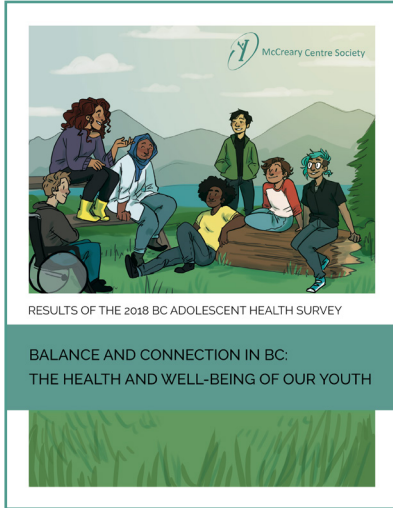


# INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN BC

## A 2018 BC ADOLESCENT HEALTH SURVEY FACT SHEET



This fact sheet uses data from McCreary Centre Society's BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS). The most recent BC AHS was completed in 2018 by over 38,000 youth aged 12–19. For more information about the survey methodology please visit [mcs.bc.ca](http://mcs.bc.ca).

The BC AHS is only available in English. This may have impacted the participation of some international students.

International students from over 150 different countries come to BC to attend public schools (B.C. Government, n.d.). However, there are few studies which have considered their health and well-being.

Studies which have been conducted have shown that international students can experience challenges to their mental health and well-being as a result of homesickness, trying to adapt to a new culture, social isolation, academic pressure, and discrimination (Nicola, 2020; Kaya, 2020; de Moissac et al., 2020). Additionally, international students may be deterred from seeking help due to a preference for self-reliance, a reduced knowledge of available services, and cultural stigma surrounding mental health (de Moissac et al., 2020). Some of these challenges can be alleviated through social supports and connections (B.C. Government, n.d.).

*"If you could help international students more that would be great." 17-year-old male*

## BACKGROUND

In 2018, 6% of youth who completed the BC AHS had come to Canada as international students (an increase from 4% in 2013). Older youth were more likely to report they were an international student. For example, 3% of youth aged 14 or younger were international students, compared to 8% of youth aged 16 and 16% of youth aged 18.

Half of international students identified as female, 46% as male, and 4% as non-binary. The percentage who identified as non-binary was higher than among Canadian-born youth (2%). Most international students identified as straight (79%), 9% as mostly straight, 4% as bisexual, 1% as lesbian or gay, and 6% were not yet sure of their sexual orientation.

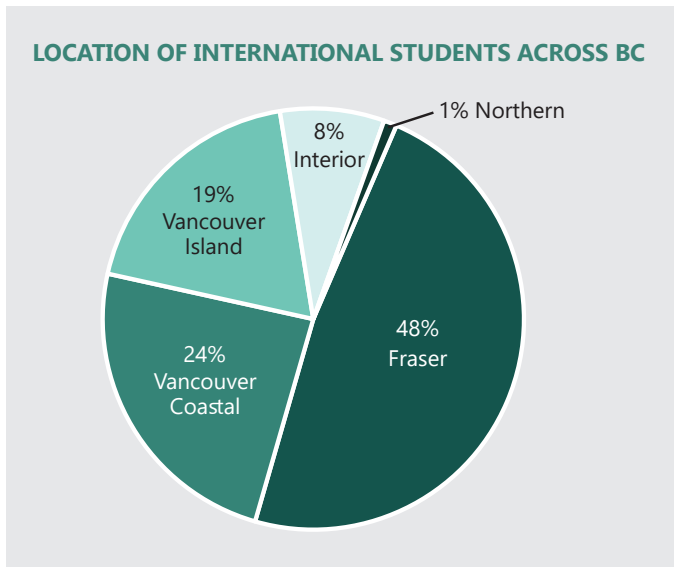
The majority (62%) of international students had been in Canada for less than two years, although 7% had been here for at least six years. East Asian was the most common family background and most international students (90%) spoke a language other than English at home, including around half (54%) who did so most of the time.

The majority of international students lived in the Fraser and Vancouver Coastal regions with the highest percentage in Fraser North (30%) and Fraser South (15%).

Over half of international students reported that spirituality was at least somewhat important in their lives (57% vs. 35% of youth born in Canada).

FAMILY BACKGROUNDS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS	
East Asian	59%
European	17%
Latin/South/Central American	11%
Southeast Asian	10%
South Asian	4%
Indigenous	3%
West Asian	2%
African	1%
Australian/Pacific Islander	NR
Other	1%

Note: Youth could choose more than one response.  
 NR: Percentage not releasable due to risk of deductive disclosure.



