Youth with caregiving responsibilities in BC

McCreary Centre Society

This fact sheet uses data from the BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) to profile BC students in Grades 7 to 12 who had caregiving responsibilities on a typical school day. It includes those who were caring for a sick or elderly relative, a relative with a disability, and/or younger siblings.

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

Introduction

In Canada, a young carer has been defined as "a child, teenager, or a young adult stepping up to help a family member who needs them … they take on diverse responsibilities, including personal care, sibling care, financial support, and even emotional support" (Young Caregivers Association, 2025). In households with multiple children, it is often younger siblings who perform caregiving roles as older siblings become less available due to commitments outside the home, such as school and work (McDonald et al., 2010).

Current estimates of the number of Canadian young people with caregiving responsibilities are unavailable but the number is predicted to continue to increase as Canada's population ages (Perri et al., 2026). In comparison to other western countries such as the United Kingdom where the rights of young carers are enshrined in legislation (UK Government, 2014), Canada is lacking in policy and supports for youth with caregiving responsibilities (Perri et al., 2026; Waugh et al., 2015).

Previous research has shown young carers are at greater risk of experiencing challenges, such as poverty and deprivation (Vizard et al., 2019), mental health challenges (Alfonzo et al., 2022), bullying (Alfonzo et al., 2023), and disengagement from school and work (Hamilton & Redmond, 2020; King et al., 2025). Youth's caregiving responsibilities can also limit their social and leisure opportunities (Stamatopoulos, 2018).

Who are BC's young carers?

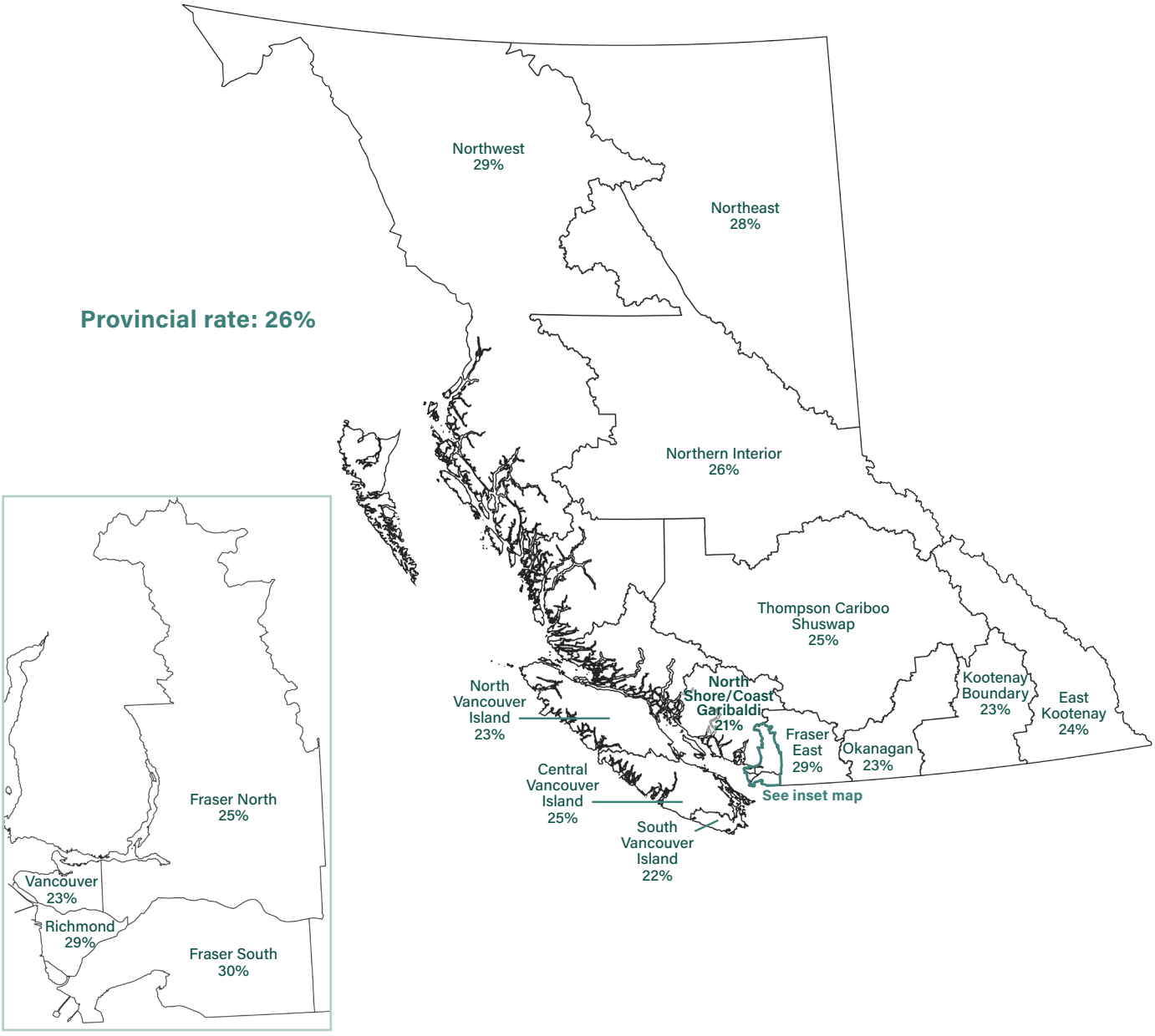
On an average school day in 2023, 26% of BC youth aged 12 to 19 had caregiving responsibilities for a relative. This was an increase from previous survey years (26% vs. 21% in 2018 vs. 20% in 2013). Females were more likely than males to be caring for a relative (29% vs. 23%), as were younger youth compared to older ones (e.g., 30% of those aged 12 or younger vs. 24% of those aged 17 or older).

