

Welcome to the...



Lincoln County Drug Free Coalition Merrill Social Norms Project

When asked, students and adults, usually overestimate the percentage of youth who use alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. When students overestimate, they justify use by their peers and are more likely to use themselves. When adults overestimate, they may actually encourage risky behavior and use by reinforcing inaccurate information through the messages they give young people.

The Social Norms Project uses a theoretical approach and marketing strategies to correct misperceptions about student alcohol & other drug use.

SOCIAL NORMS SURVEY:

The first step in the Social Norms project is to collect local data from students, parents and staff about youth behaviors and their perceptions of behaviors. Since the initial survey in February of 2007, the social norms surveys (student, parent and staff) have been issued annually in February through 2012. Due to lack of funding, no surveys were conducted in 2013. Funding was secured from Merrill Area United Way to conduct a shortened version of the student survey at the Merrill High School with 9th- 12th grade students in May 2014 and with all 6th – 12th grade students in May 2016. All completed surveys are sent to Northern Illinois University where the National Social Norms Center analyzes them. The Merrill Social Norms committee reviews the results received from Northern Illinois University to evaluate progress, the prior year's campaign and to develop the marketing campaign for the next school year.

Results from the Merrill High School student surveys indicate that from 2007 to 2016, there was an important reduction of perception of alcohol use among Merrill High School students as measured by a decrease in perception of alcohol as the typical socializing beverage (27% to 17%), perception of students driving after drinking (77% to 63%), riding in a vehicle with another student who had been drinking (84% to 69%), and perception of peers who have drunk alcohol in past 30 days (93% to 87% perceived used by typical student; 60% to 54% perceived use is normative [more than half their peers used]). Between 2007 and 2016, the actual reported 30 day use of alcohol has dropped by 16% (47% to 31%) and the percentage of students that reported never drinking alcohol increased by 24% (26% to 50%). This data demonstrates that by marketing true norms we are changing perceptions which leads to an increase in healthy behaviors.

SOCIAL NORMS THEORY:

The theory states that individual behaviors are influenced by misperceptions of how peers think and act. For youth in particular, peer influences and perceptions have been found to be more influential in shaping individual choices for behavior than other factors. The theory states that over estimating problem behaviors discourages healthy behaviors. Correcting these misperceptions by promoting actual norms can result in decreased negative behaviors and increased prevalence of healthy protective behaviors. (Perkins, H. W. & Berkowitz, A. D.:(1986) Perceiving the Community Norms of Alcohol Use among Students: Some Research Implications for Campus Alcohol Education Programming. International Journal of the Addictions. 21, 961-976.)

SOCIAL NORMS MARKETING:

This type of marketing has been widely used throughout the past several decades in many disciplines as a behavior changing strategy. Social norms marketing is the adaptation of commercial marketing technologies to programs designed to influence the voluntary behavior of target audiences. (Andreasen, A. R. (1994). Social marketing: Its definition and domain. Journal of Public Policy and Marketing. 13(1), 108-115.) The Merrill Social Norms marketing campaign has included posters placed throughout the high school and middle school, information in middle and high school parent newsletters, ads in school event programs, local television ads, billboards throughout the community, social norms messages on school computer log-in screens and website access pages, ads at the local movie theater, local radio commercials, ads and articles in local newspapers, presentations to various community groups and organizations, Coalition website and on the Merrill Public School Facebook page.

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Learn more by visiting the Lincoln County Drug Free Coalition website at <http://lincoln.uwex.edu/dfc/>.