

# THE WHOLE PICTURE

YOUTH'S REFLECTIONS ON THE 2023 BC ADOLESCENT HEALTH SURVEY FINDINGS



McCreary Centre Society



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We gratefully acknowledge that the McCreary Centre Society is located on the ancestral, traditional, and unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the xwməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətəł (Tseil-Waututh) Nations.

# The Whole Picture:

Youth's reflections on the 2023 BC Adolescent  
Health Survey findings

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ISBN: 978-1-998481-29-3

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McCreary  
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We are grateful to all the young people who participated in the Next Steps workshops, and to those who coordinated and supported youth to engage in these sessions, including:

Burnaby School District  
Central Coast School District  
Coast Mountains School District  
Gold Trail School District  
Haida Gwaii School District  
Nicola-Similkameen School District  
Pacific Rim School District  
Sooke School District

Funding for this project was provided by the BC Government and West Vancouver Community Foundation.



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# Introduction

Since 1992, McCreary Centre Society (McCreary) has conducted the BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) with students in Grades 7–12 across the province. The most recent survey was in 2023 and was completed by around 38,500 youth in 59 of BC’s 60 school districts. Provincial results are shared in

***The Big Picture: An overview of the 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey provincial results.***

[mcs.bc.ca/pdf/2023\\_bcahs\\_the\\_big\\_picture.pdf](https://mcs.bc.ca/pdf/2023_bcahs_the_big_picture.pdf)



Following each wave of the BC AHS, McCreary takes the results back to young people through the Next Steps program. The goals of Next Steps workshops are to:

- **Share** results of the BC AHS with youth in communities across the province.
- **Provide** an opportunity for participants to share their perspectives on the findings.
- **Support** participants to design and deliver projects that address local youth health issues.

Between February 2024 and June 2025, McCreary facilitated 30 Next Steps workshops, sharing local and provincial findings from the 2023 BC AHS. These workshops took place in 13 diverse urban and rural communities and engaged over 570 youth in public mainstream and alternative schools.

Workshops were facilitated in each of BC’s five health authority regions, and included students from Ashcroft, Bamfield, Bella Coola, Burnaby, Clinton, Haida Gwaii, Hazelton, Kitimat, Lillooet, Lytton, Merritt, North Vancouver, Port Alberni, Princeton, Sooke and the West Shore communities, Terrace, Tofino, Ucluelet, and West Vancouver. In some communities, additional events with adult stakeholders and community members followed the youth workshops. During these sessions, McCreary staff and, in some cases, local students shared 2023 BC AHS results and youth’s responses to the data.

This report focuses on youth’s discussions about the 2023 BC AHS. It shares the areas they thought were most impacting youth health in their school and community and their suggestions for improving well-being. The report also includes some examples of initiatives that have been implemented following the workshops.

Throughout the report, 2023 BC AHS provincial findings are shared in blue and quotes from youth participants are shared in red.

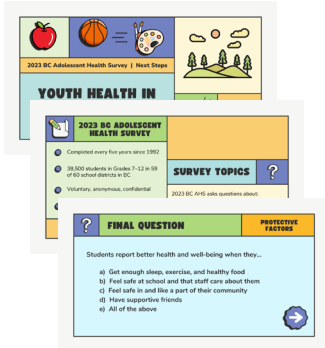
## LIMITATIONS

The perspectives of youth shared in the workshops may not reflect the experiences of all young people in BC. Additionally, while participants were provided a variety of ways to share their ideas, workshops took place in group settings which may have affected what some youth felt comfortable sharing.

*“Thank you for pulling this together and proving that youth voices matter.”*

# WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES

THE FORMAT OF THE NEXT STEPS WORKSHOPS VARIED BASED ON THE NEEDS OF THE STUDENTS AND THEIR COMMUNITY. SESSIONS RANGED FROM A SINGLE CLASSROOM PERIOD TO A FULL DAY. EACH WORKSHOP INCLUDED A RANGE OF INTERACTIVE ACTIVITIES:



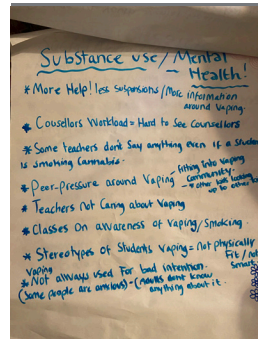
## BC AHS TRIVIA

Youth were divided into small teams to discuss trivia questions about local BC AHS findings. Questions covered topics such as physical health, mental health, substance use, school experiences, relationships and other protective factors.



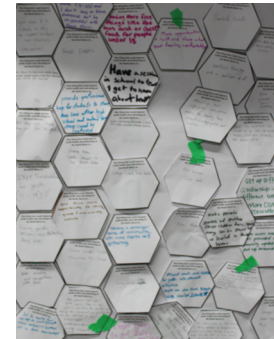
## PYRAMID ACTIVITY

In small groups, youth were provided a set of icons representing BC AHS topics that could positively and/or negatively influence youth health and well-being. Each group created a pyramid of the top 10 factors they felt were impacting youth health locally, with the most influential at the top. They shared their reasons for including these topics in their pyramids. All participants then voted on the topics they felt were most affecting youth health, and which they wanted to discuss in greater detail.



## WORLD CAFÉ DISCUSSIONS

In half- or full-day sessions, youth participated in a world café discussion on the topics they had prioritized through the pyramid activity. For each health topic, they discussed what was going well in their school or community, identified gaps or challenges, and offered suggestions for how young people could be better supported. Shorter sessions included a larger group discussion on priority topics.