Youth in the North (28%) and Fraser (28%) regions were more likely to have caregiving responsibilities than those in the Vancouver Coastal (24%), Interior (24%), and Island (23%) regions. At the Health Service Delivery Area (HSDA) level, rates of young carers ranged from 21% in North Shore/Coast Garibaldi to 30% in Fraser South.

Other youth more likely to have caregiving responsibilities for a relative included those who:

- Were born outside of Canada (31% vs. 24% of those born in Canada).
- Spoke a language other than English at home at least some of the time (31% vs. 20% who never spoke another language at home).
- Lived with their grandparent(s) (34% vs. 25% who did not live with these relatives), siblings/stepsiblings (29% vs. 19%), other children or youth (38% vs. 26%), and/or other related adults (38% vs. 25%).

Youth with caregiving responsibilities



Note: Not all differences between HSDAs were statistically significant.

Experiences of young carers in BC

Economic well-being

Young carers were more likely than their peers to experience material deprivation (31% vs. 21%), including feeling deprived of three or more items from McCreary's Youth Deprivation Index (7% vs. 3%). *See Smith et al., (2022) for more information about the Youth Deprivation Index.*

Youth who lacked but wished they had …		
	Youth who took care of a relative	Youth who did not take care of a relative
Money to spend on themselves	14%	10%
Some space of their own to hang out in	9%	5%
Lunch for school/money to buy lunch	7%	4%
Money for school supplies, trips, and extracurricular activities	6%	3%
Clothes to feel they belong/fit in	5%	3%
Equipment/clothes to do extracurricular activities	5%	3%
A smartphone	5%	3%
A quiet place to sleep	4%	2%
Access to transportation	4%	2%
Access to the Internet	1%	1%
Personal hygiene products	1%	<1%

Note: Although percentages round to the same whole number, young carers were more likely to lack but wish they had access to the Internet.

Food insecurity was more prevalent among young carers. For example, they were around twice as likely to go to bed hungry at least sometimes because there was not enough money for food (13% vs. 7% of youth without caregiving responsibilities), and to access a food bank the previous day (4% vs. 2%).

Young carers were as likely as youth without caregiving responsibilities to have worked at a paid job in the past year (both 32%). However, they were more likely to have worked 21 or more hours a week (3% vs. 2% without caregiving responsibilities), and were almost twice as likely to report the reason they worked was to contribute to their family income (19% vs. 10%).

Mental health and well-being

Young carers were less likely than their peers without caregiving responsibilities to rate their mental health as good or excellent (57% vs. 61%), and to feel satisfied with their life (e.g., 71% felt they had a good life vs. 77% of those who did not have caregiving responsibilities). They were more likely to often or always feel lonely (27% vs. 23%), and to experience extreme stress (15% vs. 12%) and despair (10% vs. 7%) in the past month.