## HEALTH PROFILE

### Physical and mental health

*"Mental health is affected by language barriers for international students."* 15-year-old female

Compared to Canadian-born youth, international students were more likely to rate as good or excellent their overall health (84% vs. 80%) and mental health (81% vs. 71%). They were less likely to report having a mental health condition (7% vs. 17% of Canadian-born students); or to have seriously considered suicide (12% vs. 18%), attempted suicide (3% vs. 5%), or self-harmed (14% vs. 18%) in the past year.

Most international students (79%) felt they had a good life and 60% usually felt good about themselves. However, 24% wished they had a different life, compared to 16% of youth born in Canada.

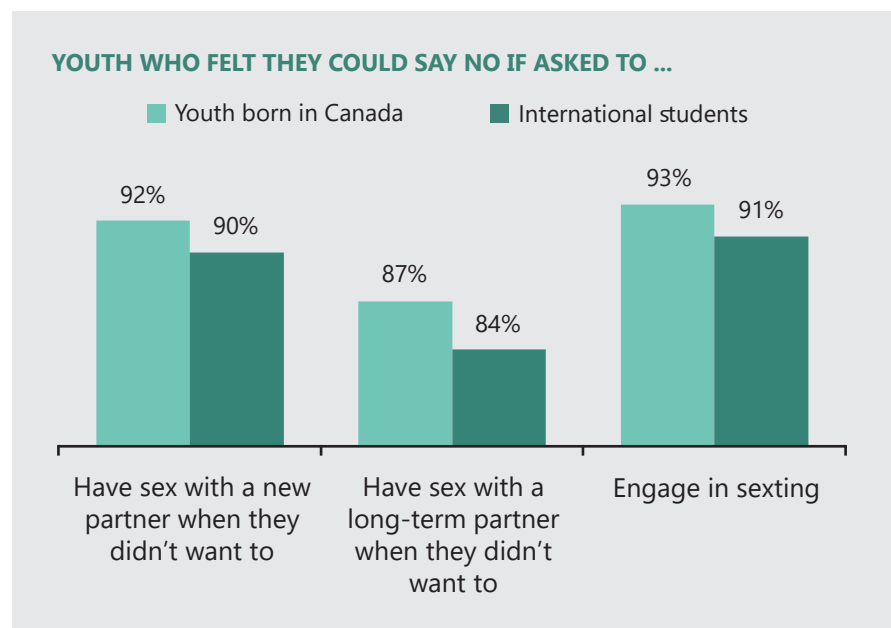
Similar to Canadian-born youth, 85% of international students had felt stressed in the past month but international students were less likely to report their stress was extreme (9% vs. 12% of Canadian-born students).

### Substance use

International students were less likely than their Canadian-born peers to have tried alcohol (39% vs. 46%) or cannabis (14% vs. 28%), and they had tried tobacco at a similar rate (19%). The one substance international students were more likely to have tried was cocaine (4% vs. 2% of youth born in Canada).

### Sexual Health

Compared to youth born in Canada, international students were less likely to have ever had oral sex (16% vs. 23%) or intercourse (17% vs. 21%). Among youth who did have sex, international students were more likely to have used protection the last time they did so (71% vs. 63% of youth born in Canada). However, they were less likely to think they could say no to unwanted sexual activity with a new or long-term partner.



Note: The difference between youth born in Canada and international students who could say no if asked to engage in sexting was not statistically significant.

## ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

*"I really need help, but I am an international student who's working to achieve permanent residency." 17-year-old female*

The most common health services accessed by international students were a walk-in clinic and family doctor. However, they were less likely than Canadian-born students to access these health care providers, and were more likely to visit a school wellness centre and traditional healer.

International students were less likely than Canadian born youth to have seen a dentist in the past year (58% vs. 87%), and 14% had never been to the dentist (vs. 1% of youth born in Canada).

Similar to Canadian born youth, 22% of international students who had needed medical care in the past year had not got the help they needed. However, they were less likely to report missing out on needed mental health services in the past year (14% vs. 19% of youth born in Canada).

Among those who did miss out on needed mental health services, the most common reasons for doing so were thinking or hoping the problem would go away, and not wanting their parents to find out. International students were more likely than youth born in Canada to miss out because they didn't know where to go.

### WHERE YOUTH GOT HEALTH CARE IN THE PAST YEAR

	Youth born in Canada	International Students
Family doctor	64%	25%
Walk-in clinic	36%	26%
Emergency room (ER)	18%	6%
Counsellor/psychologist	13%	6%
Nurse	9%	6%
Youth clinic	4%	3%
School wellness centre	2%	4%
Traditional healer	1%	3%

Note: The difference between youth born in Canada and international students who went to a youth clinic was not statistically significant.