## POSTCARD ACTIVITY

At the end of each workshop, youth were provided a postcard and invited to answer the question:

*"What is one thing that could support better health and well-being for youth in your community?"*

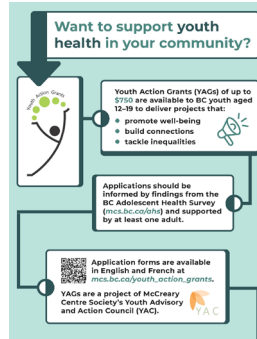
## OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

IN LONGER SESSIONS, ONE OR MORE OF THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES WERE ALSO FACILITATED:



### USING MUSIC TO SHARE DATA

Youth watched a music video about the BC AHS findings and engaged in discussion about the song's themes. The music video, **Generations**, can be viewed on the McCreary YouTube channel ([youtube.com/@McCrearyCentre](https://www.youtube.com/@McCrearyCentre)).



### PLANNING YOUTH-LED PROJECTS

Youth developed project ideas to address BC AHS findings. They were then supported to complete an application for a Youth Action Grant to see their projects come to life.



### COMMUNITY DESIGN ACTIVITY

Youth designed a school or community that supported positive health and well-being, and addressed any challenges identified in earlier discussions.



**THEMES: BELONGING & CONNECTION**  
 When I see the Totem Pole, I think of belonging. With their arms up welcoming all into their Totems. No matter what, they will be there for you.  
 When I see the Totem Pole, I think of connection. For those who are Indigenous, this is a sacred object. The images and animals on this piece of art show connection to their roots.  
 When I see the Totem Pole, I think of children. Because I know that they contributed to painting the statue. The Totem Pole tells me the ground that they walk on every single day for school.  
 When I see the Totem Pole, I think of me. We have taken one step, and now it's time to take the next. And continue to climb.  
 Youth, Grade 7, Vancouver Coastal

### PHOTOVOICE

Youth were asked to take photos based on the BC AHS findings and workshop discussion (e.g., *where at school do you feel safest?*), and write a brief reflection.



### ZINE DESIGN

Youth created handmade magazines featuring BC AHS data and their reflections.

# Youth's response to the BC AHS findings

*"I liked that we went over the [BC AHS] results and actually discussed why we thought they were that way."*

## PHYSICAL HEALTH

In most workshops, physical health was the first topic youth discussed and included conversations about health ratings, sleep behaviours, food security and literacy, and participation in physical activity.

### HEALTH RATINGS

**TRUE OR FALSE:**  
The majority of BC youth rated their overall health as good or excellent.

**?** **TRUE.** In 2023, 73% of youth rated their overall health positively. However, this was a decrease from 87% in 2013 and 81% in 2018.

These findings reflected what most youth saw and experienced in their schools and communities. Some had expected positive health ratings to be lower, citing declining mental health, poor nutrition, and an increasingly sedentary lifestyle due to time spent online.

A minority of youth expected positive health ratings to be higher. These youth lived in diverse urban and rural communities across the province, but all discussed their proximity to nature and its positive effect on their well-being. They also described a school and community culture that encouraged outdoor activity, which they felt positively affected overall health (e.g., being physically active, supporting positive mental health).

*"I like that our school does mountain biking."*

*"There are lots of outdoor resources here [which contribute to positive health]."*

## SLEEP



**What percentage of students slept for 8 or more hours the night before taking the 2023 BC AHS?**

**42%.** This was a decrease from 53% a decade earlier.

**One in 10 youth went offline** (e.g., turned their phone off, put it on silent) and did not engage in any activities after the time they were supposed to be asleep. However, most were online and engaging in different activities.

### ACTIVITIES YOUTH ENGAGED IN AFTER THEY WERE EXPECTED TO BE ASLEEP

Scrolling through social media	67%
Chatting or texting	60%
Doing homework	51%
Gaming (other than esports)	30%
Playing/watching esports	20%
Doing other things online (e.g., watching videos)	66%

Youth were not surprised by the BC AHS finding that fewer students were getting the required amount of sleep than in previous survey years. Insufficient sleep was identified as a major health issue by youth across the province.

Students in alternative programs were among the few participants surprised by the percentage of youth who had slept less than 8 hours the night before. Alternative education programs often start later than mainstream schools, which students thought better aligned with adolescent sleep patterns. Many alternative programs also allow students to attend at times that work best for their needs, which youth felt also supported them to get enough sleep.

*“Starting later means I can get up at 8:30 and have enough sleep.”*

Students in mainstream and alternative programs attributed decreased sleep to increased time spent on screens. The rise in popularity of social media and the addictive nature of these platforms led many to feel unable to limit their engagement after bedtime. Some described consuming excessive negative online content (“doomscrolling”) at night which impacted them emotionally and made it hard to fall asleep even when they went offline.

*“Social media can really affect my sleeping pattern because I stay awake on my phone.”*

*“Toxic apps make it difficult to fall asleep.”*

Some youth, especially boys, struggled to limit their time playing video games at night. Youth noted that while there were helpful apps to limit nighttime phone use, there were fewer such tools to limit gaming. Social media and gaming are discussed further starting on **page 18**.

In addition to missing out on sleep due to screen time, many youth described staying up late on school nights because they were managing school work, extracurriculars, volunteering, socializing, being physically active, and/or working at a paid job. Some also noted that staying up late was a way to gain autonomy over their time when the rest of their day was scheduled for them.

*“The stress of being too busy has an effect on our sleep.”*

*“Bed time is the only time I have some ‘me’ time, because I’ve been so busy during the day doing all the things I have to do, that when I go to bed, I want to exercise some control and so I scroll on my phone or chat with my friends even when I maybe should be going to sleep.”*

Stress and anxiety also impacted youth's sleep, and they commonly spoke about being kept up at night worrying about tests, homework, and social issues at school. Many described going on their phones (e.g., social media, streaming TV or movies) or playing video games as a way to manage their stress, but this further delayed their sleep.

Youth across all workshops recognized the importance of sleep and its impact on physical and mental health, as well as engagement in school and activities. For example, youth described how not getting enough sleep could lead to higher energy drink consumption during the school day, which may continue to disrupt their sleep cycle. A lack of sleep could also affect attendance and engagement at school.

