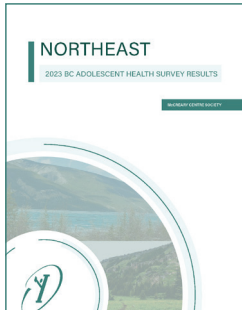


Food security and poverty a concern for local students



The much anticipated Northeast regional results from the 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) were released today by the McCreary Centre Society (McCreary). The survey is conducted every 5 years and focuses on the health and well-being of students in Grades 7-12.

The Northeast report is one of 16 regional reports of the 2023 BC AHS results to be released this year. It shares data provided by students in the Northeast Health Service Delivery Area (HSDA). The Northeast HSDA is comprised of three school districts: Peace River South, Peace River North, and

Fort Nelson. The Peace River North School District was the only district to not participate in the province-wide survey in 2023. Additional students were surveyed in the other two school districts to make up for this gap.

The local results highlight the economic challenges experienced by young people in the region. For example in the past 12 months, 10% of youth cut the size of their meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food, and 13% went to bed hungry at least sometimes for this reason (vs. 9% provincially). Also, 4% had eaten food from a food bank on the day before completing the survey.

During the school year, 40% of students worked at a paid job (vs. 32% provincially). Local students were 3 times more likely to be working 21 or more hours each week than students across BC (6% vs. 2% provincially). Around half of students reported that they worked because they needed money and 11% reported that they were working to contribute to their family's income.

Most youth in the region enjoyed being physically active, but 13% reported that they missed out on extracurricular sports and other types of extracurricular physical activity because they could not afford to participate (vs. 9% provincially).

McCreary's Executive Director, Dr. Annie Smith, commented on the Northeast: *"We saw a lot of positives for this region in the survey results, such as the impact of Indigenous language revitalization and the increased presence of supportive adults in youth's lives, but the economic challenges faced by many young people and their families were also really prominent in the results. This is really concerning, as we know that poverty can have a huge impact on young people's mental and physical health, as well as on their aspirations and hopefulness."*

Smith welcomed new food initiatives being implemented in schools: *"We see a higher percentage of students locally who rely on getting their breakfast at school than we see across BC, so ensuring there is sufficient funding to support school food programs is absolutely vital. We know that young people can't learn and fully participate in school and community life when they are hungry, and that the knock-on effects of this can continue to have an impact into adulthood."*

The survey result showed the value of young people having access to healthy food and getting their other basic needs met. The results also showed the impact of feeling connected and supported. It was therefore encouraging to see that most Northeast youth (76%) had at least one adult in their neighbourhood or community who they felt cared about them. Also, 24% had adults both inside and outside their family they could talk to if they were having a serious problem, which was an increase from 20% in 2018.

To read the full results for the Northeast region, please visit mcs.bc.ca/pdf/2023_bcchs_northeast.pdf.



McCreary Centre Society is a non-government, non-profit organization committed to improving the health of BC youth through research, evaluation, and community-based projects.

Founded in 1977, our vision is that all youth are supported to be healthy and connected.

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Backgrounder

The 2023 BC AHS was completed by around 38,500 young people aged 12–19 in 59 of BC's 60 school districts. The survey was developed in consultation with young people, parents, and other experts in youth health. It was pilot-tested with diverse young people in communities across BC before being administered in this region by Public Health Resource Nurses and allied health professionals to students in mainstream public schools in the spring of 2023.

Some key findings for the Northeast region:

- Around a third (32%) of students identified as Indigenous (vs. 10% provincially). Local Indigenous youth were more likely than those 5 years earlier to speak at least a few words of an Indigenous language (33% vs. 21% in 2018).
- The night before completing the survey, 38% of youth slept for at least 8 hours, and 23% slept 5 hours or less. Local youth were more likely than youth across BC to have slept 5 hours or less (18% provincially), and were less likely to go offline after they were expected to be asleep (7% vs. 10%).
- Northeast youth were less likely than those 5 years earlier to have three or more close in-person friends in their school or community (62% vs. 80% in 2018). They were more likely to have three or more online friends they had never met in person (23% vs. 17% in 2018).
- Reflecting the provincial trend, there was a local decrease in the percentage of youth who rated their mental health as good or excellent (55% vs. 70% in 2018), and an increase in those who had self-harmed (29% vs. 17% in 2018) and seriously considered suicide (25% vs. 20% in 2018) in the past year. Males were the most likely to report positive mental health.
- Males were the least likely to have experienced abuse, sexual harassment, and discrimination. Around 7 in 10 non-binary youth often or always felt safe in their home, compared to 91% of males.
- In this region, 41% of youth had ever vaped (vs. 26% provincially). One in 5 of those who had ever vaped (20%) vaped every day in the past month. The majority of these youth (81%) vaped within 30 minutes of waking up. Females were more likely than males to have tried vaping (49% vs. 34%), as well as to have used cannabis (39% vs. 30%) and alcohol (60% vs. 51%).
- Most youth (88%) got at least an hour of moderate to vigorous exercise in the past week, including 18% who exercised every day. The majority reported that they enjoyed exercising and being physically active at least somewhat (88%), including 35% who enjoyed exercising very much.
- There were some health and well-being differences between youth in urban- and rural-based schools. For example, urban-based youth were more likely to report good or excellent mental health, and were less likely to have vaped and used other substances. Rural-based youth were more likely to engage in informal sports (such as hiking and biking) at least weekly, and were more likely to know how to swim and to be confident swimmers.
- Local survey results highlight some of the factors that can negatively affect health and well-being, such as experiencing deprivation; as well as the value of exercise, sleep, and access to healthy food. The results also clearly show the importance of youth feeling connected to family, culture, school, and community.

For more information about the BC Adolescent Health Survey, please visit mcs.bc.ca/about_bcahs.

