

CHANGES OVER TIME IN MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE AMONG HOMELESS AND UNSTABLY HOUSED YOUTH AGED 12-19



McCreary
Centre Society

This fact sheet focuses on mental health and substance use among youth aged 12-19 with experience of homelessness and unstable housing in 13 BC communities. The fact sheet uses data from McCreary's 2014 and 2023 *Homeless Youth Health and Wellness Survey*.

Youth who participated in the survey were currently homeless, unstably housed, or at risk of homelessness, and included those who were staying on the streets, in temporary accommodation (such as a shelter or SRO), and couch surfing.

There were a few changes over time in youth who participated in the survey. Specifically, there was a decrease in the percentage who identified as male from 47% in 2014 to 40%, and an increase in those who identified as non-binary from 3% to 10%. Also, youth in 2023 were more likely to have first become homeless at a young age, as 18% first became homeless at age nine or younger, compared to 10% in 2014.

Mental health and well-being

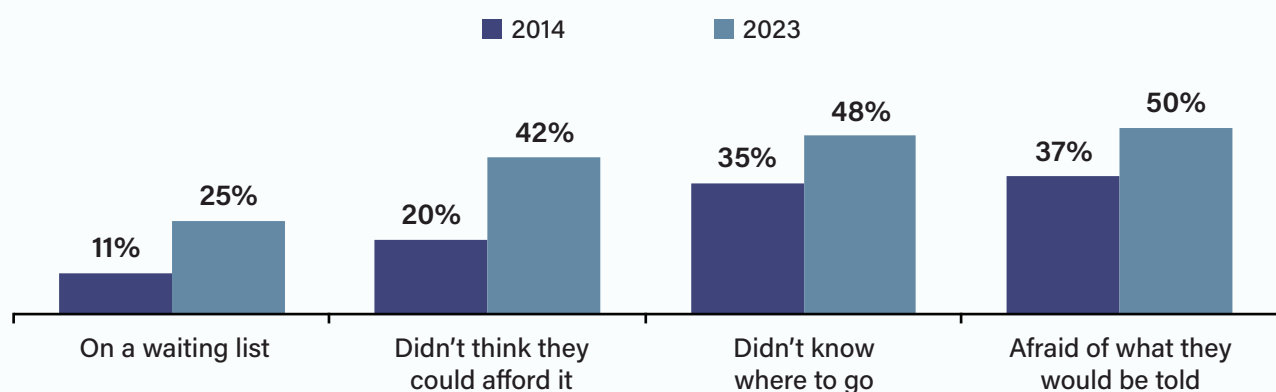
Over time, there was a decrease in youth reporting positive mental health, and an increase in mental health challenges. For example, there was an increase in the percentage of youth who reported:

- 📍 Poor or fair mental health (from 51% in 2014 to 73% in 2023).
- 📍 Extreme stress in the past month (21% to 39%).
- 📍 Self-harming in the past year (45% to 52%).
- 📍 Depression (47% to 57%).
- 📍 Anxiety disorder/panic attacks (27% to 54%).
- 📍 ADHD (25% to 54%).
- 📍 PTSD (17% to 40%).

The percentage of youth who seriously considered suicide in the past year increased over time from 42% to 51%. However, the percentage who attempted suicide remained similar (30% in 2023).

Around 3 in 10 youth (31%) missed out on the mental health services they needed in the past year, which was similar to the percentage in 2014. However, among those who missed out on these needed services, youth in 2023 were more likely to identify certain reasons for not accessing these services.

Youth's reported reasons for not accessing the mental health services they felt they needed in the past year



Substance use

Youth were asked about their lifetime and recent use of alcohol, cannabis, and other substances. They were also asked about vaping and smoking.

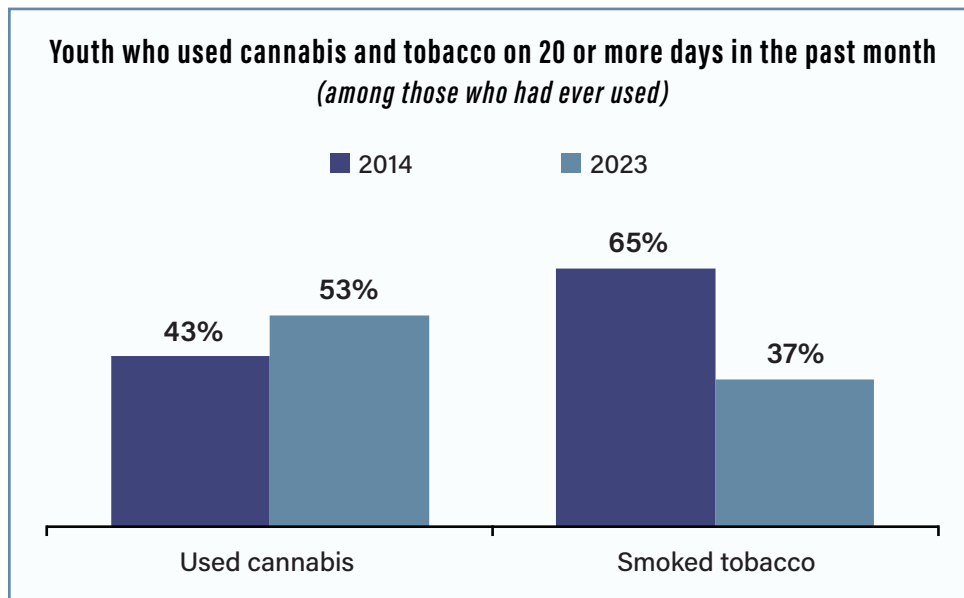
There was no change over time in the percentage of youth who had tried alcohol (78% in 2023). There was a decrease in youth who had used cannabis (from 84% in 2014 to 74%), and those who used cannabis were waiting longer to first try it (e.g., 21% waited until they were 15 or older vs. 15% in 2014). However, among youth who had used cannabis, youth in 2023 were more likely to be using it regularly.