**In 2023, 15% of youth had an energy drink the day before.** This percentage has more than doubled since 2018 (7%) and tripled since 2013 (5%).

*"When you don't get enough sleep, you have more energy drinks. And when you have more energy drinks, you can't sleep."*

*"Lots of kids skip first period because it's too early. It's usually only me and one other kid in the class of 15."*

Most youth felt they knew what they needed to do to get a good night's sleep, but lacked the skills, structure, or motivation to implement these strategies. Others described sleep disorders which they felt could not be easily managed through behaviour change.

*"Putting my phone in a different room has helped me to stop going on it at nighttime."*

*"My friend has insomnia and struggles to go to sleep no matter what she tries."*

Youth suggested incorporating sleep education into the school curriculum. They were keen to learn strategies to build and maintain a nighttime routine, limit screen use before bed, and relax (including mindfulness strategies).

*"Educate youth on how to develop a good bedtime routine."*

As many students stayed awake at night doing school work, they also suggested introducing a dedicated time during the school day for students to catch up on course work or meet with teachers for extra help. Other suggestions included later school start times in mainstream schools; moving to a 4-day school week to allow more time for homework, sleep, and non-school activities; and scheduling dedicated rest or mindfulness times during the school day.



*Some students ranked sleep as the biggest health issue impacting youth.*

## FOOD AND EATING BEHAVIOURS



**From 2013 to 2023, did the percentage of youth who ate fruit, vegetables, or salad the day before the survey go up, down, or stay the same?**

**IT WENT DOWN.** Youth were less likely to have eaten fruit, vegetables, and/or salad the day before the survey than 10 years earlier.

Most participants were aware of the benefits of eating healthily. However, many were concerned about being able to afford fresh produce and other healthy foods, especially in rural areas.

In addition to issues of access, youth felt that they lacked food literacy and food preparation skills, and were often dependent on their parents or guardians for access to food. If these adults did not model a healthy approach to food, youth often turned to social media for their nutritional information.

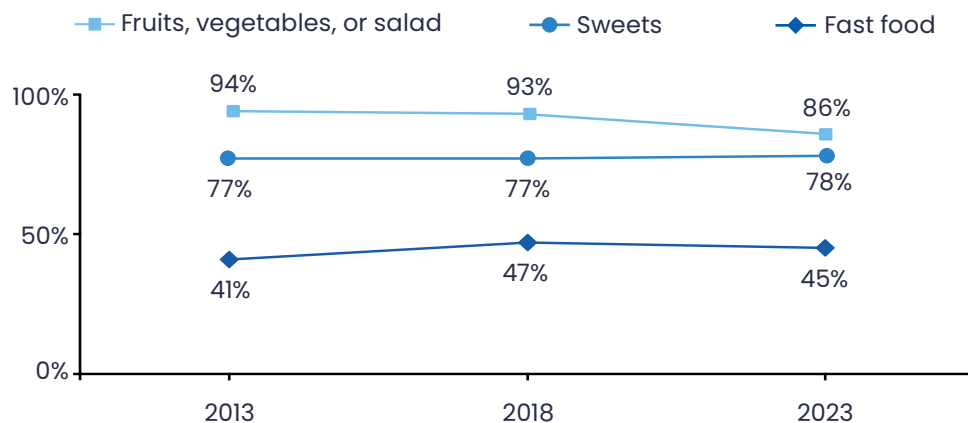
Youth recommended schools and community programs incorporate education and skill building on healthy eating. Specifically, they wanted to learn to prepare basic healthy meals on a budget and with limited ingredients.

**There was a decrease in students who ate breakfast on school days from 82% in 2018 to 71%.**

Some youth felt that fewer of their peers ate breakfast than in previous years due to increased food insecurity, while others felt that sleeping in due to staying up late was contributing to youth missing breakfast.

*“If [youth] are struggling to wake up in the morning, they’re probably not going to have time to eat breakfast.”*

### CHANGES OVER THE PAST DECADE IN WHAT STUDENTS ATE THE DAY BEFORE



## SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS

**6% of students ate breakfast at school, a decrease from 7% in 2018.**

Despite the decrease in youth getting breakfast at school, participants felt food insecurity was a growing concern and students were increasingly reliant on school food programs, especially in rural communities. Participants valued the care that went into the “home-cooked meals” prepared in these programs, and often described food program staff as caring and trusted adult supports.

Indigenous youth were grateful for school food programs that incorporated traditional practices and knowledge about food and nutrition. This included regularly preparing traditional foods, as well as learning traditional methods of growing and gathering foods, and understanding their medicinal and nutritional properties. Meaningfully incorporating traditional foods and practices helped Indigenous youth feel more connected to and proud of their culture. When food was shared with others, this also created a stronger sense of community.

In addition to the many benefits of school food programs, youth identified some challenges. Commonly, breakfast programs ended too early for students who bussed to school or were late (e.g., because they slept in). Youth wished for more grab-and-go options available later into the morning, and that students be allowed to eat these in class (except where it posed a safety hazard).

Youth also wanted food programs to offer a greater variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, and to explore different dishes (including ones cooked with different sauces, spices, and herbs) to make healthy and flavourful meals. For some youth, school meals were an opportunity to try foods they would not otherwise have access to, and they encouraged schools to expand their offerings.

Many felt they lacked a voice in school food programs and wanted to be more involved in menu planning, such as providing suggestions and feedback, voting on menu items, and sampling potential new items.

## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

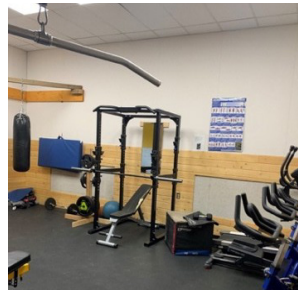


**What percentage of youth got at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on at least 1 day in the past week?**

**88%, including 19% who exercised daily.**

Youth in lower grades were more likely than those in higher grades to have exercised daily.

