Talking about youth health:

McCreary Centre Society

Young people's response to data from the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey

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Youth health • Youth research • Youth engagement

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Founded in 1977, McCreary Centre Society is a non-governmental not-for-profit committed to improving the health of BC youth through research, evaluation, and youth engagement projects.

Acknowledgements

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BRITISH COLUMBIA | Office of the Provincial Health Officer

REPRESENTATIVE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Table of contents:

About the report:

In 2009, McCreary Centre Society was tasked by the BC Office of the Representative for Children and Youth and the Provincial Health Officer with getting young people's feedback on measurements of youth health.

At that time, 112 diverse youth from across BC participated in focus groups to discuss results from the 2008 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS), and data from the BC Ministry of Education and BC Stats.

In 2014, McCreary was asked again to collect young people's feedback and perspectives about a range of new and updated data on youth health including the BC AHS. These have been included in a joint report released in June 2015 by the BC Office of the Representative for Children and Youth and the Provincial Health Officer called Growing Up in B.C. 2015. The report is available at: *https://www.rcybc.ca/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/reports_publications/guibc-2015-finalforweb_0.pdf*

In this report we consider in greater detail youth's feedback about McCreary's 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey. This provides context to the survey findings and also helps to inform the development of the next survey which will take place in 2018.

Quotes from youth participants are included through the report.

Collecting youth's responses to the data

In 2014, 31 focus groups were completed with a total of 228 participants, aged 13–21. Youth who had stayed in government care or had been on a Youth Agreement were specifically sought out for their perspectives on data which related to their unique experiences.

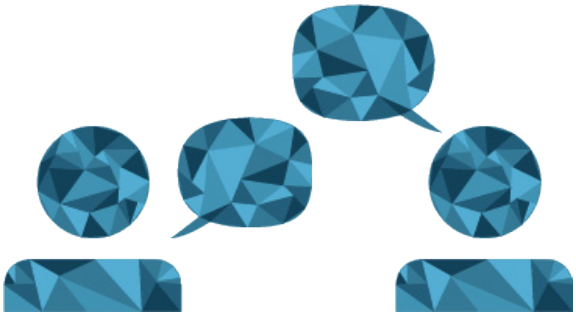
Prior to the commencement of each focus group, the facilitators explained the purpose and content of the group and the consent procedures for participation. Youth who wished to participate also read and signed a consent form and were compensated for their time with an honorarium.

A facilitated discussion about the data followed, including open questions such as "What should people bear in mind when they look at this data?" and more specific questions such as "The data shows that being too busy is a major reason youth do not participate in extracurricular activities. What are they busy doing?" Participants were also asked for their suggestions for improving youth health in BC.

Limitations

Some youth participants with literacy challenges or who were English language learners were not able to comment on some of the data because they were unable to understand the content that was presented and discussed.

Youth were asked to provide some basic demographic information to ensure the perspectives of youth with diverse experiences were captured. Not all youth were able to do this or chose not to. As a result, demographic information was captured for 207 of the 228 youth who participated. Additionally, not all participants gave their perspective on every measure of youth health.



Participants were asked to comment on data across different domains of child and youth health. These domains were child behaviour, child physical and mental health, child safety, child learning, family economic well-being, and family, peer, and community connections.

Youth participants

Among youth who provided demographic information, participants were most commonly 15–17 years old (59%). Fifty-seven percent identified as female, 36% as male, and 7% as another gender (e.g., transgender, gender fluid).

Youth identified with a range of backgrounds. The most common were European (41%), Aboriginal (26%), and East Asian (18%). Other backgrounds included Southeast Asian, African, South Asian, West Asian and Latin/Central/South American. Seven percent of youth did not know their family background.

Most youth were born in Canada (78%). Among those born abroad, the majority were permanent residents or Canadian citizens.

Seventy-five percent of youth identified as straight, 15% as bisexual, and 4% as gay or lesbian. The rest reported questioning who they were attracted to or not having attractions.

Most youth (86%) were currently in school, with 73% attending high school and 14% attending a post-secondary institution (e.g., trade school, college, university). Youth who were not currently in school most commonly indicated that they stopped going once they finished high school (35%) or before they graduated from high school (31%).

A total of 24% of youth reported ever living in a foster home (including 7% who lived there currently), and 18% reported ever living in a group home (with 3% currently living there). In addition, 13% of youth had stayed in a youth custody centre (with 4% currently staying there). Seventeen percent of youth had been on a Youth Agreement (including 7% who were currently on one).

Forty-nine percent of youth reported having a health condition or disability, and the most common was a mental or emotional health condition (35%). Other common conditions included an addiction to alcohol or other drugs (16%), a long-term or chronic medical condition (e.g., diabetes, asthma; 12%), a behavioural condition (e.g., conduct disorder), and a learning disability (11%).

Child behaviour:

PARTICIPATION IN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

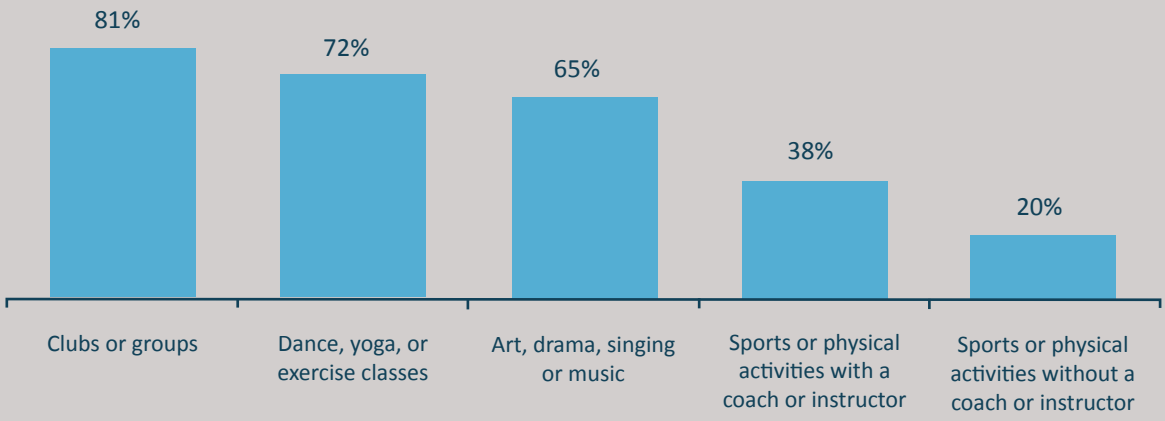
Youth were shown BC AHS findings about levels of participation in various extracurricular activities. Among youth who were engaged in activities, many said that they had been engaged in the particular activity for a long time and felt like they were part of a team or group of friends, which was what motivated them to stay engaged.

Several older youth who were engaged in clubs, orchestras, and sports teams said that they would not join these activities now but would keep doing them because they were an established part of their routine. They also said parental support helped them to stay engaged. Others said that in older grades activities like sports teams and some dance and music programs became too competitive and it was no longer fun.

"If you're not used to doing sports when you're young, it won't take up a big part of your life later."

"If your parents support you you're more likely to do it if you have a support system and encouragement. Like, if they come to watch your game."

Youth who did not participate in extracurricular activities in the past year



Feedback on the survey question

Participants pointed out that even if they did not take part in organized extracurricular activities, they might be engaged in other types of activities, such as online games and socializing, where they felt they developed similar skills and friendships to those which would be acquired through organized extracurricular activities.

"We also deserve to relax. The time you're not doing anything, that's OK too."

Barriers to participation in extracurricular activities

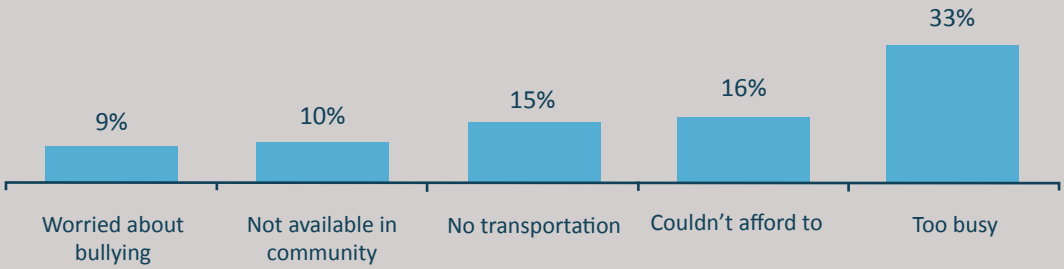
Some youth felt that it was not one barrier that had prevented them from participating in activities but rather the multitude of barriers they faced that made it feel too overwhelming.

Youth of all ages and backgrounds agreed that the major reason they did not participate in activities was that they were too busy, and that other commitments increased as they got older.

"By the time I'm finished with school and work, I just have nothing left…"

"I was in school, working, and going to soccer on the weekend. I had to make a choice."

Barriers to participating in extracurricular activities in the past year



Most youth were unable to articulate what made them too busy to participate. Among those who could explain, a variety of different reasons were given. One of the most common was having time management challenges as a result of spending more time than they intended on their cellphone texting or using the Internet.

Spending time with friends, either online or in person, was considered more important for some youth than engaging in organized activities, and they did not feel they had time for both.

Homework, after-school classes or online courses took away time which students might otherwise have used to pursue extracurricular activities, as did having to get involved in volunteer work for high school credits and to improve their chance of getting accepted into a post-secondary institution.

Other activities that kept youth too busy to join extracurricular activities included family commitments, such as caring for younger siblings and preparing the family dinner. Some youth whose parents were immigrants reported that in some cultures, they were not encouraged to do extracurricular activities because their family responsibilities were the priority.

Youth in government care and those living on a Youth Agreement thought that they were busier than other youth because they had so many appointments with social workers and other professionals to fit into their day. Also, having to balance the responsibilities of being in care or living on a Youth Agreement and being in school often left them too exhausted to think about taking on extra commitments.

"You can waste an hour checking your phone…You watch one [video clip] after another."

"You could exercise but you'd rather stay inside and play the game."

"My brother used to pick me up and walk me home. He was really good at basketball, but he couldn't be on the school team because he had to walk me home."

Young mothers talked about having to take their child to a different location for child care than where activities were offered. This was too time consuming because they were juggling so many other responsibilities as well.

Scheduling was another reason youth gave for not taking part in activities, particularly sports and music which often held practice early in the morning. Participants suggested that drop-in sports after school or on weekends would overcome several of the barriers they encounter. Youth could attend when their schedule allowed and they could afford it.

When reviewing the data, some youth thought that in reality more than 16% likely did not take part in activities because they could not afford to do so, but were too embarrassed to admit it.

Participating in an extracurricular activity was often not just a one-off cost of joining but also included ongoing costs such as clothing, equipment, events, and trips which put the activity beyond their reach. Also, the more skilled youth became in an activity, the greater the expense as additional travel, uniforms, and equipment were needed.

Youth who did not have the financial resources to engage in activities felt that this affected their self-esteem, especially when they watched their peers getting involved. They wished that there were more free activities, or the opportunity for youth to trade work for sports, dance, or yoga classes.