Young carers were also more likely to report having specific mental health challenges. For example, they were more likely to have an anxiety disorder (26% vs. 21% of those without caregiving responsibilities) and depression (16% vs. 13%). However, they were also slightly more likely than youth without such responsibilities to feel they were really good at something (74% vs. 73%), including having practical and relational skills. Examples they shared included:

***"[I'm really good at] working hard, helping others, and sports."*—13-year-old youth**

***"[I'm really good at] taking care of my younger siblings and being able to cook and bake (both my favourite things)."*—14-year-old youth**

***"[I'm really good at] taking care of others, without expecting anything in return."*—18-year-old youth**

***"[I'm really good at] being there for someone when they need it."*—17-year-old youth**

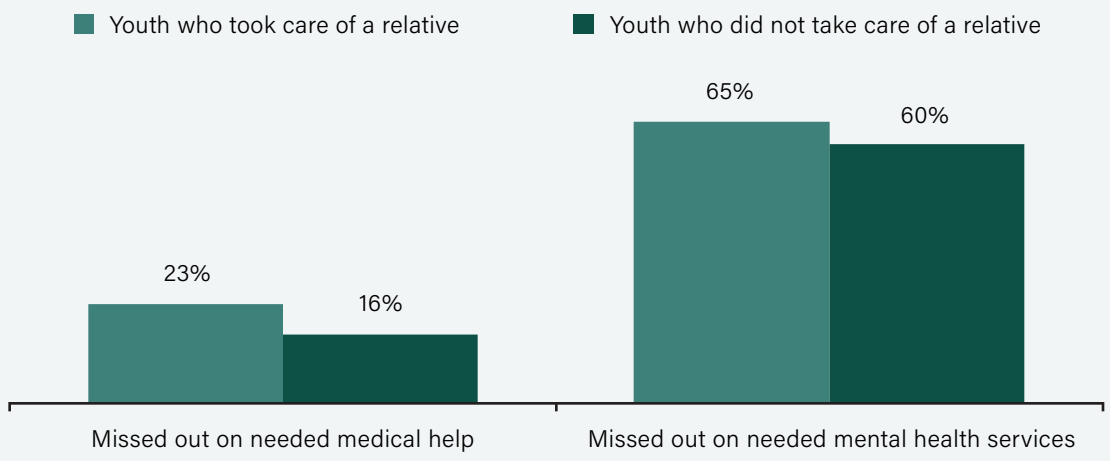
Accessing health services

The majority of young carers had not needed medical help (58% vs. 62% of non-caregiving youth) or mental health services (68% vs. 71%) in the past year. However, among those who had needed services, young carers were less likely to have accessed the help they needed.

Young carers were more likely to identify some specific reasons for missing out on needed mental health services, including:

- Not knowing where to go (48% vs. 44% of non-caregiving youth).
- Having no transportation (13% vs. 8%).
- Thinking they could not afford it (31% vs. 24%).
- Their parent or guardian would not (or could not) take them (23% vs. 17%).
- Being worried about confidentiality (48% vs. 39%).

Youth who cared for a relative were less likely to access needed medical and mental health services in the past year

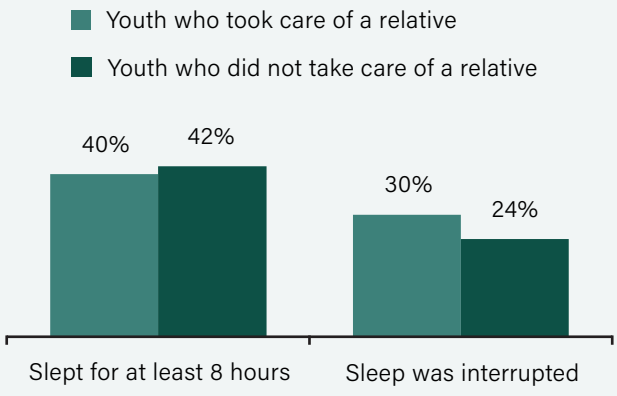


Note: Among those who needed medical help and mental health services.

Sleep

Compared to youth without caregiving responsibilities, young carers were less likely to get a full night's sleep the night before completing the survey and were more likely to report interrupted sleep. For example, 22% slept for 5 hours or less that night, compared to 17% of youth without caregiving responsibilities.