There was a decrease in the percentage of youth who had ever smoking tobacco (e.g., cigarettes), from 81% in 2014 to 65%. Among those who had ever smoked there was a decrease in those who had smoked in the past month (from 89% in 2014 to 73%), including daily (from 55% to 32%). However, there was an increase in those who had vaped in the past month (from 40% to 67%).

There were decreases in the lifetime use of other substances, including:

- 📍 Prescription pills without a doctor's consent (from 41% in 2014 to 32%).
- 📍 Cocaine (48% to 29%).
- 📍 Hallucinogens other than mushrooms (43% to 32%).
- 📍 Ecstasy/MDMA (54% to 28%).
- 📍 Inhalants (22% to 13%).
- 📍 Amphetamines (32% to 14%).
- 📍 Crystal meth (30% to 18%).
- 📍 Ketamine/GHB (32% to 11%).

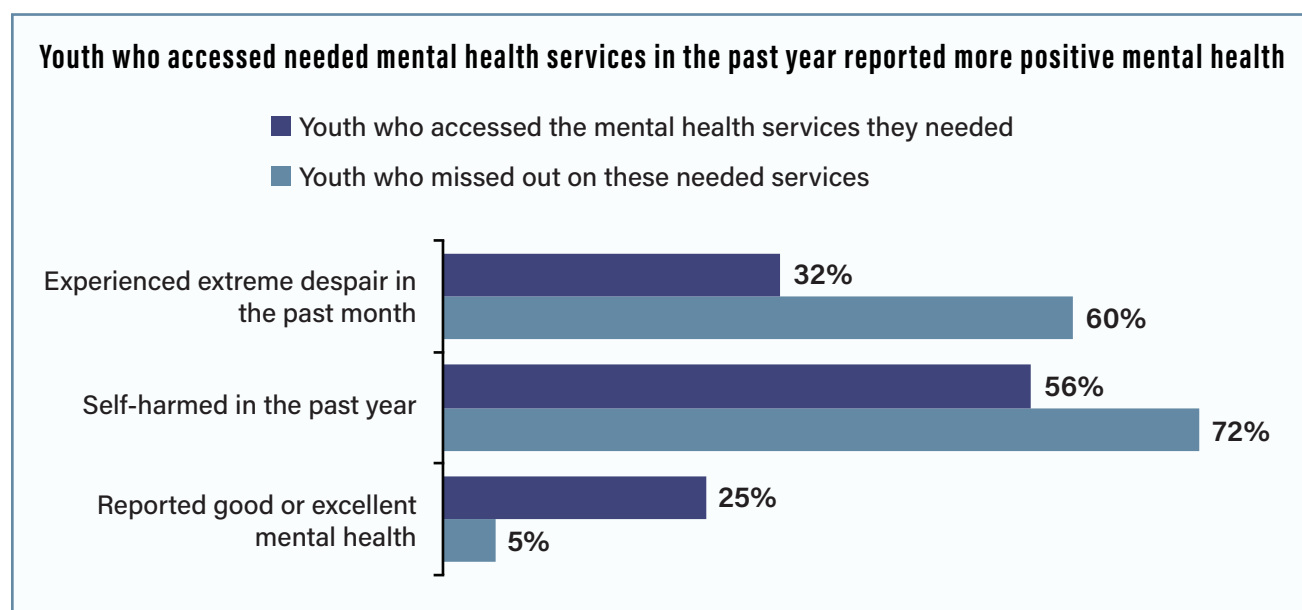
There was no change in the percentage of youth who had ever tried opioids such as heroin (in 2023, 21% had ever tried heroin, fentanyl or other opioids). However, there was an increase in those who had used opioids in the past month (from 5% to 8%).



Supporting youth with mental health and substance use challenges

In both survey years, youth reported better mental health and well-being, and reduced substance use, when they had their basic needs met and had access to the supports and services they needed. For example, in 2023:

- 📍 Youth who **accessed the mental health services they needed** in the past year were less likely than those who missed out on needed services to have self-harmed and experienced extreme despair. They were also more likely to report positive mental health.