"I go to school and I come home and I take care of [my baby]…I've got a lot of homework that I have to deal with."

"Too busy, that's what people say when they are poor."

"I've always been below the poverty line. I work two jobs and…I've never been able to do the things I want."

"Volleyball was free in elementary, then in high school you needed knee pads to play. Then in ballet I couldn't afford the tutu."

"That's why I get so depressed in the winter, unless you have lots of money you're just standing outside."

"I'm always surprised the community centre doesn't do more activities for high school students."

Transportation was another major barrier to participating in activities. Buses were expensive and often stopped running too early for youth to complete an extracurricular activity. Also, youth struggled to carry heavy musical instruments or large sports bags on transit.

Youth in smaller communities also reported that a lack of extracurricular activities available in their community prevented them from taking part in activities that interested them. Aboriginal youth who lived on a First Nations reserve noted that not all reserves had community halls or community spaces, so there were not many extracurricular activities close by for them to join.

Even when activities were available, youth reported that often age restrictions meant they could not attend. One female youth described how she had been unable to find a dance class because the community centre only had classes for younger youth and adults over the age of 19.

Victimization was confirmed as a reason some youth did not take part in activities, and specifically sports, as youth were teased for their appearance, body weight, or because they could not afford up-to-date equipment or apparel.

Feedback on the survey question

Overall, youth felt the data were accurate. However, many groups felt that "a lack of motivation" and "exhaustion" should have been included as response options.

"Friends stopped going" was also suggested as a response option which was missing, as was "mental health challenges."

It was suggested that more youth could take part in activities if food and child care were provided, and if there was recognition for participation (such as certificates).

Other popular suggestions were that time management should be taught at school and that youth needed supportive and motivated adults and peers who could encourage them to get engaged in activities and to maintain that engagement.

SUBSTANCE USE

When reviewing the data about substance use, youth from marginalized groups were quick to point out that the data were collected in mainstream schools and did not reflect the lived experience of many youth outside these settings. Additionally, by presenting data at the provincial level, the higher use in some communities was masked by lower use in others.

In one community, youth felt that the data for alcohol and marijuana use would look different if it was from 2014 instead of 2013 as the school district had switched from a middle school system to an elementary and high school one. They felt that this had led to more youth using alcohol and marijuana at a younger age.

In support of this viewpoint, youth in another community who had been through a middle school system were surprised at how many youth in the middle school years were trying substances when in high school.

Alcohol use

Youth commonly reported that often alcohol use began following the move from elementary to high school as a way to deal with feeling stressed. Examples of stresses at this time included getting used to a new school, and separation from elementary school friends.

Older youth reflected that for them Grade 9 was a time when they started to become more independent and began to experiment with alcohol.

Youth who were homeless or street-involved pointed out that when youth started using alcohol at a very young age it was usually a cry for help or an indication of problems at home.

"When you are age 12 and 13 you're transitioning to high school. You don't have the same friends, and you're going to see a jump [in alcohol use] there. It has to do with fitting in. I changed school to a huge school and all I wanted to do was fit in and I literally did anything I needed to, to fit in."

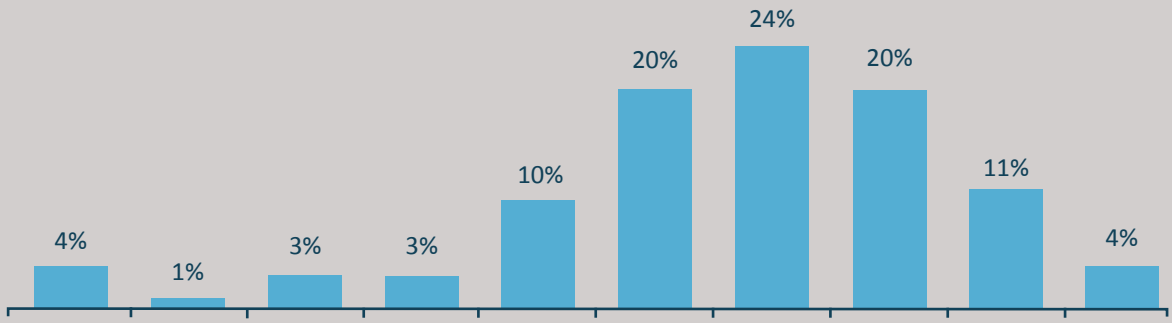
"Most of us [who are homeless] drank at an early age."

Being bullied was often cited as a reason youth began drinking alcohol. This was partly to relieve the stress of the experience but also because youth who were drinking at an early age were often accepting of other youth who did not fit in and were looking for friends to drink with. Other reasons youth gave for beginning to use alcohol included a lack of alternative activities; wanting to emulate their parents; seeing alcohol glamorized in the media; and using alcohol to manage mental health challenges, such as depression and anxiety.

Youth who reported never drinking alcohol said there was a lot of peer pressure to do so and it was considered abnormal among their peers to go to a party and not drink.

Youth across several focus groups felt that awareness and education around alcohol consumption was growing but that promoting abstinence was not an effective way to approach the issue. They also suggested more education for adults because young people could always find an adult willing to buy alcohol for them.

Age youth first tried alcohol (among those who ever drank)

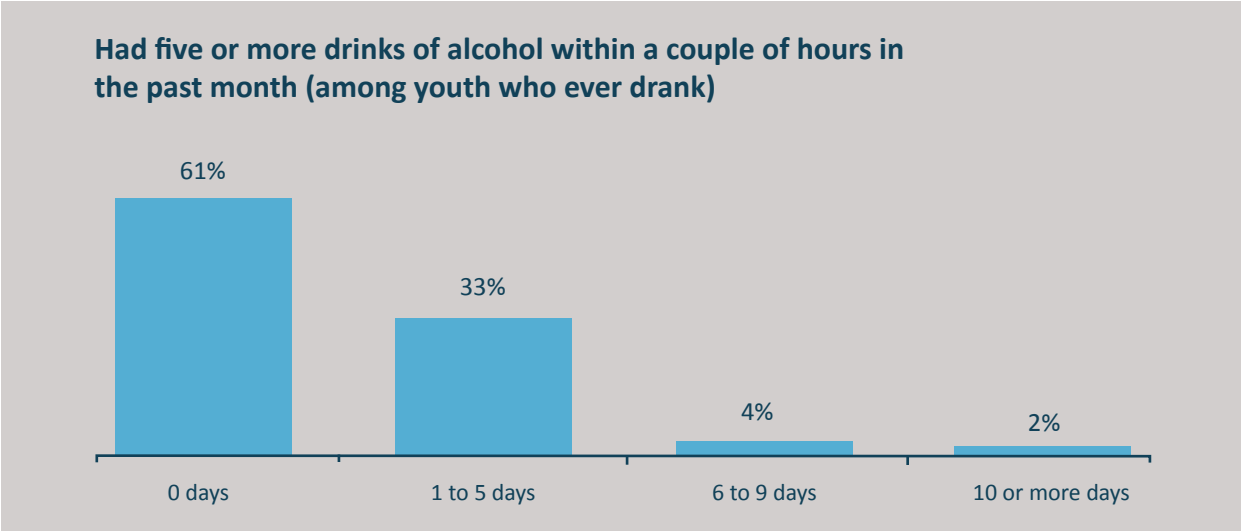


Binge drinking

Some youth were surprised at the definition of binge drinking and felt that most youth would have at least four or five drinks on Fridays and Saturdays.

When asked why some youth might binge drink, youth gave reasons similar to why they drank at all, such as peer pressure and to help them cope with stress and adverse life circumstances. Other reasons were that they did not know their limits yet, and family and peer norms influenced how much youth drank.

Engagement in sports appeared to be both a risk and protective factor for binge drinking. Some youth chose not to drink in the buildup to games or made the decision not to drink at all because they wanted to play sports at a high level. However, others reported that being on a team led to them binge drinking in celebration of team victories or as a bonding experience.



"I don't drink because my parents were alcoholics before they had me, and my sister struggled with it. So I don't drink because I am afraid I won't be able to stop."

"Parents are buying alcohol for their kid. It's sending the message that it's okay to drink."

Youth who had transitioned from high school to post-secondary felt that binge drinking rates would be higher among youth aged 19–21 than was reflected in data for 12–19 year olds. This was because alcohol is more easily accessible and college culture promotes excessive consumption.

When asked what would help youth to make safer decisions around alcohol use, suggestions included educating parents to be more aware of what youth are doing in their spare time and teaching parents how to talk to youth without lecturing or scaremongering.

Participants suggested that programs that promote awareness about substance use without stigmatizing those who choose to use alcohol might help youth to make healthier choices. Specifically, youth should be taught about the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption and what to do in different situations, such as when they or a friend are drunk.

Youth felt that a harm reduction approach would be beneficial in teaching youth about alcohol use and binge drinking. Several of the participants had been through an abstinence-based program in Grade 6 or 7 but had not found it useful. They felt that more useful and appropriate programs were needed in later grades when youth were more likely to be drinking alcohol.

Feedback on the survey question

Youth felt it was important to consider what time of year the survey was administered, as youth tend to drink more in the summer than in the winter.

"If I start to [drink alcohol], it will mess up my whole [sports] career."

"Your first year of college or university you're supposed to party and go nuts, there's an expectation."

"They tell you to drink responsibly but they don't tell you how to drink responsibly."

Youth in smaller communities felt there should be more information about drunk driving available as it was considered normative behaviour. They also felt that a late night bus service would allow people to get home safely after they had been drinking.

Some youth who were living in government care said that they knew young people in group homes and foster care who binge drank every day. However, others said they had been exposed to alcohol problems in their families, which led them to not drink. Additionally, the extra requirements to meet with social workers and earn their own income meant that they did not have the time or money to drink.

Access to counselling, support, and a positive peer group were suggested by youth in care as helpful in preventing them from drinking too much.

Marijuana Use

Focus group participants were often evenly split on the positive and negative effects of marijuana, and commonly expressed concerns about its short and long-term effects.

Youth in smaller towns felt that the provincial data did not reflect what they saw in their community, where more youth started using marijuana at age 12 or 13 than waited until they were 14 years old. They said that they were offered marijuana as soon as they entered their teens and that pressure from peers to use marijuana was greater than it was to use alcohol.

Participants reported that marijuana use was common among youth and adults. However, some thought that adults were not aware of the dangers to brain development when they allowed their children to use it.

"A parent can't ignore it or condone it too. They should be informed, not be an ostrich and stick their head in the sand."

"I was younger [when I took DARE], and then brushed it off and forgot about it."

"A lot of us have experienced trauma in our past so that's why I drink."

"Kids have a tendency, before you start to develop more critical thinking, to think marijuana's natural and that they can smoke as much as they want all day."

