3 mos.); Unprotected Sex (no protection, last encounter); **TOBACCO MEASURES:** Smoke Cigarettes (on 1+ days, past mo.); Heavy Smoking (over 10 cigarettes per day, past mo.); Use Any Tobacco (used chewing tobacco, snuff, dip, or smoked cigars or cigarettes on 1+ days, past mo.); **VIOLENCE MEASURES:** Physical Fighting (1+ times, past yr.); Dating Violence (physically abused by partner in the past yr.); Rape Victim (forced into sexual intercourse, ever); **WEIGHT MEASURES:** Obesity (over the 95th percentile for body mass index); No Exercise (60+ min. of exercise on 0 days, past wk.); Poor Nutrition (no fruit or vegetables, past wk.)