Youth who cared for a relative were less likely to get 8 or more hours of sleep and more likely to report sleep interruption the previous night



School plans

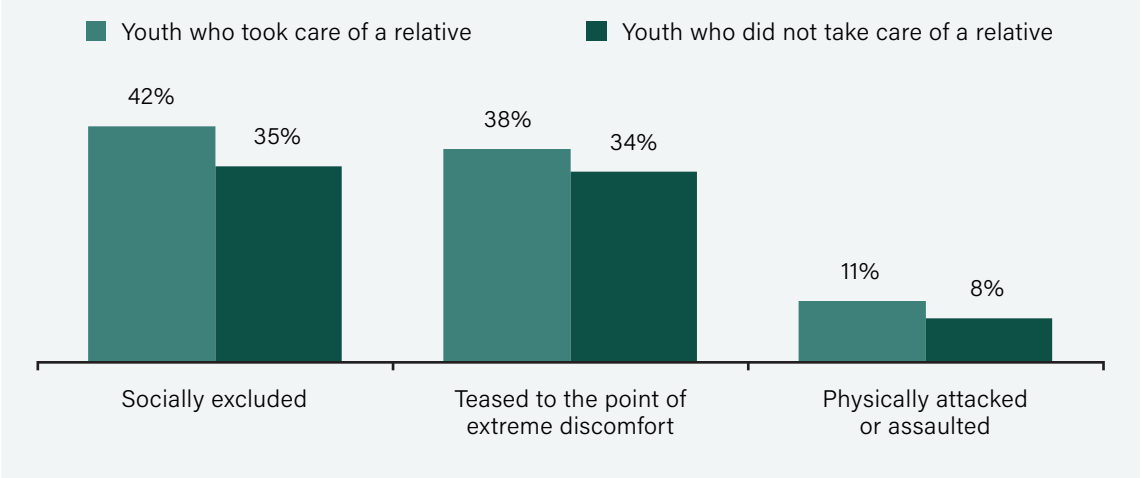
Overall, 76% of young carers in Grades 7 to 12 planned to attend post-secondary education. Among youth in lower grades, the percentage with post-secondary plans was similar between youth with and without caregiving responsibilities. However, among Grade 12 students, young carers were less likely to anticipate they would continue their education after high school (83% vs. 87% of those without caregiving responsibilities).

School experiences

Around three quarters of youth (77%) who cared for a relative had missed school in the past month. This included 43% who missed school because they had to attend appointments (vs. 39% without caregiving responsibilities), and 26% who missed school due to their family responsibilities (vs. 14%).

Young carers were more likely to experience victimization at or on the way to or from school in the past year compared to their non-caregiving peers. They were also more likely to have been cyberbullied in the past year (18% vs. 14%).

Youth who cared for a relative were more likely to experience victimization at, or on the way to or from, school in the past year



Leisure time

Extracurricular activities

Youth with caregiving responsibilities took part in a range of extracurricular activities at least weekly in the past year, and were more likely than their peers to participate in some types of physical activity. For example, 14% exercised at least weekly to an online video or class, compared to 11% of youth who did not have caregiving responsibilities.

In the past year, 68% of young carers had experienced barriers to taking part in extracurriculars, including 46% who experienced multiple barriers (vs. 39% of those without caregiving responsibilities). The most common barrier they experienced was being too busy to participate.

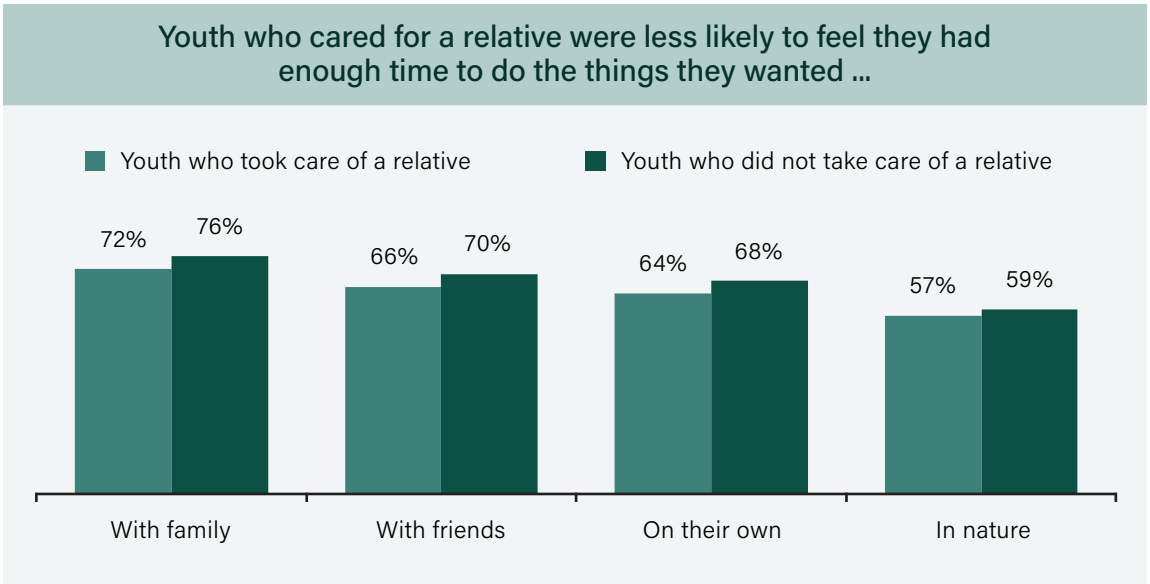
Enough time to do the things they want

The majority of young carers felt they spent the right amount of time with their family, friends, on their own, and in nature. However, they were less likely than other youth to feel this way.