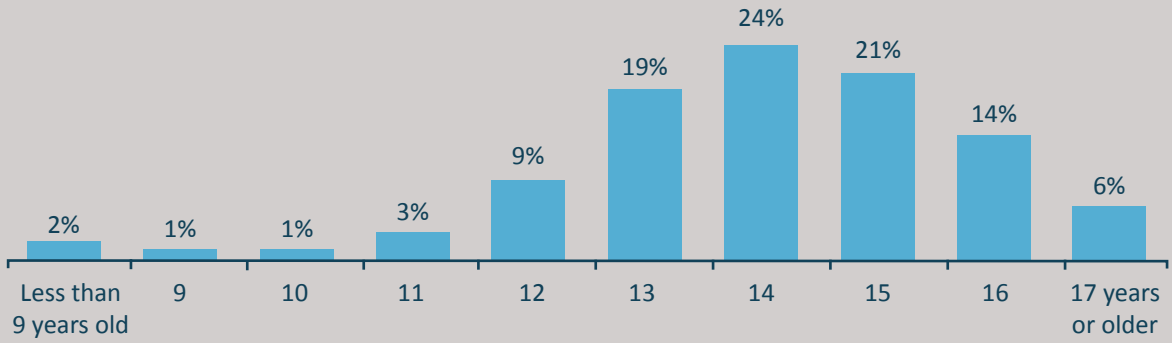
Many participants felt that marijuana was easier to access than alcohol because they did not need ID to buy it.

Participants described a variety of reasons youth might use marijuana, which included ease of access and for medicinal purposes. They spoke of daily use helping to calm their anxiety, manage pain, and function better than if they did not use it.

Several groups noted that their reasons for using marijuana were different from their reasons for using alcohol. Alcohol was associated with partying and marijuana use with managing mental health, sleep, and diet issues.

Participants in a number of groups indicated that it was easier to hide the effects of marijuana than of alcohol or other substances, which made it easier to use on a daily basis without others being aware. They also felt that marijuana was safer than other substances because there was no risk of overdose.

Age youth first tried marijuana (among those who ever used marijuana)



"Practically everyone smokes [marijuana]. Parents smoke."

"You can buy [marijuana] from just about everybody."

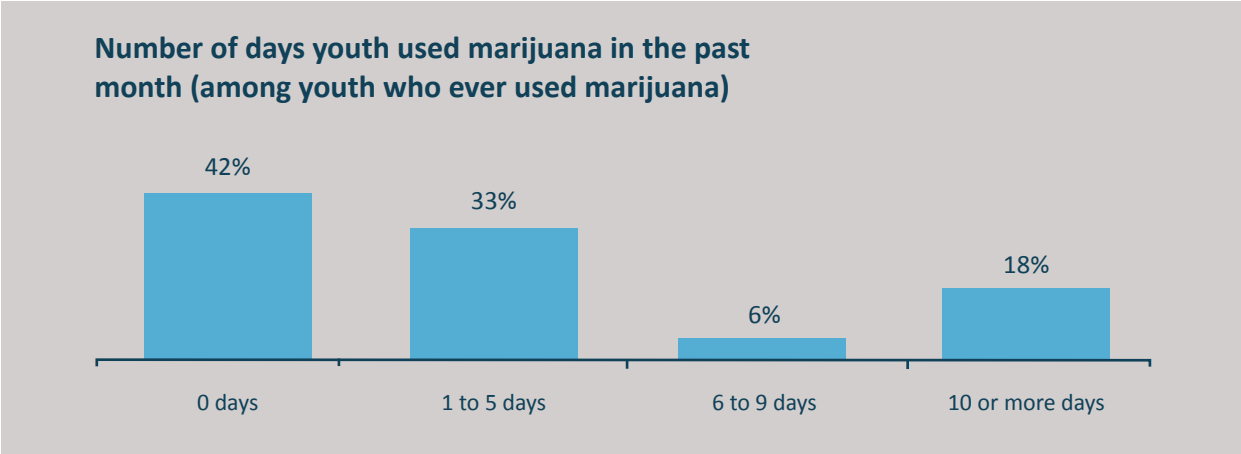
"Weed is the only substance that you can really wake and bake, do it at recess, do it at lunch, do it before practice, do it after practice, do it before you go to bed."

Some youth were surprised that among youth who had used marijuana, 42% had not used it in the past month. They felt it could be addictive and some felt it was more habit-forming than alcohol.

While some youth maintained that using marijuana had no ill effects and therefore it was not a problem if youth smoked it every day, others felt that it could lead to mental health problems. Some felt that their excessive use had resulted in a reduced ability to focus at school, as well as memory loss and decreased motivation.

Some participants reported using marijuana as an alternative to other drug use. However, this sometimes led to them feeling addicted and worrying about the long-term impact, especially as they commonly mixed marijuana with alcohol.

Participants suggested that there should be opportunities for youth to learn accurate information and engage in dialogue around marijuana use, including the impact of chronic use versus occasional use.



"It's not chemically addicting, it's behaviourally addicting."

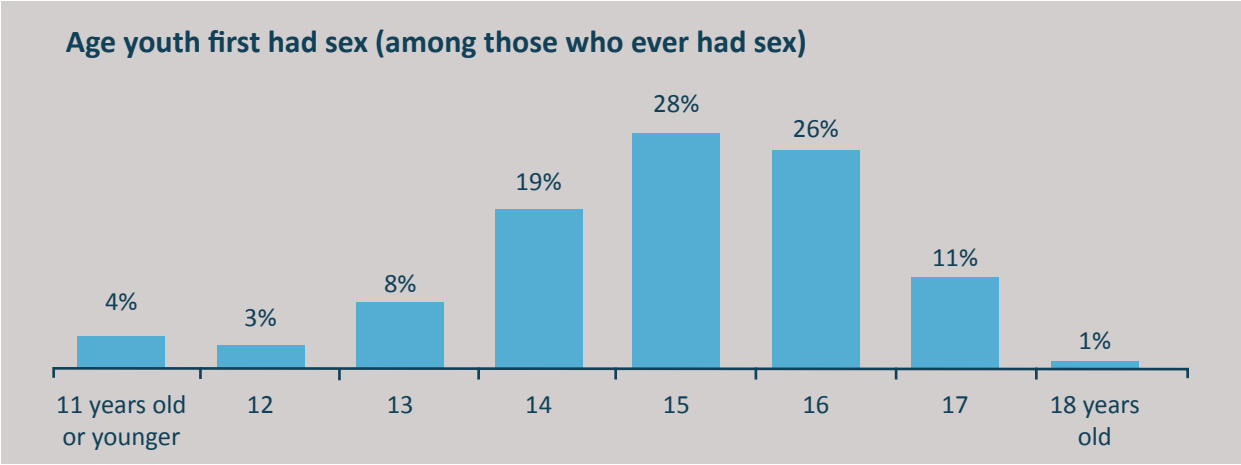
HEALTHY SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

Most youth felt the sexual behaviour data they reviewed was accurate, and confirmed that not all youth had sex.

Some youth reported that they were waiting to have sex because they had seen friends get pregnant at a young age. Others said their parents had children young and did not want to follow in their footsteps.

Some felt that the age that youth started having sex was directly linked to the age they were allowed to be home alone, to use alcohol and go to parties where adults were not present, which for most youth was between 14 and 16. Across the focus groups, youth felt that those who had sex before age 13 were not having consensual sex.

Youth experiencing challenges, such as homelessness, thought that the age youth generally started to have sex would be younger than 15. Most felt that if youth had sex at a young age it was with an older partner.



"If someone is waiting for marriage to have sex, there's a stereotype that they're either religious or a prude. There's no in-between."

"My mom got pregnant at 16 so I was like 'Oh no, I'm not doing that.'"

"I'm going to assume that [sex at age 11 or 12] is rape."

Condom use

Youth noted that from around age 14 onwards puberty was leading to increased sexual desires as well as a sense that same age peers are becoming sexually active. By age 15, youth felt they were starting to make their own decisions around their health and relationships so could choose whether to be sexually active or not. However, at this age peer pressure also increased.

Several participants talked about feeling internal as well as external pressure to have sex, especially when they were in a relationship and felt that it was what they were supposed to do, even if they did not feel ready or comfortable.

Participants felt that over-sexualized media directed towards female youth was contributing to them feeling pressured to have sex.

Several groups felt that ensuring youth had the knowledge and skills to make safe and healthy decisions was more important than the age they first had sex.

Some participants were surprised by how many youth used condoms because they felt condoms reduced the pleasure of the sexual experience. Also, youth did not always carry condoms and many did not know or think about the potential risks involved in not using them.

One group of male participants reported that when they got condoms they often broke, so they chose not to use them.

Participants felt that for younger youth in particular sex may not have been consensual, so they may not have had the option to use a condom. Alternatively, they may not have used one because they were in a committed relationship and had both been tested for STIs.

Some youth felt they had not received enough sex education, and what they did receive focused more on abstinence and the potential risks of having sex rather than teaching youth how to be safe, such as how to put on a condom.

"Youth think [sex] is a necessity in a relationship, that it will bring you closer."

"You end up doing something you're not comfortable with because you think that's what couples do."

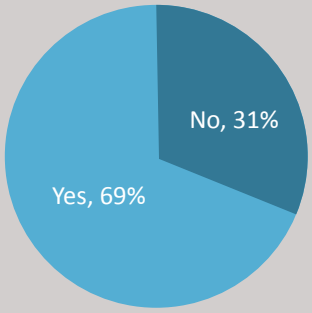
"If you're going to make the choice–are you going to make it safely, are you going to have back-up plans, are you going to understand what this is going to do to you, and are you prepared to deal with it after it happens?"

Youth reported condoms were readily available at school, health clinics, and community service agencies. However, both male and female participants felt it was more acceptable for males to access condoms than for females to do so. One youth said that staff at his high school had given all the male students a bag of condoms which had been helpful because they likely would not have gone out and got them themselves.

Among youth who used condoms, most said they only did so when they were available free of charge and were easily accessible. They said they either could not afford to buy them or would not buy them in a store because they were too embarrassed. Youth who were allergic to latex said that they had to buy latex-free ones and that the higher cost and lower accessibility contributed to them not always using protection.

When youth were asked what influenced their decision to use a condom, several reported that when they mixed sex with alcohol they were less likely to use a condom.

Youth who used a condom or other barrier the last time they had sex (among those who ever had sex)



"They talk about AIDS and stuff yeah, but they make you not want to have sex ever."

"Being a girl, you grab a condom, you're automatically called a whore. When it's a guy it's like 'Hey, hey good job man.'"

"In non-heterosexual relationships, not a lot of people use condoms."

"Talk needs to happen. You romanticize sex, you don't have the talk, you don't ask questions for fear of being judged or losing the moment."

Participants also talked about how important sex education was in influencing their choices. Without it they often had misinformation or no information. This was particularly the case for youth in same-sex relationships, as a lot of young people with same-sex partners said they had not realized they should be using protection.

Several groups raised the point that youth were not taught anything about negotiating safe and healthy sexual relationships and that they need to be taught the skills to negotiate and talk with a partner about condom use.