Note: Youth could choose more than one response.

### MOST COMMON REASONS FOR NOT ACCESSING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES IN THE PAST YEAR (among youth who felt they needed services)

	Youth born in Canada	International Students
Thought or hoped the problem would go away	64%	52%
Didn't want parents to know	63%	50%
Afraid or what the doctor would say or do	44%	32%
Didn't know where to go	43%	52%
Afraid someone I know might see me	38%	25%
Too busy to go	36%	29%

Note: The difference between youth born in Canada and international students who did not access mental health services because they were too busy to go was not statistically significant.

## RISKS TO HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

*"I am an international student and I don't have enough money ... I feel pressured and stressed by the community and sometimes I want to go back to my country but I can't do that so I always think of killing myself." 15-year-old female*

*"Care about how international students are feeling; some of them are not rich or really good at studying, and they can't join school groups. They need help." 17-year-old female*

### Poverty and deprivation

International students were more likely than youth born in Canada to go to bed hungry at least some of the time (12% vs. 10%), including 1% who often or always went to bed hungry.

There were also some differences in experiences of material deprivation. International students were more likely than youth born in Canada to feel deprived of access to transportation (5% vs. 3%), space of their own to hang out in (7% vs. 5%), and equipment or clothes to do extra-curricular activities (5% vs. 3%). Whereas they were less likely to feel deprived of spending money (6% vs. 10% of youth born in Canada), a smartphone (4% vs. 7%), and lunch for school/money for lunch (3% vs. 5%).

### Victimization and sense of safety

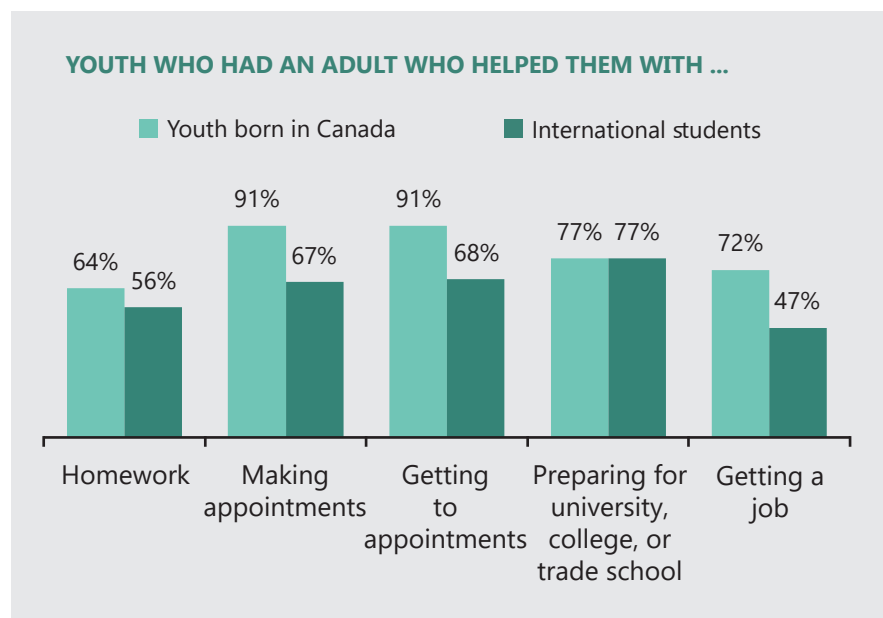
International students were more likely to have been discriminated against because of their race, ethnicity, or skin colour in the past year (20% vs. 12% of Canadian-born students). However, they reported lower rates of being bullied in-person and online (e.g., 6% of international students had been cyberbullied in the past year vs. 15% of youth born in Canada).

International students reported similar rates of feeling safe in their neighbourhood and on transit as Canadian-born youth, but were less likely to often or always feel safe in their home (91% vs. 94%).

### Social isolation

Compared to Canadian-born youth, international students were less likely to have an adult in their community who really cared about them (43% vs. 68%). Also, less than half felt like they were a part of their community (43%) or felt connected to the land or nature (45%).

International students were less likely to have an adult they could ask for help with homework, making and getting to appointments, and getting a job. However, they were also less likely to report needing help in these areas. For example, 15% of international students reported they did not need an adult to help them make appointments (vs. 5% of youth born in Canada).



International students were less likely to have at least one close friend in their school or neighbourhood (93% vs. 97% of youth born in Canada), and to have at least three close in-person friends (73% vs. 82%).

