



Are BC's adolescents taking more risks?

According to the latest McCreary Centre Society survey of 30,000 of the province's Grade 7-12 students, the answer in many ways is an emphatic "no."

The 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey was conducted in 56 of BC's 59 school districts. It is the fifth time students have been asked to complete the comprehensive health survey since 1992.

Results show that youth are generally making better choices about risk behaviours than they have in previous years. For example, a lower percentage of students reported having tried tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, or other substances than their peers five and ten years ago. They were also more likely to engage in injury prevention behaviours, such as wearing a seat belt and not driving after drinking.

These choices may also be reflected in better health outcomes: Students were less likely to have had a sexually transmitted infection or to have been pregnant or caused a pregnancy, and a smaller percentage reported serious injuries than in previous years.

Other encouraging news from the survey included a decrease in the percentage of students who had been physically or sexually abused, as well as in the percentage who had been sexually harassed.

However, the teen years can still be a struggle for many youth. Students' responses to questions about their mental health were particularly concerning, especially among girls who were more likely than boys to report extreme stress, extreme despair, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts. Improvements seen between 2003 and 2008 in the percentage of students reporting suicide attempts continued for males but not for females.

Although students in 2013 were less likely to be cyberbullied than in 2008, they were more likely to be teased or socially excluded than reported previously. Almost one in four students (24%) admitted that they had bullied someone either in person or online, with girls more likely than boys to be the victim of most forms of bullying. Fourteen year olds were particularly vulnerable.

Only 24% of students slept for the recommended nine hours or more on the night before they took the survey, and most used their phone or the Internet after they were supposed to be asleep (85% of females vs. 79% of males). This is concerning because lack of sleep was linked to poorer mental health.

Despite the encouraging decline in serious injuries, 16% of youth had experienced a concussion in the past year. Yet adults may not be taking these injuries seriously. Among youth who had not accessed needed

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

Founded in 1977, the Society sponsors and promotes a wide range of activities and research to address unmet health needs of young people.

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medical help, those who had a head injury were more likely to report that their parents would not take them (19% vs. 14%), and that they had previous negative experiences seeking medical help (15% vs. 10%).

“What youth have told us loud and clear through the survey is that they are getting the message about health risk behaviours such as binge drinking, and are acting more responsibly as a result. However, they are also telling us that we have to focus our attention on the major areas of concern such as mental health, bullying and rising obesity,” said McCreary Centre Society’s Executive Director, Annie Smith.

The survey identified a number of protective factors which were associated with better health for even the most vulnerable of BC students. These included having caring adults to turn to, having supportive friends, feeling safe in their neighborhood, and having strong connections to school, community and culture.

A copy of the report *From Hastings Street to Haida Gwaii: Provincial results of the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey* can be obtained at www.mcs.bc.ca

A film made by students at the Digital Media Academy, Argyle Secondary School, North Vancouver will accompany the launch and will include commentary on the results from Hon Stephanie Cadieux, Minister of Children and Family Development; BC Representative for Children and Youth, Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond; Vancouver Whitecaps CEO Bob Lenarduzzi; and many other leading experts.

The report will be launched at 9am on February 12th at the Vancity Theatre. All media are welcome.

Webinars

A series of webinars to share the findings have also been scheduled:

- Wednesday, February 12, 3:00 pm
- Thursday, February 13, 3:00 pm
- Friday, February 14, 8:00 am
- Friday, February 14, 12:00 pm
- Friday, February 14, 3:00 pm
- Monday, February 17, 12:00 pm
- Tuesday, February 18, 12:00 pm
- Tuesday, February 25, 8:00 am
- Tuesday, February 25, 12:00 pm

Details of how to join the webinars are available at www.mcs.bc.ca.

BACKGROUND

Between February and June 2013, almost 30,000 students in Grades 7–12 completed the BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) in schools across British Columbia.

This is the fifth time students have been asked to complete the survey. It was conducted previously in 1992, 1998, 2003 and 2008. In 2013, the regional coverage was the highest yet. Fifty-six of the 59 BC school districts participated in the survey. The results are considered representative of 98.5% of mainstream school students in the province.

The survey provides decision makers and others with an interest in youth health with information on the health picture of young people in BC, as well as essential information about health trends, and about risk and protective factors that can influence young people's healthy transitions to adulthood.

The survey is designed to consider emerging youth health issues and to track trends over time. The survey included 130 questions asking youth about their perceptions of their current physical and emotional health, risky behaviours and health promoting practices. Healthy development for youth includes many contributing factors and the survey also asked about broader issues such as feelings of safety, relationships and engagement in a variety of activities.

Some key findings from the report:

- BC youth are increasingly diverse. For example, compared to five and ten years ago, a lower percentage of youth spoke only English at home (51% vs. 53% in 2008 and 57% in 2003), fewer lived with at least one parent (94% in 2013 vs. 96% in 2003 and 2008), and fewer identified as completely straight (81% vs. 86% in 2008, and 85% in 2003), with a rise in the percentage of male and female students who identified as bisexual, and an increase in the percentage of female students who identified as lesbian.
- Obesity is a major health concern in Canada. A greater percentage of youth were obese than in previous survey years, and only 17% of students aged 12 to 17 met the Canadian guidelines of an hour of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day.
- One in five students (20%) cared for a relative on an average school day.
- Females were three times as likely as males to report a mental or emotional health condition (15% vs. 5%).
- In the past year, 8% of youth did not get medical help when they thought they needed it and 11% (17% of females vs. 5% of males) did not get needed mental health services. The most common reason students did not access mental health care was that they did not want their parent to know (64% of females and 57% of males).

- Students aged 14 and older were more likely in 2013 than in 2008 to report extreme levels of despair to the point where they could not function.
- Eight percent of males reported suicidal ideation in the past year, which was a decrease from 9% in 2008 and 11% in 2003. However, the decline for females seen between 2003 (21%) and 2008 (14%) did not continue, but instead rose to 17%.
- Similarly, the rate of female students who reported suicide attempts in the past year increased between 2008 and 2013, but remained lower than the rate in 2003, while rates for males remained constant.
- A known risk factor for attempting suicide is having had a family member or close friend attempt or die by suicide. Thirteen percent of students reported that a family member had tried to kill themselves at some point (4% in the past year), and 23% reported that a close friend had attempted suicide (16% in the past year).
- Students in every grade who slept nine or more hours the night before completing the survey were more likely than students who got less sleep to report that their mental health was good or excellent.
- Only 27% of males and 21% of females slept for nine hours or more. Another 29% of youth slept eight hours (31% of males vs. 28% of females). Additionally, 82% of youth were online and/or on their phone after they were supposed to be asleep.
- Thirteen percent of students reported they were more physically active as a result of the 2010 Winter Olympics, and 6% thought they had more sports opportunities.
- Students who played sports or exercised were more likely than their less active peers to rate their mental health as good or excellent; to report feeling happy, calm and at peace and to have slept for nine or more hours on the night before taking the survey.
- Students who felt their family paid attention to were more likely to engage in injury prevention behaviours. For example, they were more likely to wear a seatbelt and less likely to drive after drinking alcohol or using marijuana.
- Students who had an adult outside their family who cared about them were more likely to be able to name something they were good at, to have positive aspirations for the future and to have felt happy in the past month.
- Students in 2013 were more likely than their peers in 2008 to have friends who would disapprove of risk behaviours such as getting drunk, joining a gang, fighting and dropping out of school. Having pro-social friends reduced the risk of youth engaging in these behaviours.