Youth praised the sex education they had received when staying in a custody centre, and also appreciated that it had not been co-ed. They said that when males and females were separated, they had taken the classes more seriously and had been less afraid to ask questions.

Others sought out information on the Internet and felt there were some websites which provided excellent non-judgmental information. However, confusion among youth about what a condom was used for was also evident.

When asked what would help youth to make healthy decisions about their sexual health, many felt passionately that sex education should be more of a focus in schools. One group of participants had developed their own curriculum which included information about alternative sexualities, STI risk for those not in heterosexual relationships, what constitutes consent and healthy relationships, and how to identify warning signs of an abusive relationship.

While peer education was cited as being helpful in most areas of youth health, youth across several groups said they preferred to get information about sex from adults as they trusted their knowledge more.

"I know a lot of people who say 'Oh I'm on birth control, I don't need to use a condom.'"

"All they talk about is organs and what they do, pregnancy and STDs. They need to explain what happens emotionally when that happens."

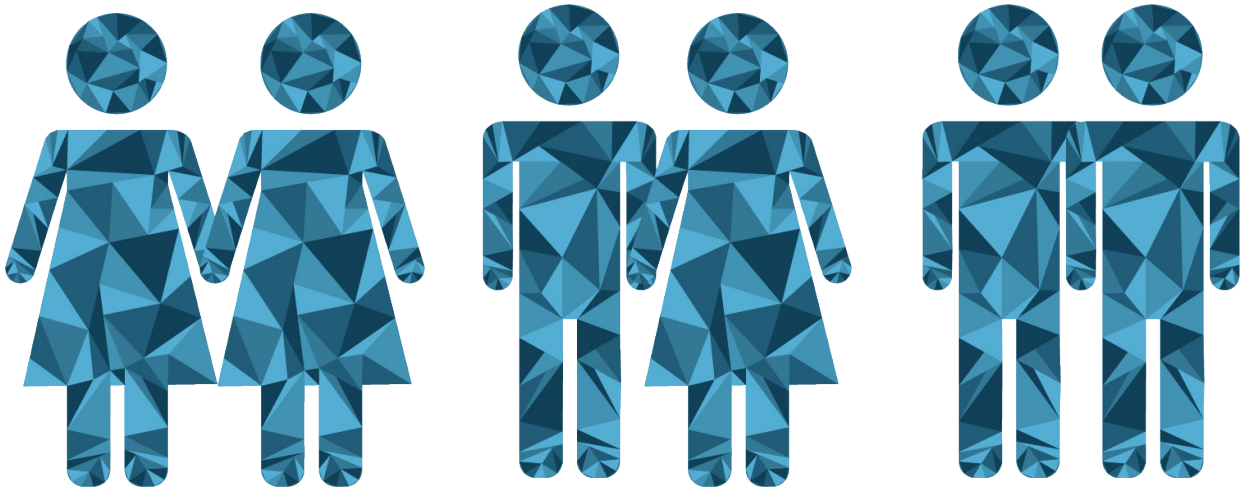
"You wouldn't wanna hear someone the same age as you giving a sex talk."

Youth's suggestions

- Teach sex ed at every grade starting in elementary school.
- Deliver sex ed curriculum to single sex groups.
- Teach youth the proper use of condoms, including female condoms.
- Ensure sex ed classes are inclusive of a range of sexual orientations and gender identities.
- Have condoms available in discreet locations where youth hang out.

"Condoms should be free."

"Have a bowl for condoms."



Child physical and mental health:

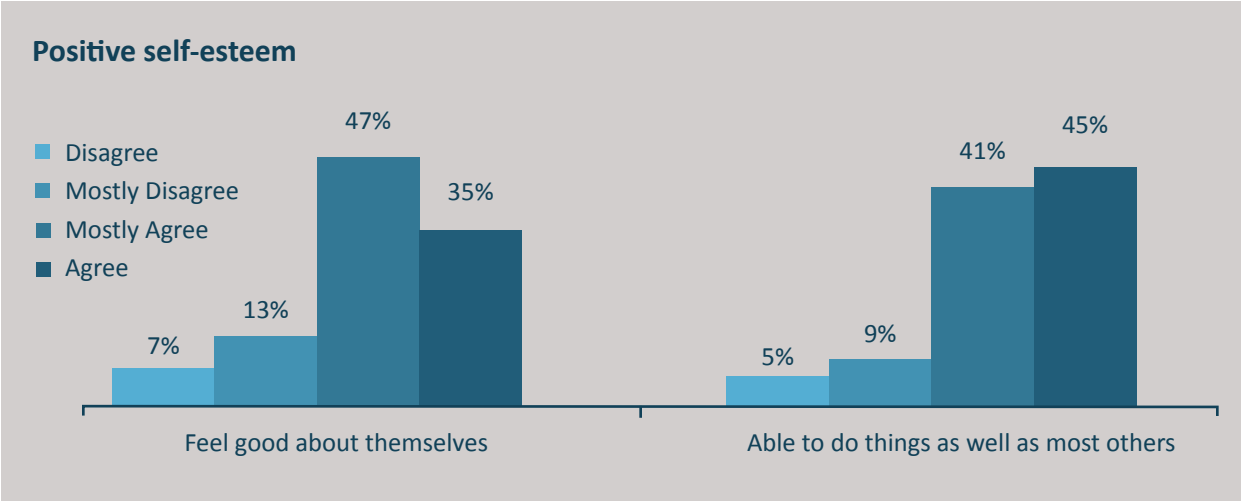
EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Self-confidence

Young people expressed shock that most youth in BC reported usually feeling good about themselves and their abilities, because they had seen many social media posts about people feeling insecure and depressed.

One group felt that youth often did not feel as skilled as others but this did not necessarily affect whether they felt good about themselves. The group cited school tests and exams as situations in which they might not do as well as their peers but might still feel good about their own grade.

However, others felt that their self-esteem was impacted by how they "measured up" to their peers, in terms of skills, popularity, and looks.



"Personally this chart really surprises me because the majority of people I know hate themselves, really hate themselves."

"People portray that they're okay but inside not really."

Youth across several groups spoke about being raised in a family culture where they were not expected to feel good about themselves and were encouraged to focus on the needs of others. Youth from some cultures also felt it was not healthy to have too much positive self-esteem.

Youth gave examples of when they felt good about themselves, such as when they had supportive friends, were a skilled and participating member of a sports team or other group, and when they had someone to talk to.

The media was felt to be a negative influence on whether youth felt good about themselves, especially for female youth.

Having a mental health condition such as anxiety or an eating disorder influenced youth's abilities to feel good about themselves–not only because of the effects of the condition but also because people judged them negatively, and they felt they were different to their peers.

Youth who identified as LGBTQ felt they faced additional challenges developing positive self-esteem. For example, some youth found their sense of self-worth was negatively affected by being referred to by pronouns that did not fit their gender identity or by being discriminated against and judged for their sexuality or appearance.

Interactions with the adults in their lives could negatively affect some youth's self-esteem as they felt they were often reminded that they lacked skills or experience.

"If I think about myself ahead of other people, I get in shit for it."

"You set a milestone and reach it, but you shouldn't let it go to your head."

"You feel good if you're part of something like a sports team or clubs."

"I think it's media, when people can't afford or can't look good in certain styles they get depressed."

Stress

Youth in care commented that they had not received help with problems in their life until they were placed in care, by which time their self-esteem was negatively affected. It would have made a significant difference had someone noticed they were struggling and helped them before they were placed in care.

School also played a particularly important role for youth in care who were negatively affected by family relationships and the stigma of being in care. Doing well in school was described as "a huge self-esteem booster" especially if youth felt that teachers were acknowledging their hard work and progress.

When asked what would make youth feel better about themselves, participants suggested that students should be exposed to more activities or subjects that they might be good at in school, praised when they did something well, and have the opportunity to talk about self-esteem and self-care.

Youth were not surprised there was a gender difference in youth reporting stress, and felt the data reflected their experiences. Some felt that females were under more pressure than males to look and act a certain way, that they internalized stress more, and were affected by certain things more so than males. Others felt that males were equally stressed as females but either did not show it or had more opportunities to release their stress.

For most youth, school was a major cause of stress that intensified as they got closer to graduation and deciding a career path. Other sources of stress included work; being victimized; relationships with friends, family and romantic partners; and life events such as bereavement and homelessness.

"I would go from loving to hating myself at the drop of a dime."

"I have days where I can't even answer the phone. I can't get what is expected done. I can't put the effort in to look the way I want to look."

"We are completely patronized by adults while being expected to be adults."

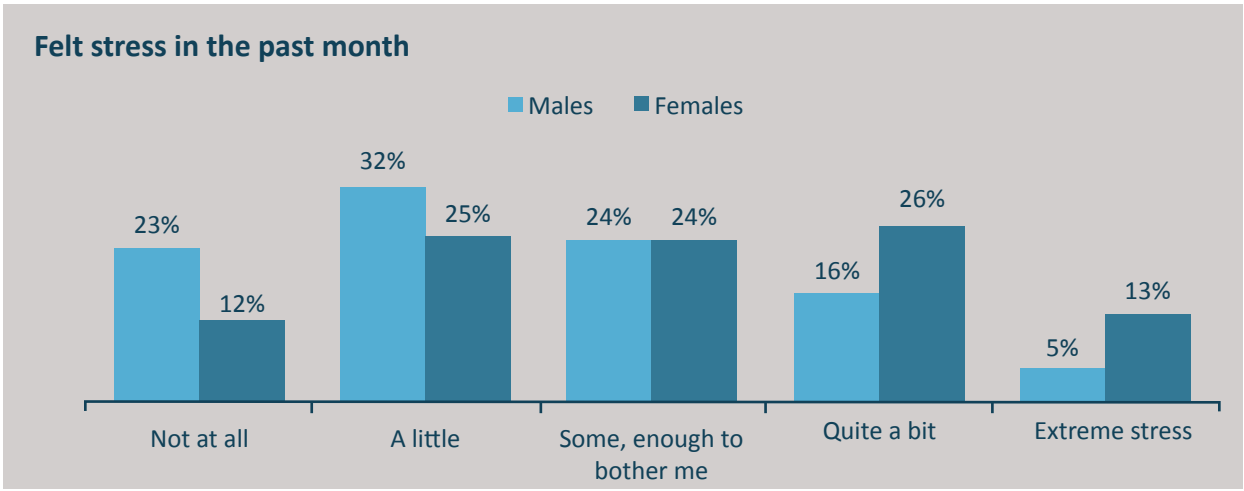
"When you've done a good job, it's nice to hear you've done a good job."

Youth reported that stress rose at around ages 13 and 14 as school and peer pressure increased. They received little support because school counsellors focused on students who were graduating rather than on younger youth. Participants who were pursuing post-secondary education felt that stress continued to increase after age 19.

Youth in Grades 11 and 12 who wanted to go to university said that not knowing how to prioritize was very stressful. One said "It's like you need amazing grades to get into university, but you need extracurriculars to get financial aid, and you need the financial aid to go to university. It's hard to prioritize. Should I work harder in school or focus on extracurriculars?"

