

The 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) was completed by 38,488 students aged 12–19. This fact sheet focuses on international students who participated in the survey—i.e., students from outside Canada who may pay fees to attend school in BC for a semester or longer (e.g., full school years).

For more information about the BC AHS, please visit mcs.bc.ca/about_bcahs.

International students who completed the 2023 BC AHS were older than their Canadian-born peers. All findings in this fact sheet account for this age difference (i.e., statistically controlled).

Results were similar between international students and those born in Canada, unless otherwise noted.

All quotes in this fact sheet are from international students who completed the 2023 BC AHS.

Introduction

Research on international students has primarily focused on post-secondary students, and studies on those in high school have mostly been qualitative (Liu, 2024; Lou, 2025; Rowan et al., 2021). Findings to date have shown that international students can experience homesickness, loneliness, and isolation, and may lack social and emotional support (Blackmore et al., 2022; Schecter & Merecoulias, 2023). They also report challenges such as lack of access to familiar food; difficulties adjusting to climate and environmental differences; and unequal treatment or discrimination (Oduwaye et al., 2023). Belonging and connection have been highlighted as important for international students, especially feeling connected to school and peers (Blackmore et al., 2022; Lou, 2025).

Background

In 2023, 8% of students who completed the BC AHS were in Canada as international students (vs. 6% in 2018 and 4% in 2013). These students were most commonly 16 or 17 years old (40%). However, there was an increase among younger students. For example, the percentage of Grade 7 students who were international students more than doubled between 2018 (3%) and 2023 (7%).

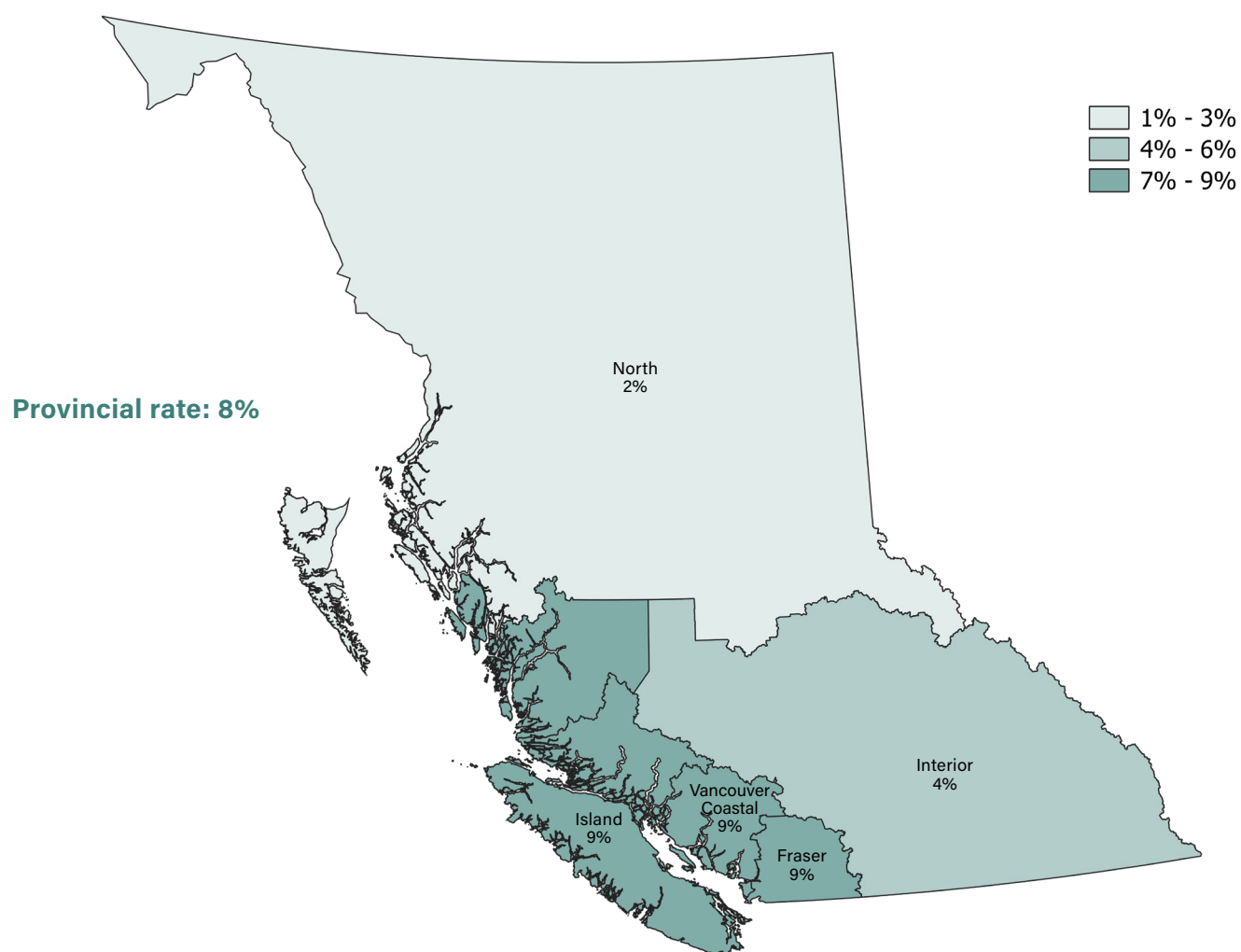
Just under half of international students (49%) identified as male, 48% as female (vs. 44% of Canadian-born students), and 3% as non-binary (vs. 5%). Three quarters identified as straight, 7% as mostly straight, 7% as bisexual or pansexual (vs. 11% of Canadian-born youth), 2% as gay or lesbian (vs. 3%), 1% as asexual, and 7% were questioning their sexual orientation (vs. 4%).

