

MEDIA RELEASE | March 30th 2020

Gender differences in Northern Interior youth health picture

McCreary Centre Society today released the Northern Interior regional results of the 2018 BC Adolescent Health Survey. The survey was completed by over 38,000 of the province's Grade 7–12 students, including all school districts in the Northern Interior Health Service Delivery Area.

Results showed a number of contrasting findings for males and females. For example, while across the province there was a decrease in both males and females rating their mental health less positively than five years earlier, this was only the case for females locally.

McCreary's Executive Director Annie Smith explained: *"There were other gender differences in the results which likely go some way to explaining the more positive mental health of local males. For example, there was an increase in girls who reported they had been sexually abused – this went up to more than 1 in 5 girls locally while rates remained stable for boys at 4%. Also, males were less likely than females to have been verbally or physically sexually harassed, and local females were also more likely than females across BC to have been sexually harassed."*

Smith went on to say *"These disparities are obviously concerning, as were the findings that more youth are missing out on mental health services that they need - but there were also some positive local results, including more youth waiting until they were at least 15 years old before trying cannabis, and local youth being more likely than those across the province to feel there was an adult in their community who cared about them."*

Survey results also showed that Northern Interior students are wanting to learn more about mental health, as it was the most common topic they asked for information and curriculum about, including wanting to know more about specific conditions, how to better manage stress, and where and when to seek help.

A copy of the report, *Balance and connection in Northern Interior: The health and well-being of our youth*, and an accompanying Power Point of the results are available at www.mcs.bc.ca.

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

Founded in 1977, our vision is that all youth are supported to be healthy and connected.

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BACKGROUND

The 2018 BC Adolescent Health Survey was conducted in 58 of BC's 60 school districts and is the sixth time students have been asked to complete the comprehensive health survey since 1992.

Participation was the highest since the survey began, and the results are considered representative of over 95% of mainstream school students in Grades 7–12 in the province.

Northern Interior HSDA is comprised of three school districts: Quesnel (SD 28), Prince George (SD 57), and Nechako Lakes (SD 91). All school districts in this region participated in the BC AHS in 2013 and 2018, and two of the three have participated in five waves of the survey.

The survey provides essential information about health trends, and about risk and protective factors that can influence young people's healthy transitions to adulthood. The 2018 survey included 140 questions asking youth about their perceptions of their current physical and mental health, their engagement in health promoting and health risk behaviours, and about factors that can contribute to a healthy transition to adulthood.

Some key findings from the report:

Northern Interior students were more likely than their peers across the province to identify as European (60% vs. 46%) and Indigenous (24% vs. 10%). However, the percentage who identified as European decreased from 67% in 2013.

Among local Indigenous students, 6% had at least one parent who had been in residential school and 29% had grandparents who had attended.

Provincially there was a decrease in males and females who rated their mental health positively. Locally, rates remained stable for males while there was a decrease for females (60% vs. 75% in 2013).

Just under half of students (48%) slept for at least eight hours on the night before completing the BC AHS. This was a decrease from 56% in 2013. Students reported doing various activities after the time they were expected to be asleep, including chatting or texting (59%), homework (43%), gaming (29%), and online activities other than gaming (e.g., watching videos, checking social media; 69%).

Compared to ten years earlier, there was a decrease in the percentage of students who missed out on needed medical care in the past year (8% vs. 14% in 2008). However, there was an increase from five years earlier in those who had missed out on needed mental health services (20% vs. 11% in 2013).

Local youth were less likely than their peers across the province to always eat breakfast (44% vs. 50%) and lunch (52% vs. 64%) on school days, and to eat three meals a day (29% vs. 37%).

Compared to 2013, local youth were less likely to have sustained a concussion in the past year (16% vs. 19%). Less than half (43%) of those who experienced a concussion received medical treatment for their injury.

There was an increase in students who reported having a mental health condition, including Anxiety Disorder/panic attacks (23% vs. 10% in 2013), Depression (20% vs. 11%), and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; 4% vs. 1%).

One in five local youth (20%) had seriously considered suicide in the past year. This was an increase for females (27% vs. 20% in 2013), and similar to five years earlier for males (11%). Also, 6% (3% of males vs. 9% of females) had attempted suicide during this time, which was similar to local rates five years earlier and to youth across BC.

Northern Interior youth were more likely than their peers across BC to have tried tobacco (25% vs. 18%), alcohol (55% vs. 44%) and marijuana (30% vs. 25%). They were also more likely to have vaped in the past month (35% vs. 27%).

Compared to a decade earlier, youth were more likely to have waited until they were at least 15 years old to first try alcohol and marijuana. Also, local males were less likely to have used marijuana than five and ten years earlier (e.g., 25% vs. 38% in 2008), while rates among females were comparable to previous years (34% in 2018).

Eleven percent of youth in the Northern Interior went to bed hungry at least sometimes because there was not enough money for food at home (vs. 9% in 2013).

Fourteen percent of students had been sexually abused (compared to 11% provincially). There was a rise in the percentage of females who had been sexually abused (22% vs. 16% in 2013), while rates for males remained unchanged (4%).

Youth in the Northern Interior generally felt connected to their families, school and community. Most also felt there was an adult in their community who really cared about them (69% vs. 65% across BC).

Local males were more likely than males across BC to feel safe in their neighbourhood during the day (96% vs. 93% provincially) and at night (78% vs. 73%). Despite a local decrease in feeling safe at night for females, local females were more likely than those across the province to feel safe in their neighbourhood at night (63% vs. 58% across BC).

The majority of Northern Interior youth could identify something they were really good at, felt good about themselves, reported satisfaction with their life, and were hopeful for their future.

Around two thirds of local youth (66%) felt the activities they were involved in were meaningful to them. Those who experienced meaningful engagement in their activities were more likely to report positive mental health, to feel an adult in their community cared about them, and to feel connected to their community.