Youth with custody experience spoke about the extreme stress that came with illegal activity. It became a vicious circle of using drugs to manage stress and then needing to buy and sell drugs to manage the addiction they developed, which only exacerbated their stress. Male youth also spoke about using violence to relieve their stress but that it had often led to more stressful situations, such as having to go to court or being expelled from school.

Youth described managing their stress in a variety of different ways. These included exercising, applying breathing techniques, having hobbies and interests, and caring for a pet.



Youth felt that they could use the Internet to relieve stress either by getting engrossed in a game or by reaching out to friends, as someone they knew was usually online and this made them feel less alone.

Youth felt that some stress was good as it motivated them to perform well but suggested that they be taught how to recognize when their stress exceeds healthy levels.

Learning time management skills and how to prioritize and not get distracted were suggested as strategies that would help youth to feel less overwhelmed and stressed, and stay on top of their homework.

Youth living in government care spoke about the stress in their lives including living apart from their family, regularly moving, having changing roommates, meeting social workers' expectations, missing classes to attend appointments with counsellors and social workers, and the anticipation of being emancipated at 19 years of age.

Suggestions to reduce stress among youth with care experience included greater access to counsellors or other adults who could help them work through past traumas and current sources of stress, scheduling meetings outside of school hours, and extending services to youth beyond age 19.

"Stressed about meeting expectations–you see that in the classroom all of the time."

"Once you move on from high school to college all of those stresses are still there, but you add work and bills. Now you have to worry about your environment and your own life, and some people have a hard time coping with that."

"Are we being educated about what different levels of stress feel like, how we can deal with it? Are we given tools to deal with it? No, we're not. A lot of youth don't know what it feels like to relax."

"I need more self-discipline [to prioritize]. Like sometimes you want to do something relaxing instead of homework."

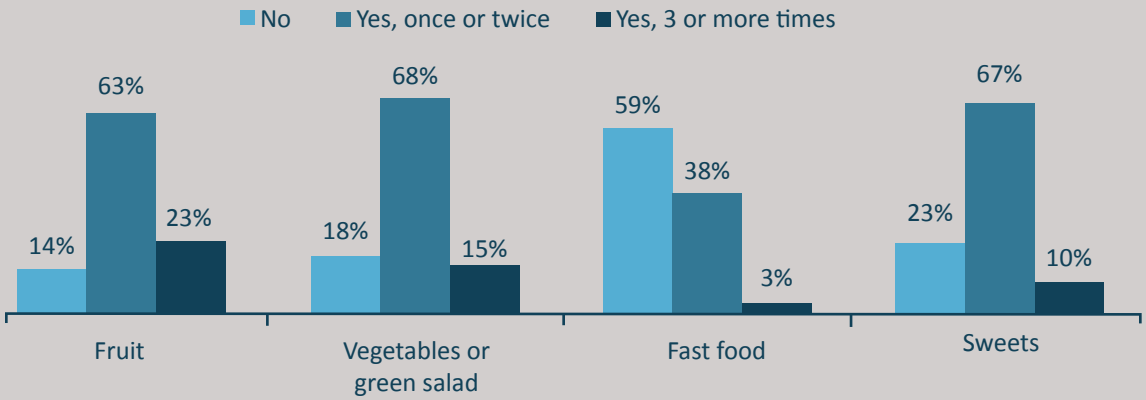
NUTRITION

Compared to 2009, more youth appeared to value healthy eating and to be learning about positive nutrition, and the majority felt they would like to eat more healthily than they currently did.

No one was surprised that most youth were not eating their recommended daily servings of fruit and vegetables or by the high percentage of those eating sweets. They thought sweets were more affordable than fast food so youth tended to eat a lot of them. One group speculated that the rise in consumption of sweets was because young people were not getting enough nutritious foods so needed to raise their blood sugar and combat fatigue.

One group felt that the percentages of youth eating fast food would be lower among those living in poverty, as they could not afford it and ate cheaper foods like instant noodles. Another group in a small community felt that because they had less access to fast food restaurants, the data for their community would show they ate healthier than youth in other communities.

What youth ate yesterday



"Fast food is a privilege. I never have money, and no one is going to buy me fast food."

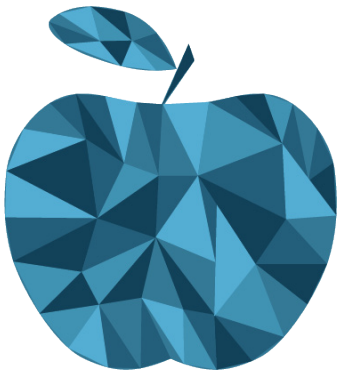
"If [the BC AHS data] was for college students, fast food would go way up, just because of how available it is. You see a salad bar, but you also see a White Spot."

Across the focus groups, youth spoke about the challenges of eating healthily, although some youth felt that it was getting easier to do so because restaurants like McDonald's have started offering healthier options. However, as in 2009, the biggest barrier to eating fruit, fresh vegetables, and other healthier foods, such as organic meats, was the price.

Youth also mentioned that culturally there may be a difference in what is considered "healthy" and it was confusing to try and follow Canada's Food Guide because the foods they ate were often not included. One gave an example of eating a lot of fried vegetables in her traditional diet but not knowing whether these were healthy because they were vegetables or unhealthy because they were fried.

Youth living in homestay placements talked about how difficult it was to access healthy food from their own culture when they were dependent on their host for meals. Similarly, youth living with their parents felt that their diet was controlled by what their parents bought and cooked.

Schools were criticized for not providing healthy options and for making these options more expensive when they did offer them. Outside of school, the time required to prepare healthy food as well as lack of access led many youth to be reliant on local stores and fast food places, which offered few healthy options.



"Healthy foods cost a ton more than fast food. I think they want us to be not healthy."

"There's more corner stores, gas stations, with unhealthy food, with more junk food. It's just more readily available."

"Junk food fills you up longer than fruit would."

Some youth reported that they often avoided fresh food because they were worried that if they did not eat it immediately it would not be safe to do so, especially if they did not have access to cold storage.

Participants with experience of homelessness appreciated the healthy meal options they got at shelters and other services for homeless youth.

Youth living on a Youth Agreement spoke about the additional challenges of eating healthily when they were responsible for budgeting a small amount of income that had to cover all the expenses of living independently. Those who had used a food bank noted that the food bank's hours often conflicted with school, felt stigmatizing to use, and often offered food they did not know how to cook.

Youth who used a school breakfast program or fresh fruit and vegetable program appreciated these programs, but wanted them expanded to include more fruit and vegetable options. They also suggested having more affordable healthy options in their school or college cafeteria, and having cooking classes which taught how to make cheap healthy meals and specifically how to cook vegetables.

Knowing that youth often gravitate toward foods that are pre-made, one youth suggested reducing costs on prepackaged salads and other healthy meals available in grocery stores and cafés.

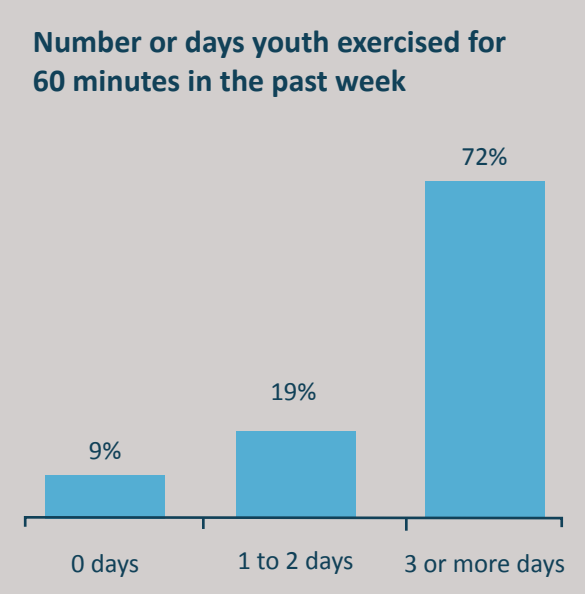
Other ideas included reducing the number of fast food restaurants allowed in a town, making fast food outlets advertise accurately and putting pressure on fast food restaurants to make healthy food options cheaper and more appealing than fast food.

"Parents won't buy fruit and veg if it is going to just sit there and nobody will eat it so they buy things people will eat."

"It would be nice to know how to cook meals on a budget and to know what's healthy and nutritious but doesn't take hours to prepare."

Physical activity

All focus group participants were able to identify the benefits of physical activity, including improved mental health and better sleep. However, many felt that knowing the benefits did not influence their behaviour as they preferred being indoors playing video games, watching TV, hanging out with friends, or social networking.



Participants felt that it was difficult for young people to meet the Canadian physical activity guidelines, especially when they were in Grade 11 and 12 when P.E. becomes an elective. Many chose to take academic courses over P.E. even if they enjoyed it because P.E. was not a requirement for post-secondary.

At some schools, students in higher grades can fulfill P.E. requirements by completing an online log in which they record the length and type of exercise they engaged in during the past week. Youth said that it is no longer a requirement for parents to sign and verify the log, and therefore there is little incentive for youth to exercise.

"Where do you make time to stay active? I understand that self-care is important, but sometimes you just really don't have the time."

"In earlier grades exercise is more of a priority."

Hitting puberty and the changes that came with that were often cited as a reason youth became more inactive as they got older.

Participants felt that if they came from active families they were more likely to be active themselves, but if their family did not value exercise the youth were not encouraged to participate. Similarly, if youth's friends were active they tended to be active too.

"If you're a Grade 10 girl in a co-ed P.E. class and you're trying to figure everything out and you're being bullied, you're getting made fun of, you're not going to want to show up for P.E. class."

"Boys mock boys who are weedy and can't throw so then they won't play sports."

Feedback on the survey question

Youth felt it was important to bear in mind that students did not do Physical Education (P.E.) every semester and took part in seasonal activities so the timing of the survey may have affected the results. The weather also contributes to how active youth are so if it had rained heavily, snowed, or had been icy or cold in the week before youth took the survey, they may not have reported getting as much exercise as they would have if the survey was conducted in the summer.

Youth spoke about taking part in exercise that would not have been captured in the data because they did not sweat or get out of breath. This included skateboarding, walking, hiking, and having active jobs such as waitressing and retail.

"If people ask if I exercise, I'll be like no I just walk everywhere."

When asked what would help inactive youth become more active, many said that nothing would help if youth did not want to be active. Youth who were inactive felt that there were many options for physical activity but they rarely accessed these and preferred more sedentary activities.

However, not all youth felt this way and females were more likely to report that having sports available out of school would help them. Female participants gave examples of wanting to engage in sports such as hockey and softball out of school but not having the option because there were only teams for males in their community. Male participants meanwhile wanted more weight training facilities available to them.

Giving youth incentives to exercise and make healthy choices and reinstating P.E. classes for older students were also suggested in several groups. Other ideas included all youth having access to a leisure pass, and making sure youth have a workout buddy.