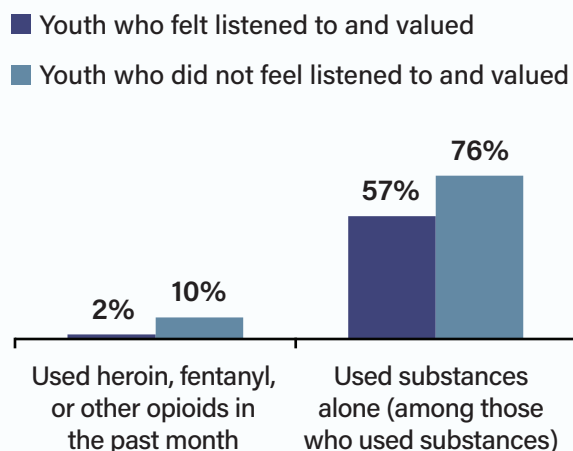
- 📍 Youth who **got the medical help they needed** were more likely to report good or excellent physical health (47% vs. 24% who missed out on needed medical care in the past year). They were also less likely to experience extreme stress in the past month (39% vs. 68%).

- 📍 Youth who felt their **cultural identity was respected when accessing services** were less likely to have used substances recently, such as cocaine (5% vs. 23% of youth who did not feel their cultural identity was respected); heroin, fentanyl, or other opioids (4% vs. 16%); and crystal meth (2% vs. 14%).

- 📍 Youth who **felt accepted for who they were when accessing services** were more likely to report good or excellent spiritual health (48% vs. 27% who did not feel accepted) and were less likely to experience extreme stress in the past month (35% vs. 49%). They were also less likely to have used a range of substances in the past month. For example, they were less likely to have drunk alcohol on 10 or more days (12% vs. 24%; among youth who had ever used alcohol), and to have consumed five or more drinks within a couple of hours (52% vs. 73%).

- Those who **felt listened to and valued when accessing services** were less likely to have used substances in the past month, including heroin, fentanyl, or other opioids. These youth were also less likely to use substances alone.

Youth who felt listened to and valued when accessing services were less likely to use substances and to use alone

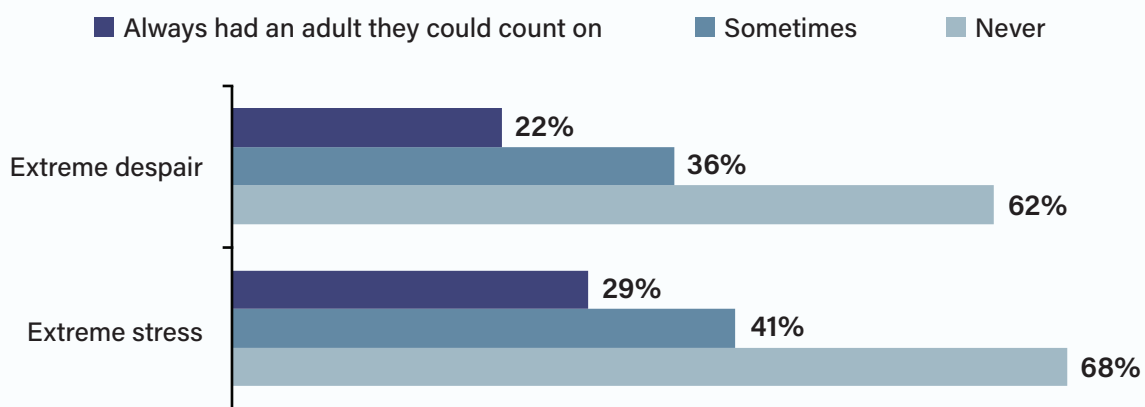


- Youth who **felt connected to their community** were more likely than those who did not feel as connected to their community to report good or excellent emotional health (40% vs. 17%), mental health (51% vs. 17%), and spiritual health (57% vs. 33%). Also, the more connected youth felt to their community, the more likely they were to feel satisfied with their life.

- Youth who **never went to bed hungry** were more likely to report good or excellent physical health (53% vs. 39% who went to bed hungry at least sometimes) and mental health (34% vs. 20%), and were less likely to have recently used substances (e.g., heroin and other opioids: 3% vs. 12%; and crystal meth: 2% vs. 12%). They were less likely to experience extreme stress in the past month (29% vs. 47%), and were around twice as likely to feel hopeful for their future (44% vs. 21%).

- Youth who **always had an adult they could count on to provide them with emotional support** were less likely to experience extreme stress and despair in the past month. They were also more likely to report good or excellent emotional health (39% vs. 17%) and mental health (37% vs. 10%).

The more often youth had an adult they could count on for emotional support, the less likely they were to experience extreme stress and despair in the past month



To learn more about the survey and to read other related publications, please visit mcs.bc.ca/hys.

A full report, *Searching for a place: The health and well-being of homeless and unstably housed youth in BC*, is available at mcs.bc.ca/pdf/searching_for_a_place.pdf.