Youth reported enjoying and participating in a range of activities, including competitive and recreational sports (e.g., soccer, basketball, hockey), outdoor activities (e.g., hiking, skiing), extreme sports (e.g., mountain biking), and exercising at a gym. Youth in rural communities also noted being active in other ways such as fishing, hunting, and farming.



*“The gym is my favourite place in school because I like working out. No one judges you for being there and everyone supports you and pushes you to get stronger.”*

— YOUTH PHOTOVOICE PROJECT

Some ranked sports as having the greatest impact on youth health, because these activities created a sense of community as well as kept youth physically active. For example, groups in Kitimat and Haida Gwaii placed basketball at the top of their pyramids:



## BARRIERS TO ENGAGING IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

**Almost two thirds of youth (64%) experienced barriers to participating in extracurricular physical activity in the past 12 months. The most common barrier they reported was being too busy (40%).**

When asked what youth were too busy doing, some described being busy with homework, extracurricular activities, or work. This was especially true for youth in higher grades. However, across all communities, youth felt their peers were too busy spending time on their phones or gaming, which reduced their motivation to be physically active.

*“Spending too much time on social media, watching too much TV [stops me from being more physically active].”*

*“Youth could make more time to go outside; they just don’t because they’d rather play video games.”*

**About one in six youth (17%) did not participate in extracurricular physical activity because they were too anxious or depressed. The same percentage (17%) did not participate because they thought it would be too competitive.**

Although participants recognized that being active could support positive mental health, they believed many youth were too anxious, depressed, or overwhelmed to take part in sports or exercise. Some youth said they found it easier to say they were “too busy” than admit they felt too socially anxious to try an activity.

Youth wanted schools and communities to provide opportunities for youth to try new activities in a low pressure, recreational environment. They also suggested schools could incorporate physical activity throughout the day through brief activities like short walks or stretch breaks.

While concern about activities being too competitive was a barrier, some competition was seen as positive to

encourage participation and build community. For example, youth suggested schools could organize friendly competitions for students in various sports and activities (e.g., sports days, school-wide contests).

*“Schools should have a competition for who can be the most active in a week.”*

Another barrier to physical activity youth discussed was not finding the activities available to them enjoyable (e.g., they disliked basketball or running). Youth believed that if exercise was fun, students would be more likely to engage regularly and continue being active into adulthood. Some suggestions included dancing, yoga, and playing virtual reality fitness games.

*“Encourage more people to find exercise in their own way.”*

*“Promote exercise. [...] It’s more than just walking, running, and going to the gym. It’s sports, swimming, gardening, partaking in other activities that helps physical health.”*

A lack of inclusivity in sports and exercise could also limit or discourage participation. For example, some girls and non-binary youth felt uncomfortable or excluded when participating in co-ed sports. Cultural values, beliefs, and practices also made it challenging for some youth to participate fully. For example, youth following religious codes of dress did not feel these were accommodated, or they did not have access to what they needed to participate (e.g., hijabs designed for swimming).

*“Boys only pass to each other.”*

Youth with some health conditions, disabilities, or specific needs reported lacking the equipment or modifications they needed to meaningfully participate in physical activity. Scaling activities (e.g., providing run-walk options) and offering a broader variety of physical activity options were suggested as inclusive ways to encourage exercise.

*“The [school] run is not adaptable to students with needs like people with asthma, people who wear binders, and people with anxiety.”*

Youth in rural communities commonly lacked a variety of sports activities, as well as sufficient numbers to create a team. These youth wished for the option to try larger team sports like football and baseball, as well as for access to needed facilities like well-lit sports fields. They also wanted access to indoor recreation facilities to reduce the impact of the weather and climate events (e.g., wildfires) on physical activity and to ensure they could be active year-round. This included wanting access to indoor sports fields, ice rinks, and swimming pools.

*“More recreational buildings.”*

*“We should build a hockey arena.”*

*“It would be good if there was an indoor pool here.”*

Youth in rural communities were more likely than those in urban centres to report a lack of transportation and unreliable transit as a barrier to being physically active. Some regularly drove long distances to larger communities to participate in a chosen activity. Others could not participate because they had no transportation.

*“I have to travel for 1 hour to [another community] to go to the pool for my swim classes.”*

Youth also described financial barriers to participating in physical activities. This included not having money to buy sports equipment or to pay for sports-related travel. For students in rural and remote schools, participating in competitive sports often required ferry or plane travel, and accommodations for multi-day trips. They suggested providing support to overcome these barriers, such as reduced fees or low- or no-cost equipment.

*“Financial difficulties mean not everyone can play sports.”*

*“I would say to have activities and sports be cheaper for families to afford.”*

## SUMMARY

### Youth recommendations to improve physical health

- **Support** students to learn about sleep hygiene and build skills to implement good sleep habits.
- **Build** time into the school week to work on course work (e.g., a ‘catch-up’ period).
- **Teach** youth food literacy, including how to make balanced and nutritious meals.
- **Increase** availability of fresh and whole foods in school food programs, and provide more options for healthy grab-and-go items and to try different cuisines.
- **Incorporate** opportunities for student feedback into school food programs.
- **Offer** a variety of inclusive physical activities to help students find an activity they enjoy.
- **Incorporate** physical activity throughout the school day, such as class walks.
- **Reduce** financial barriers to participating in activities, including fees, equipment, and travel.

# MENTAL HEALTH

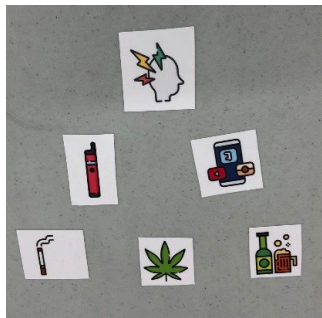
Mental health was the topic youth most commonly reported wanting to learn more about on the 2023 BC AHS, and was also a priority health topic identified by youth in the workshops.