Youth living in communities without a recreational centre or skate park suggested that having these would encourage them to exercise if these facilities were free to access and open to youth at times when they could attend.

"It takes too much energy for physical activity."

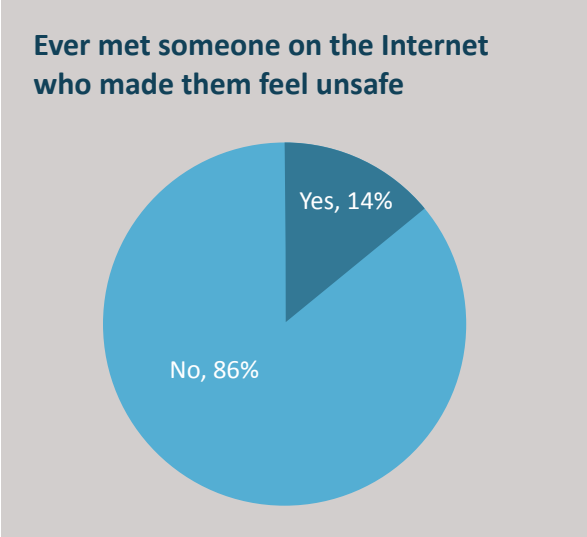
"Sports is so male-dominated, and as you get older it's harder to find things like youth hockey leagues for girls."

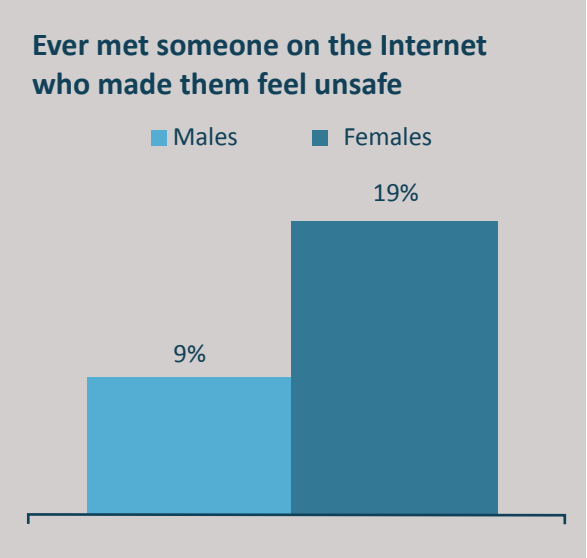
"They should have more free sports, like yoga. I do boxing and volleyball because someone pays for it."

ONLINE SAFETY

Youth felt that the data may be an under-representation of the actual percentage of youth who met someone unsafe online, as there is a stigma attached to admitting having this experience. Overall, participants had little sympathy for youth who did meet someone who made them feel unsafe and several said they would not admit to having been on a site where they met someone who made them feel unsafe.

Youth were not surprised that there was a large gender difference in the data and felt this reflected the fact that female youth would be approached by older males online. One group suggested that the percentage for females was higher than for males because females were taught to understand the signs of when they are in an unsafe situation, so were more likely to recognize this when it happened.





"They don't talk about [being victimized online] because they might not want to be blamed for what they were doing."

"Girls have been told to be more careful."

Most groups felt that online safety problems were directly related to what youth posted or what sites they visited. Facebook was one site of concern for many youth. They felt that however careful they were with their privacy settings, changes to the site meant that they shared more information than they wanted to.

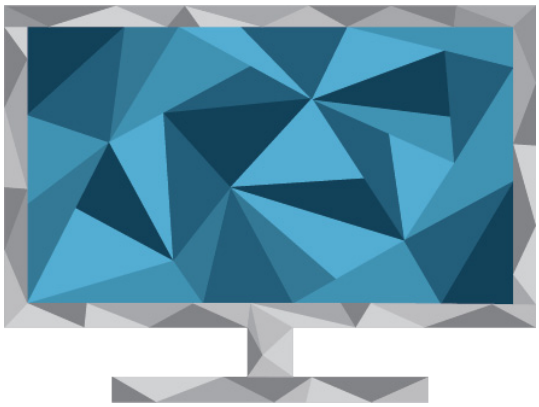
Multiplayer online gaming sites were also identified as places where young people met people who made them feel unsafe.

Participants felt that some youth made themselves vulnerable because they used the Internet to reach out for help if they were lonely or depressed. Sometimes these youth knew what risks they were taking but just having anyone to interact with made them feel better.

Youth who had met someone online who made them feel unsafe spoke of not realizing it until it was too late, and that they had unwittingly shared too many details about themselves which they had no way of retracting. Examples included sharing their address and their passwords.

Some youth had received information and support to be safe online through school, friends, parents, foster parents, and other adults in their lives.

When asked what could be done to help make using the Internet safer, youth suggested making it easier to report an inappropriate or unsafe incident or posting. It was helpful to have a "report button" on some sites but it took too long for offensive posts to be removed, and they suggested a faster response time would help reduce instances of cyberbullying and harassment.



"Whenever I turn my apps on my phone on, it turns on my Facebook. You are not safe even if you try to be."

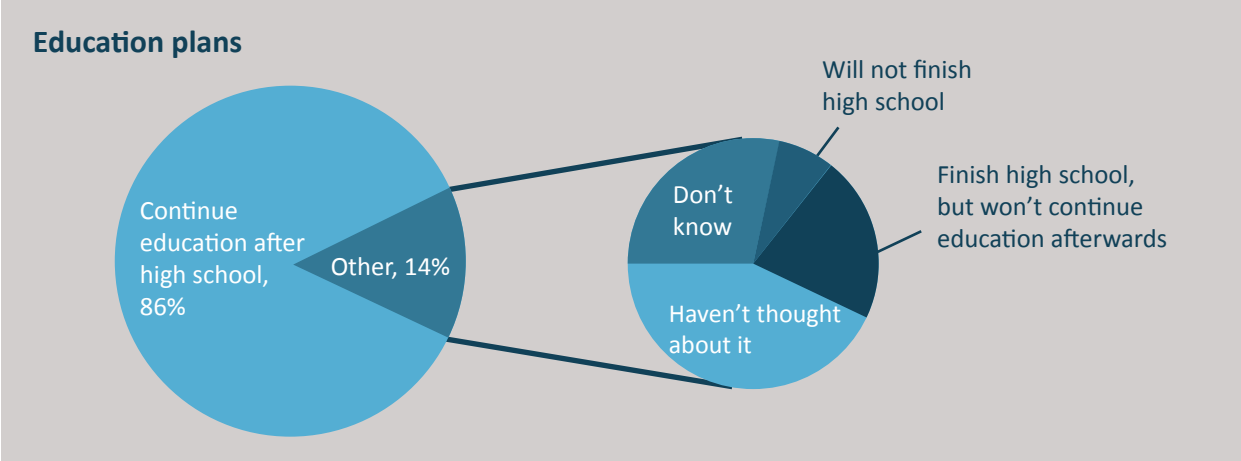
"Some people are looking for companionship that they are not getting in real life."

POST-HIGH SCHOOL PLANS

Although youth were generally dismissive of the plight of those who met someone online who made them feel unsafe, many also said that they would not know what to do if they themselves met someone online who tried to sexually exploit or victimize them. They felt schools and community organizations where youth access the Internet should teach youth how to recognize, avoid, or deal with meeting someone unsafe online.

No one was surprised by the data for education plans, although some felt that the percentages of youth actually continuing to post-secondary education would be lower. They explained that youth often said they planned to go to university, because of expectations placed on them, but in reality they might not know their plan yet, or might not be planning to continue their education after high school.

Participants felt it was unfair to ask younger youth their educational plans as this added to the pressure they already felt to pick their future career at a young age.



"You're expected to say that you're going to go to post-secondary. That's the social norm of how to be successful, if you're going to do anything else you're a failure."

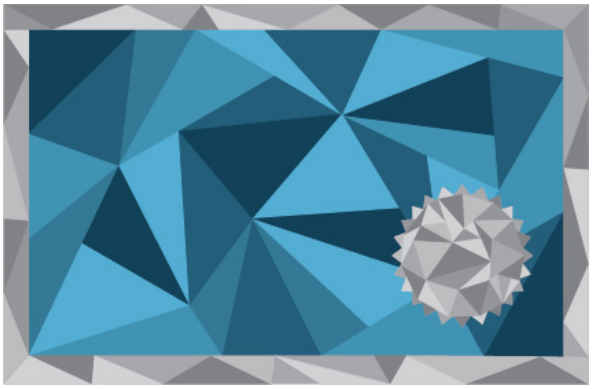
When asked about the data on youth who did not know what their plans were, participants felt that youth were avoiding thinking about it due to overwhelming pressure, were looking no further than graduating high school or were wanting to get a taste of different jobs and life experiences before deciding on a career.

Similarly, youth from smaller communities thought their experiences might not be captured in the data as post-secondary options were limited or non-existent if they could not leave their community because of other responsibilities.

Among youth planning to go on to post-secondary, many felt that university was the preferred option. They explained that there was stigma associated with taking college programs, or attending trades school, even though these might be more appropriate for what they wanted to do.

However, others felt the trades offered an opportunity to make a good living and to have more job security than would be available to graduates of some degree programs.

Participants were worried about choosing the wrong post-secondary courses or institution and wished they had more opportunities to see what kind of careers were available and what the educational requirements were.



"[We plan for university] because that's what we're taught to do. There is a stigma associated with college."

"The people I see going into trades are boys who don't think they have enough potential."

Some groups said that they had discussed career options in Planning 10. Although this was helpful, the subject should be revisited with older students who might have changed their plans or have realized their grades would not get them into their original career choice.

Some youth reported that certain universities and colleges had come to their school recruiting which had got them excited, allowed them to get their questions answered, and made them feel wanted and less intimidated at the prospect of applying. A program called "Find Your Fit" was also praised by youth who attended it as it had allowed them to narrow down career choices and find out about what qualifications and experiences were needed for those careers.

One youth described how as part of high school graduation requirements students had to create a transition plan and present it to community members. Reflecting back on the experience, the process of creating the plan had helped the youth start thinking about future plans, and would be good for other people to try.

"I'm lucky, my parents were really understanding. My friends went [to university] and spent tons of money on courses that they didn't actually want to do."

"We are left to do everything by ourselves. They do have support, like Planning 10, but I'm in the 12th grade."

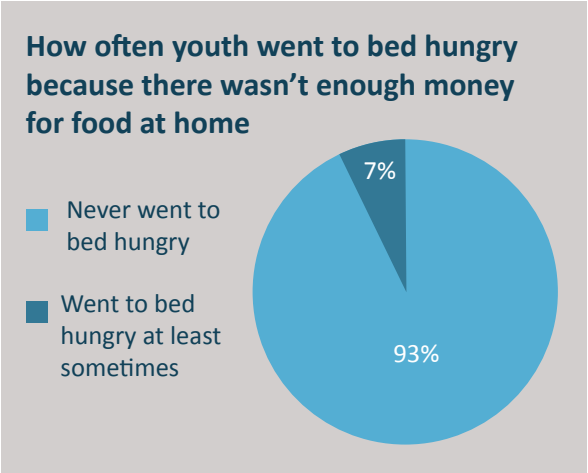
FAMILY ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

FOOD SECURITY

Young people with experience of homelessness felt that the percentages for going to bed hungry and living on a low income were an under-representation and felt that the data for specific population groups, or specific regions, would be much higher.