Similar to 5 and 10 years earlier, the majority of international students (63%) had been in Canada for less than 2 years. Most spoke a language other than English at least sometimes (90% vs. 44% of Canadian-born youth).

International students were more likely to be in school in the Lower Mainland and Island than in the Interior and North. Rates of international students ranged from 11% in Richmond, Fraser North, and South Vancouver Island to 2% in the Northwest and Northern Interior.



Where international students lived



International students most commonly identified their family background as East Asian. However, the percentage who identified this way was lower than 5 years earlier.

Just over half of international students (55%) had a religious affiliation (vs. 40% of Canadian-born youth), including Christian (33% vs. 22% of Canadian-born youth), Buddhist (7% vs. 2%), Sikh (6% vs. 9%), Muslim (5% vs. 3%), Hindu (4% vs. 1%), and Jewish (1%). Around half (49%) felt spirituality was at least somewhat important to them (vs. 32% of Canadian-born students).

Family background of international students

	2018	2023
East Asian	59%	37%
European	17%	25%
Southeast Asian	9%	12%
Latin/South/Central American	10%	11%
South Asian	4%	11%
Middle Eastern	2%	4%
African	1%	3%
Caribbean	N/A	1%
Australian, Pacific Islander	<1%	1%
Other	<1%	1%
Do not know	1%	2%

Note: Youth could mark all that applied.

N/A: The item was not included on the 2018 BC AHS.

Note: **Bolded** percentages are significantly different from the percentage in 2018.

Health profile

Overall health and access to health care

International students were more likely than those born in Canada to rate their overall health as good or excellent (80% vs. 72%). However, the longer they lived here the less likely they were to rate their health this way (e.g., 75% who had lived in Canada for 6 or more years rated their health positively vs. 83% who had been here 2 years or less).

International students were generally less likely than their Canadian-born peers to feel they needed health care in the past year. However, they were also more likely to report they missed out on care when they did need it. Also, 21% of those who needed medical help specifically because they were physically sick or hurt did not get the care they needed.

Where youth got health care in the past year		
	International students	Youth born in Canada
Family doctor	35%	56%
Specialist	25%	32%
Walk-in clinic	19%	24%
Emergency room (ER)	8%	17%
Counsellor/psychologist	7%	14%
Nurse	6%	9%
School wellness centre	3%	2%
Youth clinic	3%	2%
Traditional healer	1%	1%
Foundry centre/ Foundry Virtual BC	1%	2%
Other	4%	3%
Did not need health care	32%	22%

Note: Students could mark all that applied.
Note: The difference between international students and youth born in Canada was not statistically significant for 'Youth clinic' and 'Other'.

International students were less likely than Canadian-born youth to have visited a dentist in the past year (69% vs. 86%), and were more likely to have never been to the dentist (5% vs. 1%). However, they were more likely than 5 years earlier to have visited a dentist (e.g., 69% had gone in the past year vs. 58% in 2018).