**TRUE OR FALSE:**  
The majority of BC youth rated their mental health as good or excellent.

**TRUE.** In 2023, 60% of youth rated their mental health positively. However, this was a decrease from 81% in 2013.

Youth were not surprised that mental health ratings decreased, and many had expected positive mental health ratings to be even lower.



*Many students ranked mental health as the top issue impacting youth well-being.*

In every workshop, youth described feeling overwhelmed by school work, including struggling to keep up with tests, assignments, and deadlines; as well as balancing competing academic, work, extracurricular, and personal priorities. Some also discussed the pressure of having to work to contribute to their family income and having caretaking responsibilities, such as for a sibling or other relative, which they found stressful and took away from the time they could spend on school work.

**On an average school day, 26% of youth took care of a relative.**

**During the school year, 32% of youth worked at a paid job, and more than 1 in 10 of these youth worked to contribute to their family's income.**

Those looking to attend post-secondary programs discussed the pressure they faced to meet competitive admission requirements. This was especially concerning for those competing for scholarships to reduce financial barriers. Some also described the added pressure of academic expectations by parents or guardians to get good grades and attend a top university or college.

Other sources of school-related stress included relationships with peers (e.g., fights with friends), ending dating relationships, and experiences of bullying. Negative relationships with school staff could also contribute to youth experiencing poorer mental health and decreased engagement at school.

Youth suggested schools provide more training to help students manage their mental health, including how to manage stress, communicate difficult feelings, and practice mindfulness. They also recommended support to improve academic skills, like effective note taking and studying, which may reduce stress related to school work. Some also suggested creating comfortable spaces at school where students could relax if they were feeling overwhelmed, and discussed the value of having time in the school day to catch up on course work.

*“There should be calm rooms in the school for kids to go to if they need it.”*

Participants described how social media could support mental health, such as through positive online connections and increased access to resources. However, they

felt it more often had a negative impact, including through cyberbullying, harmful content, and replacing in-person connections and health-promoting behaviours. This is discussed further in *Time spent online* on **page 18**.

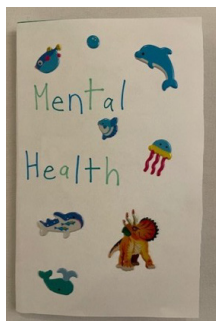
In multiple workshops, youth spoke of increased loneliness and isolation as a lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had affected youth's social skills, confidence, and connections at school and in the community. Increased time spent online (e.g., on social media, gaming) further reduced in-person connections. A few felt this isolation led to decreased empathy and connectedness among youth and within communities, and created a culture of "self-centredness."

*"It feels like we live in a lonely society."*

**Among youth who experienced stress, 49% felt they handled their stress well or very well, which was a decrease from 54% in 2018.**

Many participants felt youth lacked the skills they needed to manage their stress in healthy ways, and often turned to unhealthy or harmful behaviours as a way to manage difficult emotions or experiences. They wanted to learn healthy coping strategies and have access to needed support at home, school, and in the community.

*"[Youth] don't know how to manage stress well, so they use substances, avoid tasks..."*



*An example of a zine created by youth to share BC AHS findings and reflections related to mental health and well-being.*

## ACCESSING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

**In the past year, 18% of youth who needed mental health services did not get the help they needed.**

The most commonly reported reasons for missing out on care were that they did not want their parent or guardian to know (58%), thought or hoped the problem would go away (54%), and did not know where to go (45%).

Many young people felt embarrassed to talk about their mental health or ask for help from their parents or guardians, fearing these adults may not understand, be supportive, or have the skills to handle such conversations. They felt their parents were less informed than youth about mental health. Some also feared that parents might blame themselves for their child's struggles.

*"[Youth] don't want to be lectured by parents."*

*"[Parents/guardians] don't understand mental health in general."*

*"You don't want to stress your parents out."*

To address these concerns, youth suggested increasing education for parents and guardians about mental health challenges facing youth, having difficult conversations, and how to improve support at home. They also hoped schools could provide clearer information to students about confidentiality and the conditions under which their parents or guardians would need to be contacted.

*"I believe that there should be a day where parents are brought into the school to talk about how to handle their child's mental health, or at least handle hearing such things from their child."*

In communities of all sizes, youth lacked awareness of local mental health resources. Even in small communities, this included not knowing who the school counsellor was and whether they provided mental health support, or only focused on academic guidance. Youth described how the limited availability of school counsellors meant not all students could get the help they needed.

*“The school counsellors help with everything to do with grades, but our kids need a person who focuses only on mental health support.”*

*“Most kids don’t even know who the school counsellor is.”*

Youth also described the worry of judgement by peers for accessing mental health supports at school. This included being seen entering the school counsellor’s office or being taken out of class to speak with the counsellor.

Many youth wanted to have enough school counsellors and support workers, including culturally appropriate supports, to meet students’ needs. They also felt existing counsellors could take steps to ensure students knew who they were and the type of support they could provide. These included regularly visiting classrooms to facilitate conversations or activities; wearing a pin with their name and role; and displaying their photo on posters around the school (e.g., to advertise the available supports) to help students recognize them and feel more comfortable approaching them for support. Male youth commonly suggested providing more alternatives to talk therapy (e.g., arts activities, connecting with nature, mentorship programs).

*“More mental health awareness. Qualified counsellors and youth support workers. Indigenous youth support workers.”*

*“Maybe the school counsellor going around to classes a few times a year and talking about different issues [could be helpful for students].”*

Peers could play a role in supporting youth mental health. For example, youth suggested that students receive peer support training, and be supported to establish peer support programs or groups. Many participants wanted to discuss mental health more frequently, and recommended schools organize regular conversations on current mental health issues. Such opportunities could help youth share and learn helpful coping strategies, and also reduce stigma and fear in seeking help. Teachers and other school staff could also be trained to recognize when a student may be struggling, and how to respond in a discreet and supportive way.