Looking at the finding that 7% of students in BC went to bed hungry often or always, one group noted that some families did not have enough money to eat well but avoided hunger by choosing less healthy and more affordable food which was filling. Others noted that their family had to choose between food or heating as they did not have the money for both.

Youth who went to bed hungry talked about how it affected their mental and physical health. They worried constantly about not having enough to eat and found that being hungry affected their energy levels and made it hard to study and stay in school.



"Hard to be emotionally happy if you're hungry all the time."

"If you're not eating, you're not able to focus and do what you need to do when you're in school."

SUPPORTIVE ADULTS

Some youth were surprised by the high percentage of students who had an adult to turn to. Others readily listed adults they felt comfortable talking to about a serious problem including teachers, social workers, friends, counsellors, youth workers, and friends' parents.

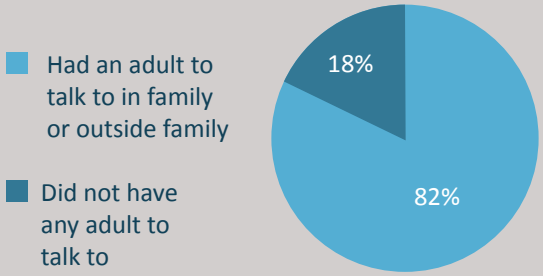
However, some participants felt that there was a distinction between youth thinking they had someone to talk to and actually approaching that person to talk, or them being available when the time came.

Youth who had been in conflict with the law reported that they had not realized there were adults they could talk to until they were in serious trouble. They wished they had adults like their probation officer or custody centre staff in their life sooner.

LGBTQ youth reported that they were more likely to feel comfortable approaching someone with some background in the LGBTQ community.

Youth said that leaving high school resulted in them losing a lot of adult supports and having to rely more on peers.

Youth who had an adult to talk to about problem(s)



"At one point I thought I was part of the 20% [who had no adult to turn to] but I had put up the barriers. I personally chose to not talk to someone."

"My PO is an adult I could talk to. That officer is not gonna just let you get away with something."

"I don't want to stop getting help [when I turn 18]. Everyone needs help."

"Teachers are a huge support in high school, but [in college] there's more stress and fewer supports."

Youth's suggestions

Youth discussed what they looked for in a supportive adult. These included adults who:

- Were friendly, talked to youth like they were their equals and approached youth to say "hello" or to check-in. These simple interactions helped youth feel more comfortable about approaching these adults for help and made them feel that they had been noticed.
- Noticed what was happening with youth, for example acting on bullying when they saw it.
- Could relate to youth's experiences, or who would try to relate to their experiences. One suggested that instead of adults saying "I know what it's like," they should say, "I don't know what it's like for you but I want to understand your experience and I want to help."
- Were sympathetic to youth's issues, non-judgmental, and took their problems seriously. Youth said that they would avoid adults who were unfriendly or seemed to only want to help youth because they were being paid to do so.
- Were flexible and could adapt as youth changed and grew.
- Youth saw regularly and whom they had the opportunity to build a relationship with.
- Were knowledgeable about local services and resources youth might need or about how to do tasks of daily living.
- Kept youth's information confidential, and did not get shocked easily.
- Followed through on what they said they would do.

"[Sometimes it's frustrating when] adults expect you to do stuff. You just want someone to confide in, not bring constructive advice."

"Are they going to judge me if I relapse? [I want to] be around those who have similar experiences."

"Our counsellors were knowledgeable and had a lot of resources."

"Someone[who] is chill and you can actually tell stuff to."

Supportive adults for youth in care

When asked what was important for adults to know, youth said that they often did not ask or get help until problems had reached a crisis point. Youth also said when they went to adults for advice, they did not want to be told what to do, but to have someone explain the options they might have and the possible result of those choices and then leave it to the youth to make the choices themselves.

When it came to navigating systems like the government care system or applying to post-secondary education, or learning life skills, youth preferred to be given hands-on direct help. They also appreciated adults willing to go through the whole process with them.

Some youth felt that less youth in care had a supportive adult to turn to because youth who had been in care often had negative interactions with adults in the past. As a result, they might be reluctant to approach other adults for help in case they got let down again.

Some youth in care felt they could not have positive relationships with people who were working for the Ministry of Children and Family Development because of the financial element involved in that relationship as well as the restrictions placed on workers, including not being available late at night or on the weekends.

"Adults mistake our problems as minor. If a student comes with a problem, then it's a problem."

"It sucks [not trusting adults]. I thought no one was there for me. You are miserable, you hate it. Feels like [foster parents] are just doing it for the money, because the last ones were."

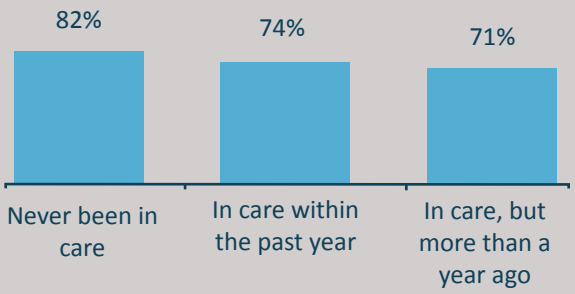
"Social workers will say 'come in Thursday,' then you come in on Thursday and the social worker is on vacation. It feels like they don't care."

"Time restrictions are huge, like after 4:30pm you have no one. Also they work while we are at school, so it's hard to get to see them."

Despite their histories, many youth with care experience reported positive experiences asking for help from friends and some specific adults. Some youth really appreciated the efforts their social worker or foster parents made to be there for them if they were having a problem.

A supportive foster parent was described as someone who asked how youth were feeling each day; asked for their opinion on what to have for dinner, or the sort of activities they would like to do; and allowed youth to have some level of privacy.

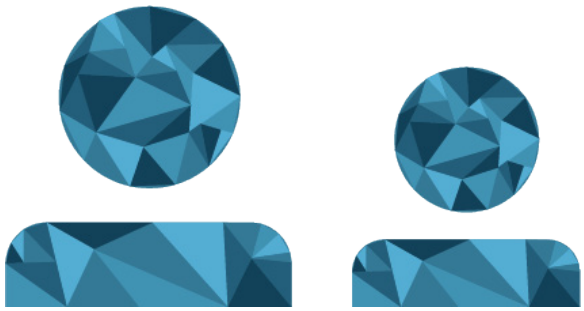
Youth who had an adult to talk to about problem(s)



Note: The difference between youth who had been in care in the past year and those who had been in care more than a year ago was not statistically significant.

Youth said they wished there were more peer support groups where youth in care could come together regularly and discuss their experiences, particularly if they found it hard to build trust with adults.

Youth also wished they could reach the supportive adults in their lives at any time and that there was more time for them to get individualized support from counsellors and social workers. They said they did not really mind what job title the adult had but that it was those adults who showed they cared who made a difference.



"My new foster mother is super lovely, even though she's never had a kid like me before."

"My mental health worker checks his phone on weekends."

SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS

Participants gave a variety of reasons for skipping school, including disliking a certain class or teacher, because they had fallen behind, they did not think they would miss anything important, they were being bullied, their friends were skipping, or because they needed to complete homework assignments for another class or to study for an exam.

Youth who felt marginalized, including LGBTQ youth, youth who were homeless, or those in government care or living on a Youth Agreement, reported skipping school because they did not think anyone would notice or care, did not feel they fit in, and did not feel that school reflected their life experiences.

Youth who had changed schools regularly said that they did not feel connected because it was hard to keep making new friends, get used to new teachers, and join in activities that they might have to leave before they completed.

Some youth with care experience did not think it was realistic for students to stay engaged in school given the various problems, responsibilities, and appointments they had. Others talked about the importance of school connectedness in keeping them in school and ensuring they did not skip or disengage.

Youth reported that stresses and pressure outside of school such as living on a Youth Agreement or having problems in their family could make it hard to feel connected to school, as could not having the financial means to participate in school activities.

Youth living in government care described feeling connected to school when teachers cared; adults were available to talk; support with assignments was available; food was provided; the school felt safe; there were free clubs, activities and events to get involved in; and there were opportunities to influence decisions at school.

When their school noticed every student and made them feel welcome, it fostered an atmosphere of connectedness. Examples of approaches that youth particularly appreciated included a program at one high school where students were assigned a "home" teacher on their first day. This teacher was available to the student to discuss academic or personal issues until the day they left the school. Another school offered a peer-mentoring program which was available to all students and not just those who were deemed to be struggling, which reduced the stigma of asking for help and normalized students helping each other out.

"You don't want to be [at school] because you are being bullied."

"I feel safe there, I walk down the hall and 3 or 4 people say 'hi.'"

VICTIMIZATION

In-person victimization

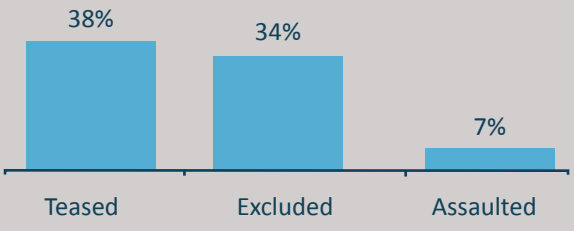
When reviewing the data, most youth thought that the percentages of students who were teased, socially excluded, or assaulted seemed lower than they would expect, as victimization was pervasive in high school.

Participants felt that youth might not report some instances of teasing and exclusion, or they might not recognize it the way they recognize physical assaults. Some youth said that they got victimized and victimized others in return and just accepted it as a part of life.

Participants were not surprised that females were teased and excluded more than males, as they felt females' insecurities about their dating relationships, friendships, and how they looked meant that small issues quickly escalated.

Although victimization was felt to increase during the middle years of high school, it was also present in elementary school where young people were developing at different rates and might be bigger and stronger than their classmates. Older high school students felt that bullying became more subtle in higher grades.

Percentage of youth who experienced different types of bullying in the past year while at school or on the way to and from school



"That [data on bullying rates] looks so low in comparison to what I see."

"I think a large percentage of bullying isn't reported."

"Physical attacks are less common. Bullying is more discreet, it's harder to tell..."

In one community, youth felt in-person victimization was decreasing and the rates in their community would be lower than the provincial rates because there had been education and awareness-raising programs which had led to less tolerance for bullying behaviours. However, in other communities youth reported that bullying continued despite the schools' zero-tolerance policy because no one reported it for fear of repercussions.

Participants with experience of homelessness felt that in-person bullying rates for them would be higher than those in the data they reviewed, whereas students attending post-secondary school felt that bullying was rarely an issue at colleges or universities.