International students may be on a different time zone to their family and friends, as they were more likely to use their phones to communicate with their online friends (29% vs. 24%) on the last school day.

They were also more likely to do a variety of activities after their regular bedtime including chatting or texting (68% vs. 58%), gaming (40% vs. 27%), and other activities online such as checking social media (81% vs. 71%). They were less likely than local born students to have slept eight or more hours the previous night (43% vs. 49%).

## SUPPORTING HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

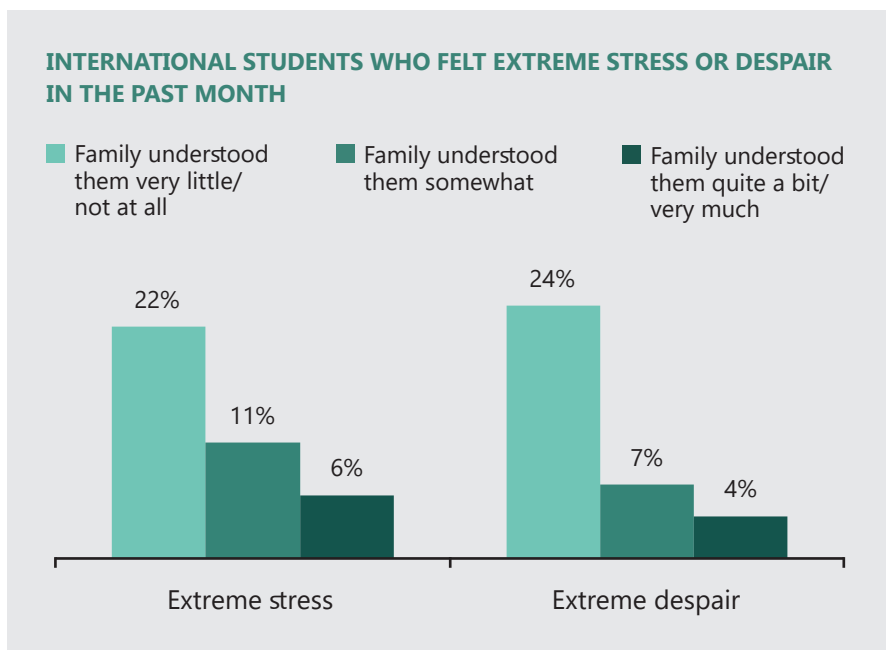
### Connection to family

A greater percentage of international students reported feeling connected to their family, compared to youth born in Canada. For example, 69% felt their family understood them, compared to 59% of Canadian-born youth.

International students who felt their family understood them reported more positive mental health and well-being. For example, they were more likely to feel hopeful for their future (77% vs. 42% of international students who did not feel their family understood them), experience good or excellent mental health (89% vs. 54%), and think they had a good life (89% vs. 43%).

### Engagement in extracurricular activities

In the past year, 92% of international students had tried at least one extracurricular activity (e.g., sports, dance, clubs, volunteering), but they were generally less likely to participate on a weekly basis than youth born in Canada (78% vs. 84%), and were specifically less likely to participate regularly in organized, informal, and extreme sports. They were more likely than Canadian-born youth to take part weekly in the arts, volunteering, and cultural activities.



Note: The difference between youth who felt their family understood them somewhat and quite a bit/very much for extreme despair was not statistically significant.

International students who engaged in at least one extracurricular activity on a weekly basis were more likely than international students who did not participate this regularly to rate their mental health positively (83% vs. 77%), have at least three close in-person friends (75% vs. 65%), and have an adult they could talk to if they were having a serious problem (82% vs. 74%).

Similar to Canadian-born youth, the most common reason international students did not participate in extracurricular activities was because they were too busy (51%). However, 16% of international students reported the activities they wanted to engage in were not available in their community, compared to 12% of Canadian-born youth.

## Support network

*“Because of being an international student from Europe, I feel really great, because I make lots of new friends and see a lot of places.”*  
16-year-old male

In the past year, international students were more likely than youth born in Canada to ask for help from the adults in their life, such as a teacher (61% vs. 54%), school counsellor (46% vs. 29%), and spiritual leader (12% vs. 5%). Most found these adults helpful. For example, 86% of international students who asked for help from their school counsellor in the past year found them helpful.

International students who had supportive individuals in their life reported more positive well-being. For example, those who had asked their friends for support in the past year and found them helpful were more likely to experience good or excellent mental health (83% vs. 54%\* who did not find their friend helpful), to feel good about themselves (61% vs. 45%\*), and to be able to name something they were really good at (74% vs. 54%\*).