*“[I want to learn] how to support my friends when they are depressed.”*

*“Have weekly ‘teen talks’ on different topics.”*

*“We need more teachers who notice when something is off with students and offer support or help.”*

Youth often described not knowing about community-based resources, even when posters and information were displayed in schools. Often, this information was posted in common areas like classrooms, hallways, or near the counselling office, where youth may feel uncomfortable being seen reading them. Instead, youth recommended sharing information about community services through school announcements, guest speakers and workshops in classes, and placing posters in private areas (e.g., inside bathroom stalls).

*“Promote mental health services more often – coming into schools, hosting programs.”*

*“No one looks at posters. Maybe visit classes or share opportunities during morning announcements.”*



*An example of a zine created by youth to share BC AHS findings and reflections related to mental health and well-being.*

Youth living in rural BC spoke about how the small size of their communities could have positive and negative impacts on their mental health and access to supports. For some, living in a tight-knit community meant they had trusting relationships with a range of caring adults, and knew who and where to go if they needed help. However, the remoteness of some communities could contribute to feelings of isolation, especially when youth lacked access to transportation. Additionally, many communities lacked in-person mental health services, and accessing services online could be challenging (e.g., due to unstable internet connection, lack of private space to access supports, not having a phone or laptop).

*“In a small community, it can be really isolating and there is not a lot to do here, which can be depressing.”*

*“[Accessing online services is not ideal] because your parents might walk in when you are online.”*

Rural youth also described concerns about confidentiality when seeking help from local adult supports (e.g., teachers, counsellors), as these adults often had other roles in the young person's life, such as being a family friend or relative. Even without such a relationship, youth would regularly see this adult elsewhere in the community (e.g., at the grocery store) and this made them reluctant to disclose sensitive information. These youth wished for more opportunities to ask questions and seek help anonymously, and to connect with a mental health support worker from outside their community.

*“Maybe a box where you can ask anonymous questions, like things you would Google.”*

## SUMMARY

### Youth recommendations to support mental health

- **Increase** mental health education and skill building at school, such as strategies to manage stress.
- **Increase** the availability and visibility of school counsellors.
- **Educate** youth on supporting peers, and provide regular opportunities for peer conversations about mental health at school.
- **Support** teachers and school staff to recognize and address when students may be struggling.
- **Provide** opportunities for parents and guardians to learn about mental health, and build skills to support conversations with their youth.
- **Provide** clear, youth-friendly information about the limits of confidentiality.
- **Offer** a variety of ways for youth to seek support, including alternatives to talk therapy and ways to ask questions or get help privately.
- **Share** information about community resources in ways that are interactive (e.g., class visits, workshops) and also discreet (e.g., posters in bathroom stalls).

# SUBSTANCE USE

Substance use was a popular topic of discussion at every workshop.

## ALCOHOL, CANNABIS, AND TOBACCO



**TRUE OR FALSE:**  
Rates of alcohol, cannabis, and tobacco use decreased over the past 30 years.

**TRUE.** These rates have declined since the first BC AHS in 1992. For example, in 2023, 38% of BC youth had tried alcohol, compared to 45% in 2013, 58% in 2003, and 67% in 1992.

Youth were not surprised that the use of substances such as alcohol, cannabis, and tobacco had declined. They suggested that pressure from peers to consume these substances was lower than for previous generations. Some also suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic may have played a role, as youth were socializing in groups (“partying”) less than previously, and were therefore not exposed to substances in the way youth might have been prior to the pandemic.

Across the province, alcohol was considered to be the most commonly used substance among youth because it was the most socially acceptable and easiest to access. However, a few explained that using alcohol and other substances had become less glamorized, and a rise in disordered eating meant youth did not want to consume “empty calories” by drinking alcohol.

*“[Alcohol] is more accepted than any of the other substances, including weed.”*

Youth living in regions where substance use rates had not declined or were higher than the provincial average suggested that boredom and a lack of youth-friendly activities were contributing factors. Other factors possibly contributing to higher substance use rates included family histories of substance abuse, and a lack of effective substance use education and support.

*“It’s boring here, so people drink.”*

*“Generational trauma with addiction – environment where you come from matters.”*

*“They tell you not to do drugs, but you don’t get to learn why not.”*

Youth thought the harms of smoking were widely understood, and felt this was why tobacco use had declined. For some, vaping had replaced cigarettes as it was considered a less harmful way to consume nicotine.

## VAPING

**Over a quarter of youth (26%) had ever vaped.**

This was the most disputed BC AHS finding in every workshop. Youth consistently expected vaping rates to be higher, and felt that almost all students had tried vaping. They explained that students may have felt too ashamed or embarrassed to have reported their vape use on the survey, for fear of judgement from their peers or parents.

*“Everyone’s vaping. It’s actually 100% [of youth who have ever vaped].”*

*“Students are lying about vaping because they don’t want their parents to find out.”*

Some youth believed that pressure to fit in and be part of a social group was driving vaping use, especially among younger youth who perceived vaping as “cool”. Others thought vaping was used as a way to cope with stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges.

*“A lot of kids feel pressured to vape from other kids in school.”*

*“I just take a hit when I’m with friends.”*

**Among youth who vaped daily, 75% had their first vape within 30 minutes of waking up, including 45% who first vaped within 5 minutes.**

Youth were not surprised to learn that the majority of youth who vaped daily had their first vape within half an hour of waking up. Most agreed that these youth were aware of the addictive qualities of nicotine, but either did not care to or did not know how to manage the withdrawal symptoms associated with stopping or reducing

their use. Some shared how peers had initially turned to vaping as a smoking cessation tool, but now vaped more than they had ever smoked because it was easy to conceal and use throughout the day (e.g., in classrooms, bathrooms).