When asked how being victimized affected youth, participants felt that it caused social isolation and mental health problems. For youth who already had mental health challenges, bullying exacerbated these problems.

Some youth who witnessed victimization said it was so normative that they did not think about it very much, while others felt that it impacted them negatively as they felt powerless to intervene. Some said they thought it was important that even if youth were not comfortable intervening that they subtly made it clear they did not agree, (e.g., not laughing or joining in) although a common response to bullying by those who witnessed it was to want to befriend the bully, to ensure they were not the next victim.

Youth felt that teachers and school administrators did not take bullying seriously. Physical assaults were the type of victimization that adults were more likely to notice, but often the bullying had started verbally and escalated to physical violence because no one had intervened.

"If someone is a bully they are being shunned. I think [our community] is very kind."

"They say that they'll enforce it [the zero tolerance policy] but nothing ever gets done."

Youth who had reported bullying thought that adults felt as powerless to stop it as youth did. Adults would often tell the youth to stand up to the bully but not tell them how to do this.

Youth thought people who bully others did so to gain power and control, to deal with their own frustrations and negative emotions, because they wanted attention or respect, or because they felt "someone needed to be taught a lesson."

Participants felt that the media reinforced bullying behaviour and made it seem acceptable.

When asked what would help stop bullying, many felt there was not much that could be done. Others felt that creating a safer and more respectful culture at school would be helpful, as would classes that taught young people empathy and self-confidence so they did not feel insecure and feel the need to bully others.

"Teachers see it but don't acknowledge it."

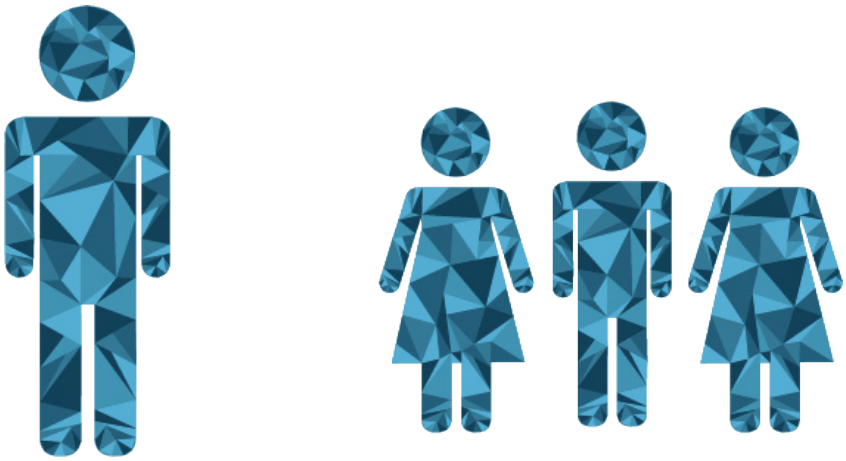
"Everyone feels helpless."

"Bullying 98% of the time is a reflection of your own insecurities."

"Things are enforced in the media: the nerd, the weird kid, the girl who hangs out with two guys because she's not like other girls, because being like other girls is bad. Femininity is [seen as] a failure. All these lead to more bullying."

Youth's suggestions

- Replace the term bullying with the terms verbal and physical assaults to show the seriousness of the behaviour.
- Offer better access to mental health counsellors to both prevent bullying and offer support for those who are being bullied.
- Pair an older youth who has overcome bullying with a younger youth to show that it does not last forever, and offer support.
- Have bonding exercises or retreats where youth from different cliques are forced to work with youth they would not normally interact with as a way of breaking down stereotypes.
- Offer parents training so that they can recognize if their child is bullying others or being bullied.
- Train bystanders to take action to address bullying without fear of being labelled a snitch.

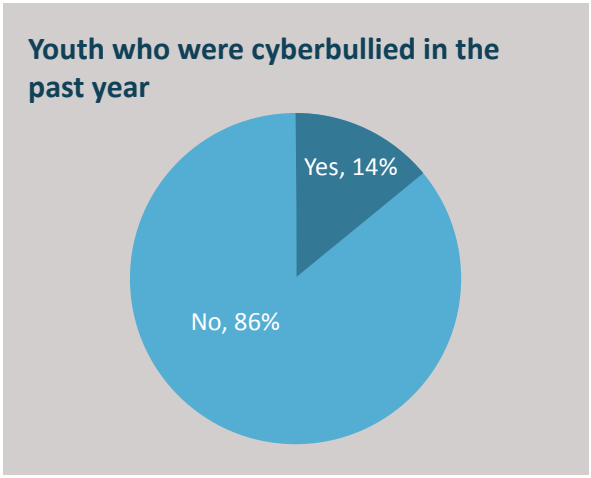


Cyberbullying

As with in-person bullying, most youth were surprised that the percentage who reported being cyberbullied was not higher. On reflection, they felt that a lot of youth would disregard instances of cyberbullying and not think to count it when surveyed. They also felt that if bullying through texting was included, the numbers would be a lot higher.

Youth felt that more people victimized others online than in person. Also, the intensity of the bullying was greater because it was easier to get away with, there were fewer consequences, and it was harder for the victim to get away from.

Females commonly reported being cyberbullied through social media sites, whereas males said that for them online bullying tended to happen through online gaming sites.



"I have never met a youth who wasn't cyberbullied."

"People cyberbully because they feel safe behind a screen."

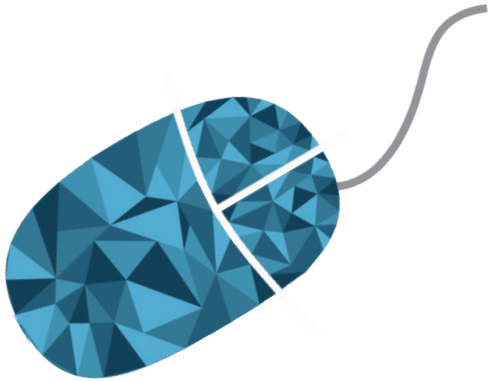
"Now you get bullied from halfway across the world."

Participants in one group had been impacted by the suicide of a female youth at their school who had been victimized online. They spoke about the devastating effect it had on everyone, as no one had realized the extent to which it was going on and therefore no one had told an adult. They were also concerned that when the female youth had told an adult, the victimization became worse rather than subsiding. Despite this experience, they said that if they were aware of anyone being bullied in the future they would encourage them to tell someone.

However, youth also noted that people often did not get involved if they witnessed in-person victimization but they were more likely to step in and defend the victim online because it was safer to do so.

Youth suggested there needed to be a quick and efficient way to remove offensive online posts or threats to someone. Some had effectively done this while others did not know how to or had tried to have a person's account removed only for that person to create a new one using a different address.

Youth also felt there should be more education about Internet safety as many youth posted things without realizing it could lead to them being victimized. They also felt that training should take place at least annually given that technology changes so quickly.



"Find someone you can trust to talk about it. It won't solve everything but it's a good start."

"I've been directly bullied [while gaming], but there are actions you can take and I've reported people."

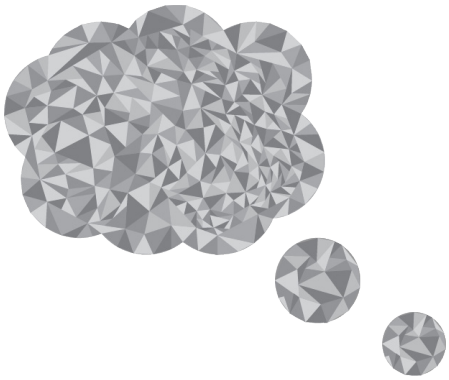
Youth's Goals for the Future

When asked what would help them to have the future that they would like to have for themselves and their peers, participants reiterated many of their earlier suggestions. These included more access to free activities and healthy food; more youth resources such as mental health counsellors, especially in smaller towns; and learning how to manage time and stress effectively.

Participants' different life experiences were reflected in what they thought would be helpful. For example, participants who had plans to attend post-secondary focused on areas such as free tuition and support applying for scholarships and admissions. Youth in care focused on the need for services to continue past their 19th birthday and for support for those in low income households. Transgender youth focused on the need for more Trans-competent health care workers and service providers.

Despite differences in experiences, focus group participants shared many common ideas about what would help them have a positive future. These included reducing expectations and pressures on youth; making sure everyone had access to the health care they needed, including free prescriptions and mental health services; and ensuring every youth had a support system which included caring adults and a place where they feel they belong.

Finally, participants felt that more discussion-based presentations that give youth information about their health and encourage dialogue would be helpful.



"[We need] services and resources in smaller or 'in-between' communities."

"[We need] more groups for youth struggling with various mental health issues in small towns."

"[We need] more accessible and affordable or free resources; better mental health supports in schools; incentives for youth to put down electronics and become physically active."

Final thoughts

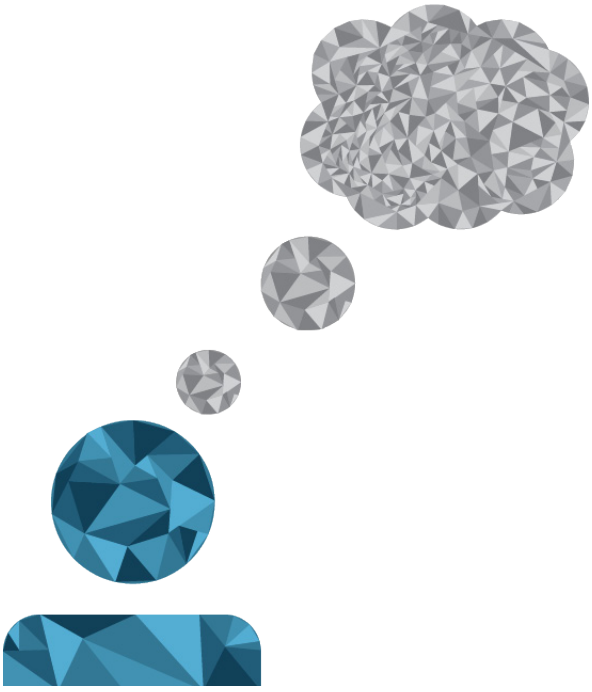
As in 2009, youth participants were engaged and thoughtful in their responses to the data. Many commented on how valuable they found the experience and wished there were more opportunities to learn about youth health and to share their perspectives.

Youth were generally not surprised by the data they reviewed although the data did not reflect every participant's experiences. They were clearly able to articulate what they felt was driving the data and what it may and may not be capturing. They also had many suggestions that would help to improve the data they reviewed.

Some of the feedback youth gave in 2009 was echoed in this project, including the need for all youth to have a supportive adult in their lives, the need to support youth in care, and the need to address in-person and online victimization.

In 2014, stress and school pressures seemed to be playing a greater role in youth's lives than seen among those who participated in 2009. Similarly, time spent on the Internet and playing video games appeared to have become a greater part of many young people's lives.

Continuing to engage young people in a dialogue about their health will allow us to remain aware of the challenges they face and will ensure their voices are included in service and policy planning.



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