Similarly, international students who had an adult in their community who really cared about them were more likely to feel connected to their community (59% vs. 31% who did not have such an adult in their life), participate in weekly extracurricular activities (81% vs. 75%), and find their activities meaningful (58% vs. 44%).

### AT LEAST WEEKLY PARTICIPATION IN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IN THE PAST YEAR



Note: The difference between youth born in Canada and international students who participated at least weekly in dance/yoga/exercise classes was not statistically significant.

Note: A percentage that is marked with an asterisk (\*) should be interpreted with caution, as the standard error was higher than expected, but still within the releasable range.

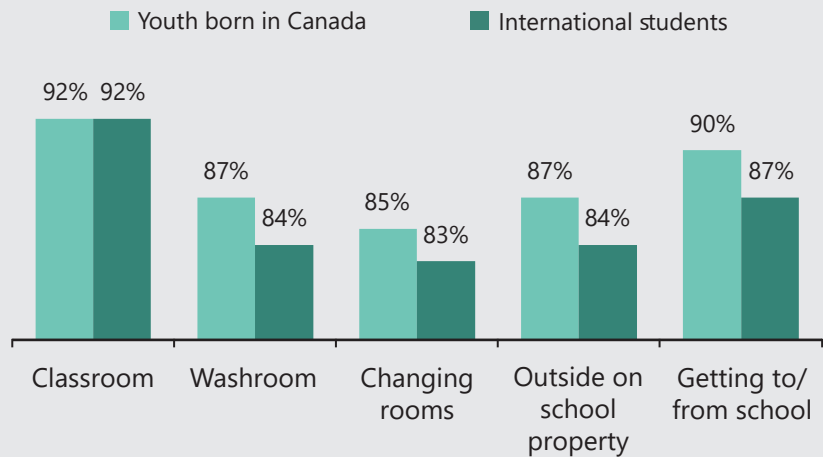


## Positive school environment

International students were more likely than youth born in Canada to feel happy to be at their school (68% vs. 59%) and to feel like their teachers cared about them (73% vs. 65%). Similar to Canadian-born youth, 60% felt a part of their school and 50% felt that school staff other than teachers cared about them.

International students reported more positive outcomes when they felt their teachers cared about them. For example, they were less likely to have skipped class in the past month (24% vs. 39% of international students who did not feel their teachers cared); and were more likely to feel happy at school (79% vs. 23%), safe at school (89% vs. 32%), and a part of their school (72% vs. 22%); and have plans to attend post-secondary (92% vs. 76%).

### YOUTH WHO USUALLY OR ALWAYS FELT SAFE AT SCHOOL



## RESOURCES

**MOSAIC BC** provides support and resources to international students, information about financial benefit eligibility, visa renewal guidance, employment services, and more by phone at 236-521-7094 and email [internationalstudents@mosaicbc.org](mailto:internationalstudents@mosaicbc.org)

Information is also available from the **BC government** at: [welcomebc.ca/Study-in-B-C/Resources-For-International-Students](http://welcomebc.ca/Study-in-B-C/Resources-For-International-Students).

## REFERENCES

British Columbia (BC) Government. *Health and wellness guidelines for international students: Understanding homesickness and acculturation stress*. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/internationaleducation/health-wellness-guidelines-international-students-has.pdf>

de Moissac, D., Graham, J. M., Prada, K., Gueye, N. R., & Rocque, R. (2020). Mental health status and help-seeking strategies of international students in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education/Revue canadienne d'enseignement sup rieur*, 50(4), 52–71. <https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.vi0.188815>

Kaya, J. (2020). Inside the international student world: Challenges, opportunities, and imagined communities. *Journal of International Students*, 10(1), 124–144. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i1.1031>

Nicola, T. (2020). Supporting international high school students in the college admission process: A qualitative study of college counselors. *National Association for College Admission Counseling*. [https://www.nacacnet.org/globalassets/documents/publications/research/supporting-international-high-school-students-in-the-college-admission-process\\_report.pdf](https://www.nacacnet.org/globalassets/documents/publications/research/supporting-international-high-school-students-in-the-college-admission-process_report.pdf)

## TO CITE THIS FACT SHEET:

Casey, E., Smith, A., Jones, G., & McCreary Centre Society. (2021). *International students in BC: A 2018 BC Adolescent Health Survey fact sheet*. [Fact sheet]. McCreary Centre Society. Available at [www.mcs.bc.ca/pdf/2018bcchs\\_factsheet\\_international\\_students.pdf](http://www.mcs.bc.ca/pdf/2018bcchs_factsheet_international_students.pdf)