*“You know it’s bad, but everyone is doing it. It’s easy to hide and it is marketed as safe.”*

*“No one dies from vaping.”*

*“Not many students know they’re addicted, which is a problem.”*

## VAPING IN SCHOOL BATHROOMS

**The percentage of youth who felt safe at school decreased. For example, 68% felt safe in the washrooms vs. 86% in 2018.**

Youth in almost all groups shared concerns about vaping in school bathrooms. Many described how vaping in the bathrooms reduced feelings of safety for those who did not vape, and meant some students would avoid using the bathroom at school. Some felt that youth vaped in bathrooms because they lacked other safe spaces on campus to do so, and because they often could not get through a class period without vaping.

Youth, including those who did and did not vape, suggested schools establish dedicated outdoor spaces where youth could vape. This may reduce the amount of vaping occurring in bathrooms, which could increase a sense of safety for those who did not vape. It could also help youth who vaped feel less stigmatized, and make it easier for them to seek help.

*“[Our school needs] a smoke pit to not make people so anxious to go to the bathroom.”*

## SUBSTANCE USE EDUCATION AND SUPPORT

Workshop participants emphasized the importance of regular, non-judgemental, and informative education about substances. This included wanting to learn the effects of substances on the brain and body, how to reduce the harms of use, and signs of problematic use. This education would ideally be provided at school. However, parents and guardians should also have the resources to have these conversations at home.

*“We need more information to make better decisions about substance use. I go to Google, grandma, and my counsellor.”*

Youth wanted the support and space to ask questions, learn, and make healthy and informed decisions about substance use, especially vaping. Specifically, youth wanted to learn about nicotine addiction, including what it is, how it can develop, where to seek help, and ways to manage withdrawal symptoms.

*“Educate us more on vaping instead of just telling us not to do it.”*

Youth who vaped described feeling stereotyped by adults as lazy and unhealthy. This could lead to disengagement from school, and could reduce the likelihood they would reach out to these adults for support. Instead of judging or punishing the behaviour, youth reminded adults to look at the young people using substances as individuals and to recognize substance use as a symptom of a deeper issue.

*“Adult supports should, instead of seeing them as the substance, think of the person behind the substance.”*

*“Kids won’t quit by being yelled at.”*

Using a trauma-informed approach and addressing the underlying reasons why youth vaped could increase their success in quitting. This could include having more conversations about stress management and improving mental health supports.

*“Vaping is not always used for bad intentions. Some kids are anxious and need help.”*

Across the province, and especially in rural communities, youth wanted more fun, youth-friendly activities to reduce boredom-related substance use. This could include structured activities, like recreational and competitive sports, as well as informal spaces and activities, like youth centres and teen-only events. It could even include meaningful employment for youth. Schools could support connection, belonging, and purpose for students through school clubs, activities, and events.

*“More activities: movie theatre, bowling alley, arcade—things to do other than party.”*

*“I think we should have less drug stores and alcohol shops and more jobs for people.”*

*“Have more exercise programs. Athletes aren’t going to be smoking or vaping.”*

## SUMMARY

### Youth recommendations to address substance use

- **Education** and conversations about vaping and other substances should be non-judgemental, consider the reasons youth are using, and include information about a substance’s impacts on the brain and body, signs of problematic use, and where to get help.
- **Support** youth who use substances to address the underlying reasons for their use.
- **Provide** activities to reduce boredom and promote purpose and well-being for youth.

# TIME SPENT ONLINE

In many workshops, time spent online was part of conversations about physical and mental health. It was also considered to be a topic that youth wanted to discuss in its own right.

## SOCIAL MEDIA



**On their last school day, what percentage of youth had used their phone to scroll on social media?**

**74%.** This was the most commonly reported use of their phone on the last school day. About 8 in 10 female youth (79%) used their phone for this reason, compared to 73% of non-binary youth and 69% of males.

In all workshops, youth agreed that social media could have positive and negative effects on youth well-being, but that its impacts were mostly negative.

**About 1 in 6 youth (18%) reported needing help for their social media use in the past year.**

Youth described “endlessly scrolling” social media content as a way to relieve boredom and stress, or to avoid something difficult or uncomfortable. However, the content they viewed often promoted harmful or unhealthy messages, and offered a filtered view of reality. This left young people with unrealistic expectations about their lifestyles and appearance, and potentially affected their mental health, self-esteem, and body image. For females, this included messages about thinness and anti-aging, and males described content which encouraged obsessive exercise and muscle growth.

*“We only see the ‘ideal’ – we’re always comparing to a certain ideal.”*

*“You see people living this perfect life, and you relate it to your life and yours is completely different.”*

*“There’s a lot of pressure for guys to look a certain way.”*

Youth also reported feeling embarrassed, hurt, and that their self-esteem was negatively impacted when they did not get views or likes for content they posted. Similarly, they felt humiliated when unflattering stories or videos were posted without their consent.

*“Not getting enough views can have a negative impact on mental health.”*

*“There are things you really don’t want going viral.”*

They described how social media algorithms could reinforce potentially problematic beliefs, and youth may not be aware of how this content was influencing them. Also, youth felt the anonymity of social media had contributed to increased and increasingly subtle forms of cyberbullying from both peers and strangers.

*“Sometimes it’s hard to tell if people are laughing at me or with me [online].”*

Positives of social media that youth identified included providing an accessible outlet for creative expression (e.g., to share their art), and its role in helping them stay connected with friends and family. Social media could also provide an avenue for youth to meet people who shared similar experiences or interests, which could foster a sense of belonging. This was especially important for rural youth and those who identified as 2SLGBTQ+, who may have limited social connections in their communities.