Barriers youth experienced to participating in extracurricular physical activity in the past 12 months

	Youth who took care of a relative	Youth who did not take care of a relative
Too busy	44%	39%
Was injured	23%	22%
Too anxious/depressed	20%	16%
Thought it would be too competitive	19%	16%
Worried about being bullied by another youth	15%	11%
Couldn't get there or home	15%	11%
Didn't feel welcome	13%	9%
Couldn't afford to	13%	8%
Parent/guardian would not allow them to	10%	6%
Activity wasn't available in their community	10%	7%
Worried about catching something (e.g., COVID-19)	7%	5%
Worried about being bullied by an adult	7%	4%
Health needs/disability could not be accommodated	3%	2%

Note: Youth could mark all that applied.
Note: For "Was injured" the difference between young carers and non-caregiving youth was not statistically significant.



Supporting young carers

All findings in this section are among youth who cared for a relative on a typical school day.

Building on findings from previous research, this fact sheet has shown that young carers in BC face challenges to their well-being and to accessing services and health-promoting activities. However, results from the BC AHS also showed that youth with caregiving responsibilities were more likely to report positive mental health and well-being when they:

Had supportive friends: Young carers who had friends they could share their ups and downs with were less likely to often or always feel lonely (21% vs. 54% of those who did not have such friends), and were more likely to feel they had a good life (76% vs. 54%).

Had helpful and supportive adults in their life: Among young carers who needed medical help in the past year, those who had an adult to help them make and get to appointments were more likely to have accessed the medical help they needed (79% vs. 50% of those without such an adult). Similarly, 36% who had an adult to help them access appointments got the mental health services they needed, compared to 27% without such an adult.

Also, youth were more likely to plan to attend post-secondary education if they had an adult who helped them prepare for the process (80% vs. 69% who did not have an adult to help them prepare). Those with an adult in their community (outside of their family/school) who they felt really cared about them were less likely to have experienced extreme stress (14% vs. 19% without such an adult) and despair (9% vs. 14%) in the past month.

Felt connected to school and school staff: Young carers who felt like a part of their school were more likely to have plans to attend post-secondary (83% vs. 62% who did not feel like a part of their school), and to feel quite or very hopeful for their future (72% vs. 31%). Additionally, those who felt their teachers cared about them were more likely to rate their mental health as good or excellent (68% vs. 34% who did not feel their teachers cared), and were less likely to be absent from school in the past month (72% vs. 89%).

Were regularly and meaningfully engaged in activities: Young carers who were involved in regular extracurricular activities were more likely to rate their mental health positively. For example, 61% of those who took part at least weekly in informal sports rated their mental health as good or excellent, compared to 51% who engaged less regularly or not at all. Additionally, those who felt the activities they were involved in were meaningful to them were more likely to feel they had a good life (78% vs. 58% who felt the activities were less meaningful), and to usually feel good about themselves (56% vs. 38%).

Resource list

RISE-UP Toolkit is designed for Canadian healthcare providers to recognize and support young carers. It was co-developed by young carers, healthcare providers, and caregiving organizations: ***canadiancaregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/RISEUP_Toolkit_Final.pdf***.

Young Caregivers Association is a Canadian non-profit serving young carers and their families: ***youngcaregivers.ca***.

Young Caregivers Connect is an online support group for young carers: ***youngcaregiversconnect.ca***.

Guide to Financial Assistance for Caregivers is a guide to financial resources, benefits, and credits for caregivers in British Columbia: ***familycaregiversbc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Guide-to-Financial-Assistance-for-Caregivers-2024-AY.pdf***.

Family Caregivers of BC Learning Centre is an online learning community offering caregiver resources: ***familycaregiversbc.ca/caregiver-learning-center***.

Family Caregivers of BC Support Line provides access to information about caregiver services and supports across BC: ***1-877-520-3267***

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