

McCreary Adolescent Health Survey shows decline in youth suicide attempts

Results of a 2008 survey of over 29,000 Grade 7 -12 students in BC has found that the majority of BC youth are in good health, feeling connected to their family, school and community; and are engaging in health promoting behaviours, which will assist them to transition into healthy adults.

However, the results also show that there are some youth in our province who are more vulnerable than others. These youth are facing many challenges which can lead to them engaging in risky behaviours. These behaviours are not only negatively impacting their lives now, but are likely to do so for years to come unless we target interventions to assist them.

Annie Smith, Executive Director of the McCreary Centre Society said of the results “With all the negative stereotyping we see and hear about young people in our province, it is encouraging to note that smoking, alcohol use and marijuana use have all declined since the last survey in 2003.”

“It is also encouraging to see a decrease in the percentage of youth seriously considering or attempting suicide. This is the first time we have seen a decline since the survey began in 1992 and although the percentages are still too high, and there are some groups of youth who are at much greater risk for suicide and who really need our urgent help, this is definitely a move in the right direction.”

The results of the survey were not all as positive and Smith pointed out: “Probably the most concerning finding was that after seeing a decline in abuse rates in previous surveys things have stopped improving, and in the case of physical abuse the rates have actually risen.”

Provincial Health Officer, Dr Perry Kendall wrote the forward to the report and noted, “If we believe that it takes a village to raise a child then we realize that we are that village, and all BC children are our children. To raise them successfully as a society, we need to know a lot about them. We need to be driven by good information if we are to be able to meet our obligations to our children under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Canada is a signatory.”



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

Founded in 1977, the Society sponsors and promotes a wide range of activities and research to address unmet health needs of young people.

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BACKGROUND

The BC Adolescent Health Survey (AHS) provides the most comprehensive picture of the physical and emotional health of BC youth, including risk and protective factors.

This is the fourth BC Adolescent Health Survey conducted by the McCreary Centre Society. Over 29,000 BC public school students in grades 7-12 completed the survey between February and June 2008. Previous surveys have been conducted in 1992, 1998 and 2003. The survey was administered by Public Health Nurses in 50 of BC's 59 school districts.

As with previous McCreary BC Adolescent Health Surveys, the results of the 2008 survey will be used by government agencies, schools and communities to plan and assess youth programs and services. The survey provides decision makers and others interested in youth health with up to date and comprehensive information on the health picture of young people in BC, as well as essential information about health trends, and about risk and protective factors that can influence young people's healthy transitions to adulthood.

The survey is designed to consider emerging youth health issues, and to track trends over time. The majority of questions have been asked since 1992. The 2008 AHS included 147 questions asking youth about their perceptions of their current physical and emotional health, risky behaviours and health promoting practices. Healthy development for youth includes many contributing factors and the survey also asks about broader issues such as family connectedness, school safety and peer relationships.

Key Findings

- The majority of students (84%) reported that their health was good or excellent, and the number who reported a debilitating health condition or disability continued to decline, from 13% in 1998 to 11% in 2003 to 9% in 2008.
- The percentage of students who were injured to the point of requiring medical attention declined from 39% to 29% in a decade. The majority of those who were seriously injured were injured playing or training for sports or recreational activities (55%).
- There was an increase in the number of students who always wore a seatbelt when they were riding in a vehicle (66% in 2008 vs. 54% in 2003).
- 18% of female students and 7% of male students across the province reported that they had not accessed mental health services when they felt they needed them; and 15% of females and 11% of males did not get medical help when they needed it.

- Around half of BC youth fell short of the recommended 5 daily portions of fruit and vegetables. However, more youth reported eating fruit in 2008 compared to a decade earlier (81% vs. 72% in 1998).
- As in 2003, only 25% of males and 11% of females exercised daily, while 7% of males and 10% of females did not exercise at all.
- For the first time since 1992, the percentage of youth who seriously considered suicide dropped, from 16% to 12% in 2008. The percentage who actually attempted suicide also decreased from 7% to 5%.
- More than one in five females and one in ten males reported that they had deliberately self harmed (cut or injured themselves) without the intention of committing suicide.
- Fewer youth in BC smoked cigarettes than in 2003, and those who did waited longer to start smoking. Three quarters of students (74%) had never tried even a puff of a cigarette, compared to 66% in 2003.
- Alcohol and marijuana use declined over the past decade, as did the use of some drugs such as cocaine, amphetamines and mushrooms. However, the use of other drugs, including hallucinogens, rose.
- Relationship violence has not decreased since 2003. The survey also found that some youth were particularly vulnerable to being physically assaulted by their boyfriend or girlfriend, including youth who had been sexually abused, students with a disability or chronic illness, and gay, lesbian and bisexual students.
- Pregnancy rates have remained stable with fewer than 2% of students reporting pregnancy involvement. However, 6% of sexually active youth reported using withdrawal as their only method to prevent pregnancy the last time they had sex, a slight rise from 5% in 2003.
- In 2008, there was an increase in youth reporting physical abuse (from 15% in 2003 to 17%). The percentage of youth reporting sexual abuse (8%) and both physical and sexual abuse (5%) did not improve between 2003 and 2008.
- The AHS showed that building protective factors such as family, school and cultural connectedness can assist even the most vulnerable youth to overcome negative experiences, can assist young people to make healthier choices and can contribute to more positive health outcomes for all youth in BC.