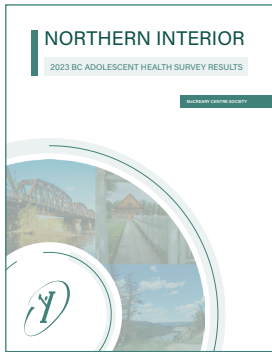


Study results show Northern Interior teen substance use remains above the provincial average but is declining



Northern Interior regional results from the 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) were released today by McCreary Centre Society.

The provincial results from the survey were published in February and showed that substance use was generally declining among public school students in Grades 7 to 12. McCreary Centre Society's Executive Director and co-author of the Northern Interior report, Dr. Annie Smith explained how results in this region compared to those for the province as a whole: *"We have been doing the survey for 30 years and historically we have always seen higher rates of alcohol and other substance use in this region than we typically see in places like Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland. The most recent survey was no exception, but we did see a drop over the past 5 years in Northern Interior young people smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol. The percentage who had drunk alcohol dropped from 55% to 51% and we went from 1 in 4 having tried smoking to around 1 in 5."*

"Provincially, we did see a worrying trend in that, although youth were generally less likely to have tried substances, those that did use them were starting to do so at a younger age. We know that this is not only concerning from a developmental perspective but increases the chances that youth will go on to struggle with substance use challenges later in life. It was therefore good to see youth in this region not following the provincial trend when it came to earlier cannabis use."

Northern Interior results were not all trending in a positive direction, as there were increases in youth reporting mental health challenges, and experiencing bereavement due to an overdose (12% vs. 6% in 2018). Also, around 1 in 5 Northern Interior youth (21%) missed out on needed mental health services in the past year, with non-binary youth the most likely to have missed out (45% vs. 28% of females vs. 12% of males).

Reflecting on these results, Smith stated: *"We have seen a real uptick in youth reporting mental health conditions such as anxiety disorder and PTSD. So, it was concerning to see youth in this region being more likely than pre-covid to report that they were not able to access the mental health services they needed. It was also concerning that they were around twice as likely as local youth 5 years earlier to report that the reasons they missed out on this type of care were because their parent or guardian would not take them and because they were on a waiting list."*

"We also saw that when youth in this region were asked where they went when they needed reliable health information, they most commonly turned to a family member for that information. I think all these results tell us that as adults we need to get more comfortable talking to young people about mental health, and listening to them when they reach out for help."

To read the full results for Northern Interior, please visit mcs.bc.ca/pdf/2023_bcabs_northern_interior.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 38,488 BC students aged 12–19 in the spring of 2023. It was the seventh time the survey had been conducted since 1992. This report is one of 16 regional reports of the BC AHS results. It shares data provided by students in Grades 7–12 in the Northern Interior Health Service Delivery Area (HSDA).

Northern Interior HSDA is comprised of three school districts: Quesnel (SD 28), Prince George (SD 57), and Nechako Lakes (SD 91). All school districts in this region have participated in the BC AHS since 2013, and all have participated in six waves of the survey. The HSDA also includes students in Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique (SD 93).

Some key findings for Northern Interior:

Northern Interior students remained more likely than their peers across BC to identify as European and Indigenous. However, the region is becoming increasingly diverse. For example, there was an increase in youth born abroad, as well as an increase in those who identified as a gender and sexual minority. Local results also showed:

- Compared to previous survey years, local youth were more likely to be living in a household with their father/stepfather, grandparent(s), and other related adults. There was also an increase in the percentage who had caretaking responsibilities for a relative (26% vs. 22% in 2018), and who did not have a quiet place to sleep (4% vs. 2% in 2018).
- In the past 12 months, 8% of youth cut the size of their meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food, and 12% went to bed hungry at least sometimes for this reason. The percentage who did not eat breakfast on school days was higher than 5 years earlier (32% vs. 20% in 2018), and higher than the 2023 provincial rate (29%). Also, local youth were more likely than youth across BC to eat breakfast at school (13% vs. 6%).
- Similar to the provincial picture, youth in this region reported poorer mental health than their peers 5 years earlier. For example, they were less likely to rate their mental health as good or excellent (57% vs. 71% in 2018) and to feel quite or very hopeful for their future (61% vs. 68%).
- In comparison to the province, local youth were less likely to have accessed health care from a family doctor (49% vs. 54% across BC). They were more likely to have accessed care from a walk-in clinic (32% vs. 24%) and Foundry (3% vs. 2%).
- Northern Interior youth remained more likely than youth across the province to have engaged in sexual activity, and were less likely to report they received sex education at school (74% vs. 80% across BC). There was a local increase in students who used withdrawal as their only method of birth control (10% vs. 6% in 2018).
- Feeling connected and supported was linked to more positive health and well-being for students in this region. Connection to school, community, and family decreased locally and across the province. However, local youth remained more likely than those across BC to feel they had an adult in their neighbourhood or community who cared about them (79% vs. 73%).

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



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