“When I was dealing with my MSP, there was nobody to contact with. I can’t get through the phone call and it was confusing.”

18-year-old youth

“Schools should have contact numbers of cheap dentists for people that can not afford/international students.”

18-year-old youth

Mental health and well-being

Most international students (71%) rated their mental health as good or excellent (81% of males vs. 64% of females vs. 41% of non-binary youth). Despite a decrease in ratings from previous years (71% vs. 81% in 2018 vs. 85% in 2013), they were more likely than Canadian-born youth to rate their mental health this positively (71% vs. 58%).

Female international students were more likely to report satisfaction with their life than females born in Canada, including that their life was going well (69% vs. 58%). They were less likely to usually feel lonely (23% vs. 30% of Canadian-born females); to experience extreme stress (11% vs. 19%) and despair (7% vs. 10%) in the past month; and to have self-harmed (22% vs. 33%) and attempted suicide (4% vs. 7%) in the past year. Male international students reported similar well-being to Canadian-born males except they were more likely to wish they had a different life (20% vs. 13% of those born in Canada).



Note: Among males, the difference between international students and Canadian-born students was not statistically significant.

Among international students who felt they needed to access mental health services in the past year, 62% did not get the care they needed. Their most common reasons included not wanting their parent/guardian to know (49%), and not knowing where to go (49%).

Substance use

International students were as likely as Canadian born students to have smoked tobacco (17%), but were less likely than Canadian-born youth to have vaped (22% vs. 28%) or tried cannabis (12% vs. 25%). Also, male international students were less likely than Canadian-born males to have tried alcohol (32% vs. 37%).

Sexual health

“[I want to learn more about] sex education! Please implement in schools. It will help reduce stigma around numerous topics.”

15-year-old youth

International students were less likely than Canadian-born ones to have received sex education at school (68% vs. 83%). However, among those who had received this education, international students were more likely to find it helpful (74% vs. 61%). Most international students (86%) felt the sex education they received was respectful of their culture or religion. Among international students, females were more likely than males to find the sex education they received to be helpful (78% vs. 70%).

Compared to youth born in Canada, international students were less likely to have ever had oral sex (15% vs. 18%) and intercourse (14% vs. 18%). Among youth who had engaged in sexual activity, international students were more likely to have used protection. For example, 75% had used protection the last time they had sex, compared to 55% of Canadian-born youth (among those who had ever had sex).

When they needed reliable sexual health information, international students most commonly turned to their parent or guardian (33%), a same-aged peer (26%), and an online resource (26%). They were more likely than youth born in Canada to go to school staff (10% vs. 3%) and to access printed resources (4% vs. 3%) for this information.

Extracurricular activities

Physical activity

“My physical activities have been severely reduced since I came to Canada.”

17-year-old youth

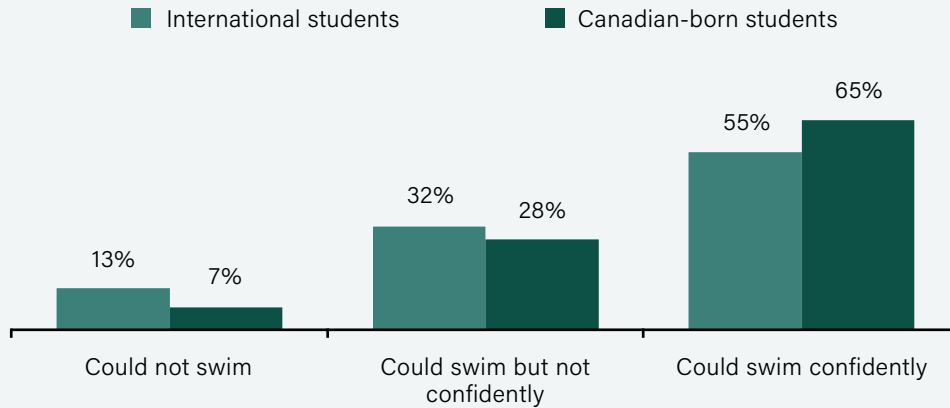
International students were less likely than youth born in Canada to have engaged in 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily in the past week (13% vs. 20%), and were twice as likely not to have exercised on any day that week (20% vs. 10%). However, they were more likely to have exercised daily than international students 5 years earlier (13% in 2023 vs. 8% in 2018).

