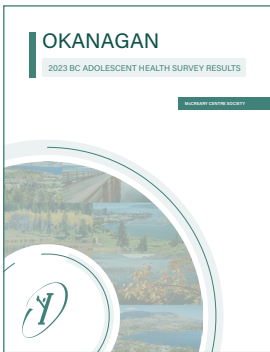


Okanagan youth less likely to be sexually active and drink alcohol than in previous years, but also less likely to report positive mental health



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

The results for the region show some improving trends, but also some concerning ones. For example, there was a decrease in youth who rated their mental health as good or excellent (e.g., 56% vs. 70% of Okanagan youth in 2018), and an increase in those who self-harmed in the past 12 months (e.g., 27% vs. 19% in 2018). Also, youth who experienced stress were less likely to feel they managed their stress well or very well (46% vs. 54% in 2018).

McCreary Centre Society's Executive Director and co-author of the Okanagan report, Dr. Annie Smith explained: *"Results in the Okanagan are mirroring what we are seeing across the rest of the province with young people reporting poorer mental health, and feeling less able to cope with the stress in their life. We also see youth feeling less connected to school, having fewer close in-person friends, and being less likely to feel their family understands them. It is also striking that over a quarter of Okanagan youth are reporting they often or always feel lonely."*

Smith went on to add: *"The survey results also show us that youth in the Okanagan report better health and well-being (including more positive mental health) when they have access to supportive adults, have someone they can talk to about their problems, and feel cared about; as well as when they have access to the service and supports that they need."*

The BC AHS has been conducted in schools across BC since 1992. Youth in the Okanagan have traditionally been more likely to engage in sexual activity and use substances than their peers across the province. This remained the case in 2023. For example, 34% of local youth had tried vaping, compared to 26% provincially. However, compared to Okanagan youth 5 years earlier, youth in 2023 were less likely to have engaged in oral sex (23% vs. 27% in 2018), smoked tobacco (20% vs. 24%), and drunk alcohol (49% vs. 53%).

Provincially, youth were trying cannabis at a younger age than in previous years. This was not the case in the Okanagan, as there was an increase in the percentage who waited until they were at least 15 years old to first try cannabis (44% vs. 35% in 2013; among those who had ever used cannabis).

Smith commented on these results: *"This was the first survey we have done since cannabis was legalized for adults, and it is concerning to see youth across BC starting to use cannabis at a younger age. We know that the younger age at which youth start using substances, the more likely they are to go on to use regularly and heavily, and to experience dependence problems later in life. It is therefore good to see that there is no increase in early use here, and also that fewer youth are starting to use alcohol and smoking."*

To read the full results for the Okanagan, please visit mcs.bc.ca/pdf/2023_bcchs_okanagan.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.

For interviews, contact:

Annie Smith
Executive Director
Tel: 604-291-1996 ext. 225
Cell: 604-728-9494
Email: annie@mcs.bc.ca

Where to find us:

3552 Hastings Street East
Vancouver, BC, V5K 2A7

Backgrounder

The 2023 BC AHS was completed by around 38,500 youth aged 12–19 in 59 of BC's 60 school districts. 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 Okanagan Health Service Delivery Area (HSDA). Okanagan HSDA is comprised of six school districts: Vernon, Central Okanagan, Okanagan Similkameen, Nicola Similkameen, Okanagan Skaha, and North Okanagan–Shuswap. All school districts in this region have participated in the survey since 1998. The HSDA also includes students in Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique.

Some key findings for the Okanagan:

- Okanagan youth remained more likely than youth across BC to identify as European (60% vs. 43%) and Indigenous (15% vs. 10%). However, the region is becoming increasingly diverse, with a greater percentage of youth born abroad and identifying as a gender and sexual minority than in previous survey years. For example, the percentage of local students who identified their sexual orientation as straight decreased from 84% in 2018 to 76%.
- There was an increase in the percentage of Indigenous youth who could speak at least a few words of an Indigenous language (31% vs. 22% in 2018).
- The percentage of youth who lived in households with their grandparent(s), sibling(s), and other adults related to them increased, as did the percentage who had caretaking responsibilities for a relative (23% vs. 18% in 2018).
- Locally, 43% of youth worked at a paid job during the school year, which was higher than the provincial rate (32%). Males were more likely than females to be working in excess of 20 hours a week (5% vs. 3%).
- Okanagan youth remained more likely than youth across BC to get at least 8 hours of sleep the night before completing the survey (45% vs. 42%). However, the percentage who slept for 8 or more hours decreased from 53% in 2018 and 56% in 2013.
- There was an increase in the percentage of youth who were injured seriously enough to require medical attention in the past year (36% vs. 28% in 2018), and in those who had experienced a concussion during this time (20% vs. 17% in 2018). Both of these rates were above the provincial average.
- Reflecting provincial results, local youth were less likely than those 5 years earlier to feel like a part of their school (51% vs. 56%), feel safe at school (62% vs. 71%), and plan to attend post-secondary (73% vs. 79%).
- Provincially, community connectedness also decreased. This was not the case locally, where rates did not change over the past decade (38% felt quite or very connected to their community in 2023).
- Males were generally the most likely to report positive health and well-being. For example, they were more likely than females and non-binary youth to rate their mental health as good or excellent, and were the least likely to have tried alcohol. They were also the least likely to have experienced physical abuse, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment.
- The Okanagan survey results highlight some of the factors that can negatively impact 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.

