



MEDIA RELEASE | March 2015

McCreary study on sexual health of youth in BC has been released

The McCreary Centre Society has released its first full length report about the sexual health of youth in BC. Using data from the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS), the report shows that the majority of Grade 7–12 students in BC are not sexually active, and youth who do have sex are waiting longer to do so than their peers who took the survey five and 10 years earlier.

Youth who were more connected to family and school were less likely to have engaged in sexual activity. Having a supportive adult inside the family and feeling good about themselves and their abilities were also associated with a lower likelihood of youth engaging in sexual activity.

In 2013, almost 30,000 students in Grades 7–12 took the survey and those who indicated ever having sex answered some additional questions about their sexual health behaviours.

The report found that in 2013 over two thirds of youth (69%) who ever had sex reported using a condom or other barrier the last time they had intercourse. However, only 17% of those who ever had oral sex used such a barrier, suggesting they may require more education about STIs.

While the report noted many youth were making safer choices around their sexual health, it also highlighted areas of concern. For instance, youth who did not use any form of contraception the last time they had intercourse were more than five times as likely as those who used some contraceptive method to report a history of pregnancy.

In addition, social inequities such as an unstable home life, a history of government care, poverty, a history of abuse, and violence exposure were associated with poorer sexual health.

Similarly, some marginalized groups such as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth, those with a health condition or disability, and youth with custody experience, also reported higher sexual health risks than their peers.

The importance of feeling connected to school and family was evident again among students who had sex, in terms of making healthier choices. Also, students who were connected to their community; had supportive adult and peer networks; and were involved in meaningful extracurricular activities also reported healthier sexual choices.

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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Annie Smith, Executive Director of McCreary commented on the report:

"Although some people may be uncomfortable with the topic of youth sexual activity, the results show us that we need to be talking to young people about their sexual health. Whether we like it or not, some youth will become sexually active and it is important that they know how to protect themselves, how to negotiate safe relationships, and who to turn to if they need support or access to resources."

"It is important to pay attention to the protective factors highlighted in the report such as having supportive adult to turn to that help young people make healthier choices when they do become sexually active."

The report includes youth's suggestions for improving their knowledge and decision making around sexual activity, including the need to teach youth how to negotiate relationships and make informed choices about whether or not to engage in sexual activity.

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

A series of webinars to share the findings have also been scheduled for **April 8th at noon, April 9th at noon, April 14th at 1:00pm, and April 16th at 9:30am**. Login details are available at www.mcs.bc.ca.

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. The survey results are used by federal and provincial policy makers and program planners, as well as by local decision makers and others with an interest in youth health.

The survey is designed to consider emerging youth health issues and to track trends over time. It included 130 questions asking youth about their perceptions of their current physical and emotional health, as well as about health risk 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.

A SELECTION OF KEY FINDINGS: SEXUAL HEALTH OF YOUTH IN BC

- Most youth were not sexually active. Three quarters of BC youth had not engaged in either oral sex or sexual intercourse.
- Although the 2013 BC AHS did not ask the reasons youth may not have engaged in sexual activity, the 2008 survey did. According to that survey, among students who had not had sex, 51% were waiting until they met the right person, 50% were not ready, and 39% did not want to be involved in a pregnancy.
- In 2013, 23% of BC students had ever had oral sex, down from 26% in 2008.
- 19% of male and female students reported ever having had intercourse (a decrease from 24% in 2003). Older students were more likely to have had intercourse than younger ones. For example, 3% of 13-year-olds had had intercourse compared to 16% of 15-year-olds and 39% of 17-year-olds.
- Youth who did have intercourse waited longer to do so than in previous survey years (eg 4% of youth under the age of 15 had ever had intercourse, compared to 7% in 2008 and 8% in 2003).
- Among youth who had ever had intercourse, the most common age for first doing so was 15.
- Youth who first had sex at age 15 or older engaged in safer sexual practices than those who first had sex at an earlier age.
- Among those who ever had intercourse, the percentage of male and female youth reporting same gender partners exclusively increased from 1% in 2003 to 2% in 2013, while the percentage reporting opposite gender partners exclusively decreased from 90% to 87%.
- Social inequities appeared to contribute to challenges in sexual health. However even the most vulnerable young people reported safer sexual practices if they had supportive relationships with adults and peers in their life and felt good about themselves and their abilities.