International students were less likely than Canadian-born ones to participate in extracurricular informal sports (such as street hockey) on a weekly basis (46% vs. 54%), and females were less likely than females born in Canada to play organized sports (such as on a soccer team) this regularly (42% vs. 50%). However, international students were more likely to exercise to an online video or class at least weekly (16% vs. 11% of Canadian-born students), and females were the most likely to do so (e.g., 22% of female international students vs. 10% of male international students).

Compared to 5 years earlier, international students were more likely to be engaging in at least weekly sports, including informal sports (46% vs. 41% in 2018), organized sports (45% vs. 38%), and extreme sports such as BMXing and back country skiing (11% vs. 8%). However, 62% reported experiencing barriers to participating in these types of extracurricular activities. The most common barrier was being too busy to participate (41%). Additionally, 17% worried it would be too competitive, 10% had transportation challenges, 10% were too anxious or depressed, and 6% reported their parent or guardian would not allow them to participate.

International students were almost twice as likely as Canadian-born students to report that they could not swim. Those who could swim were less likely to be confident swimmers.

Swimming ability



Cultural and traditional activities

Over half of international students participated in cultural or traditional activities in the past year (54% vs. 43% among Canadian-born students), which was an increase from 37% in 2018. Among international students, females were the most likely to engage in cultural activities (e.g., 60% vs. 48% of males).

Use of phones and other devices

International students may be on a different time zone to their loved ones. They were more likely to have used their phone on their most recent school day to connect with friends and family (69% vs. 64% of youth born in Canada), and to be chatting or texting after the time they were expected to be asleep (64% vs. 60%). Among international students, females were the most likely to be online, chatting and texting at night (e.g., 72% were chatting or texting after their expected bedtime vs. 58% of males).

Adverse experiences

Poverty and deprivation

There was a decrease in the percentage of international students who went to bed hungry at least sometimes because there was not enough money for food (8% vs. 12% in 2018). The percentage was also lower than among Canadian-born students (8% vs. 9%), unlike in 2018 when international students were more likely than their peers to go to bed hungry.

"Food is too expensive."

18-year-old youth

International students were more likely than 5 years earlier to experience material deprivation (24% were deprived of at least one item on McCreary's Youth Deprivation Index vs. 21% in 2018). International students were specifically more likely than youth born in Canada to feel deprived of space of their own to hang out in (8% vs. 6%), access to transportation (5% vs. 2%), and equipment or clothes to do extracurricular activities (5% vs. 3%). *More details about the Youth Deprivation Index can be found in Smith et al. 2022.*

Victimization and sense of safety

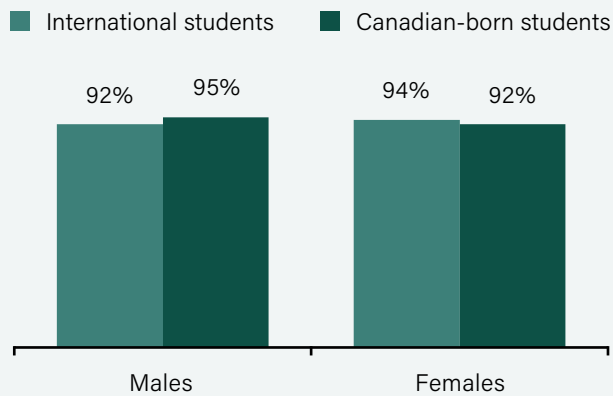
"About racism. Very common in my school ... I heard the comments about it (stereotype of Asian) to me and other races in my school. It affects my mental health."

15-year-old youth

International students were more likely than Canadian-born ones to have experienced racial discrimination in the past year (17% vs. 13%). However, they reported lower rates of in-person and online bullying (e.g., 38% had been bullied in person by another youth in the past year vs. 52% of Canadian-born youth).

International students were less likely than their Canadian-born peers to often or always feel safe in their neighbourhood during the day (87% vs. 91%). Overall, 93% of international students felt safe in their home. However, when considered by gender, male international students were less likely than males born in Canada to feel safe at home, whereas this was the reverse for females.

Youth who often or always felt safe inside their home



Social isolation

"I'm just lonely. I have friends and people usually like me, but I'm not close to them. I almost never go out with friends, we only hang out during lunch."

17-year-old youth

"I sometimes do not have good relationship between my host family and I."

13-year-old youth

"I am homesick."

16-year-old youth

International students were more likely than their Canadian-born peers to feel their teachers cared about them (70% vs. 59%). Otherwise, they were less likely than Canadian-born youth to report having supportive relationships. In particular, they were less likely to have:

- An adult outside their school and family who they felt really cared about them (65% vs. 76% of youth born in Canada).
- An adult outside their family they could talk to if they had a serious problem (27% vs. 35%).
- An adult to help with life skills and tasks (e.g., 88% who needed help making/getting to appointments had an adult to help them with this vs. 96%).
- At least one close friend in their school or neighbourhood (90% vs. 95%).

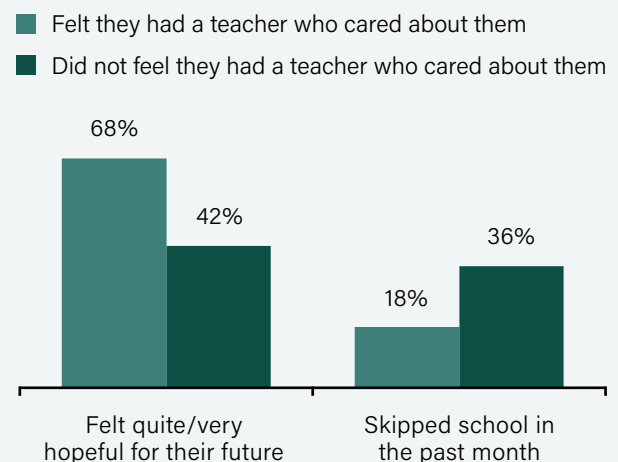
Supporting international students

All findings in this section are among international students. Patterns were similar for males, females, and non-binary youth.

International students reported better health and well-being when they:

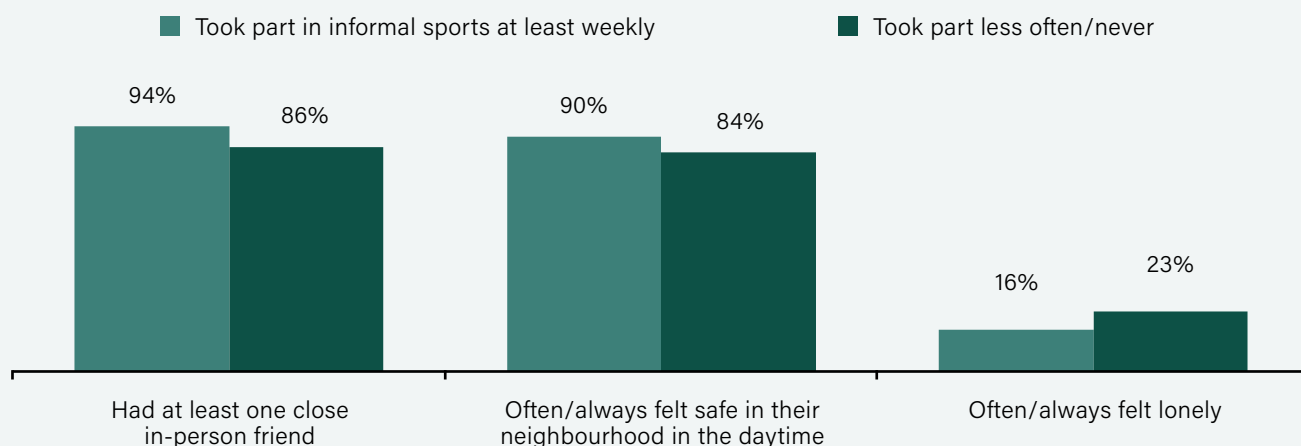
- **Had helpful and supportive adults in their life.**
For example, international students who had a caring adult in their community were more likely to report good or excellent mental health (74% vs. 66% who did not have this adult support), and to feel quite or very connected to their community (55% vs. 34%). Also, among those who needed medical help in the past year, students who had an adult to help with appointments were more likely to have received the help they needed (81% vs. 67% who did not have this adult support).
- **Felt positively about school and school staff.**
For example, international students who felt school staff treated them fairly were more likely to feel their life was going well (77% vs. 50% who did not feel school staff treated them fairly) and to usually feel happy in the past month (68% vs. 42%). They were less likely to feel extreme stress (6% vs. 21%) and despair (5% vs. 14%) in the past month.

International students who felt their teachers cared about them were more likely to feel hopeful for their future and less likely to skip school

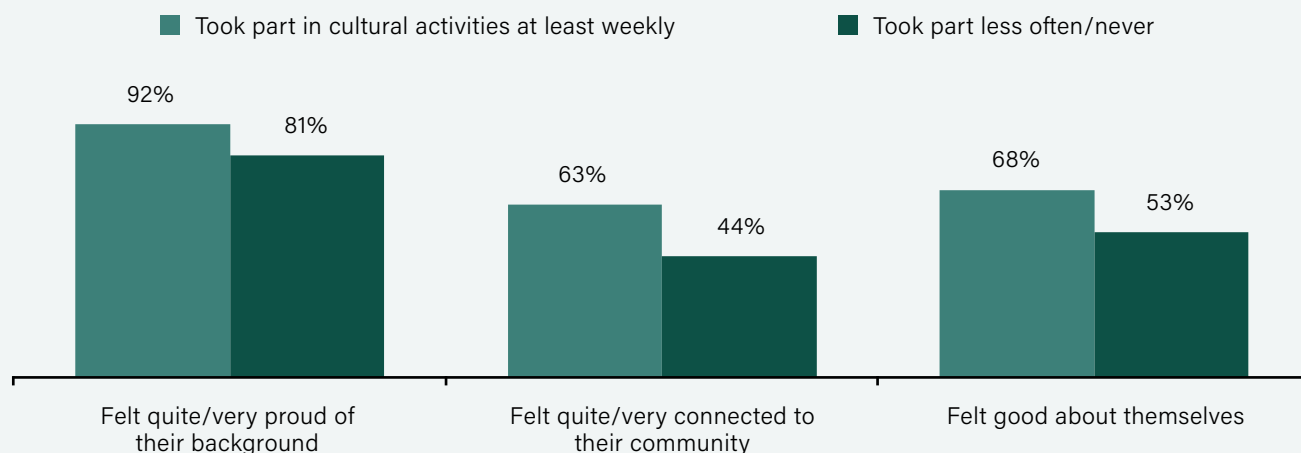


- **Had supportive friends.** International students who had friends to share their ups and downs with were more likely to feel they had a good life (83% vs. 64% who did not have such friends), to feel good about themselves (62% vs. 32%), and hopeful for their future (67% vs. 50%).
- **Regularly took part in extracurricular activities.** For example, 86% who took part at least weekly in informal (recreational) sports rated their overall health as good or excellent, compared to 74% who took part less often or never. They were also more likely to have close in-person friends and to feel safe in their neighborhood during the day, and were less likely to often or always feel lonely.
- **Accessed cultural activities and traditional foods.** For example, students who participated in cultural or traditional activities on a weekly basis were more likely to feel proud of their background, connected to their community, and good about themselves.
- **Were meaningfully engaged.** Those who felt their activities were quite or very meaningful to them were more likely to feel good about themselves (66% vs. 40% who felt their activities were less meaningful), and that they were really good at something (82% vs. 61%).

Regular participation in informal sports in the past year was associated with enhanced community connections and sense of safety, and reduced loneliness *(among international students)*



Regular participation in cultural activities in the past year and well-being *(among international students)*



Final thoughts

International students reported better health and well-being than their peers born in Canada in areas such as their overall health and mental health ratings. There were some improvements from 5 years earlier in areas such as the percentage going to bed hungry, and accessing a dentist. However, international students were less likely than their Canadian-born peers to have supportive connections, such as caring community adults and close in-person friends. They were also less likely to take part in daily physical activity and to be able to swim.

International students appeared to benefit from the presence of supportive relationships, and opportunities to be meaningfully engaged in extracurricular activities. These findings suggest that supporting international students to connect to activities in their community may help them to enhance their connections and well-being.

There were gender differences in the experiences of international students. For example, males were less likely than males born in Canada to feel safe in their home and satisfied with their life, whereas the reverse was found for females. These results suggest there is a need to understand the experiences of international students through a gender-based lens, and to learn from male, female, and non-binary students how they can best be supported.

Resources

MOSAIC BC provides newcomer services, including health care and counselling, legal support, and violence prevention and support services: info@mosaicbc.org 604-254-9626 | mosaicbc.org

WelcomeBC provides information about living in BC, including navigating healthcare, transportation, education, and employment: welcomebc.ca.

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