**Almost a quarter (23%) of youth went online when they wanted to access reliable mental health information.**

Several workshop participants noted the wide range of content online meant youth could find information and learn skills they might not have access to elsewhere, especially related to managing their mental health.

*“There’s a lot of content about mental health, ADHD, autism on TikTok.”*

*Social media was regularly ranked as the issue having the biggest impact on youth health.*



## ONLINE GAMING

**On their last school day, male youth were most likely to have used their phone to play or watch esports (e.g., 28% vs. 7% of females) and for gaming other than esports (e.g., 37% vs. 14% of females).**

Across communities, youth agreed that girls were more likely to be spending time on social media and boys were more likely to be playing video games. Male participants described gaming to relieve stress and anxiety. However, some thought gaming was less effective at reducing stress than masking it. For example, some described gaming to avoid dealing with difficult experiences or emotions.



**What percentage of youth felt or were told their gaming reached a point where they needed help?**

In the past year, **12%** of youth reached this point with their video gaming.

Similar to social media use, gaming could replace health-promoting behaviours, such as exercise, connecting with friends, and spending time outside. A few male youth also felt engaging in violent video games heightened a youth’s aggression, and made it harder to manage difficult emotions. Males also shared concerns about problematic gaming, which, in combination with replacing health-promoting and prosocial behaviours, they felt was negatively impacting boys’ emotional and physical health.

## PROMOTING DIGITAL LITERACY

Youth largely agreed that banning social media or video games was unrealistic and impractical. Instead, they wanted more education to build digital literacy and healthy online habits. This could include exploring youth's motivations for using social media or gaming; safety and privacy online; building healthy digital relationships and boundaries; identifying scams, misinformation, and AI-generated content; and how to consume social media or play video games in a way that limited negative impacts.

*"Don't do a ban. Teach a safe way to use [social media]."*

*"Learn about balance – separation between life and online."*

*"Teach youth how it can be a place for memories for themselves rather than just posting for likes."*

Finally, youth were frustrated that excessive time online was often considered a youth problem, and felt adults also struggled to maintain healthy limits. They suggested adults, such as teachers and parents or guardians, learn and model the type of healthy relationships with social media and gaming they wanted to see among youth.

## SUMMARY

### Youth recommendations about time online

- **Provide** education for students on digital literacy and fostering a healthier relationship with social media and gaming. This could include recognizing motivations for spending time online, how to have healthy digital boundaries and behaviours, safety and privacy, and recognizing scams and misinformation.
- **Adults** play an important role in modeling healthy digital boundaries, and should be supported with education and resources to build their own digital literacy.

# RELATIONSHIPS AND CONNECTIONS

For many youth, the relationships in their lives (including peer, dating, and family relationships) were considered vital to their overall health and well-being.

## PEER AND DATING RELATIONSHIPS



**In the past 12 months, what percentage of youth had been in a dating relationship?**

**42%** of youth had been in a dating relationship in the past 12 months.

Among these youth, 8% experienced physical violence, and 13% experienced digital dating abuse within that relationship.

In many workshops, youth talked about experiencing challenges fostering healthy peer and dating relationships. Many felt they had limited knowledge about what healthy relationships looked and felt like, including with friends and significant others. They explained that healthy relationship skills were rarely taught in schools, and many lacked positive examples in their own families or in media (including social media). As a result, it was difficult for young people to recognize unhealthy relationship patterns or know how to address them.

*“At [the] teenage age, there is honestly no good examples of healthy relationships. It’s an awkward age and people who date at this age usually have a bad example.”*

*“Some kids don’t have good examples of a healthy, loving relationship in their family.”*

Youth wanted schools to incorporate education about healthy relationship skills like effective communication, establishing and respecting boundaries, managing conflict, and recognizing unhealthy relationship patterns. They also wanted to learn how to recognize when it is time to end friendships and relationships, and how to do so safely and respectfully. Youth wanted to not only learn about these skills, but also be provided opportunities to practice them.

*“Having somewhere to go where you can get information on healthy relationships is really important for us as we don’t get taught this in school.”*

*“I want to know how to set your own boundaries.”*

*“I want to learn how to be honest without hesitation.”*

*Some youth felt that relationships were the most influential factor in their well-being.*



## PEER PRESSURE

**Among youth who used substances, 30% said they most recently did so because their friends were doing it.**

When discussing the influence of friends and peers, youth often described feeling pressured to engage in behaviours they may not otherwise, for fear of exclusion or judgement. Male participants described feeling pressure to engage in disruptive, mischievous, and risky behaviours, which often went against their values or what they knew was right. These included being loud and disorderly in public, being disrespectful to those in positions of power, and perpetrating bullying or violence against others. In many workshops, male youth reported they lacked the confidence and refusal skills to go against the group, as they feared social exclusion.

*“Sometimes friends make you do things you know are wrong, but you’re too scared to say no.”*

Youth of all gender identities also commonly felt peer pressure about their physical appearance, such as to have an ideal body size or wear certain clothes to fit in with a social group.

## IN-PERSON CONNECTIONS

**Compared to 5 years earlier, youth were less likely to have in-person friends, and particularly to have 3 or more such friends (69% vs. 81% in 2018). Over a third (36%) of youth had online friends they had never met in-person.**

Participants reported the COVID-19 pandemic, poorer mental health, and increased time online had all affected in-person relationships, and youth were anxious and uncertain about how to re-establish those connections. Many lacked confidence in their social skills and felt nervous in social settings, including with familiar peers.

Youth across the province identified other barriers to in-person connections. Many, especially those in rural areas, described a lack of dedicated youth spaces (e.g., youth centres) in their communities where they could socialize and ‘hang out’ with other youth. There were also few youth-specific activities, programs, or events to have fun and connect with peers over shared interests.

They also described transportation challenges. For some, public transit schedules did not allow them to participate in programs at or outside school. Others did not feel safe on public transit, could not afford it, or lacked reliable transit service in their community. Rural youth often lacked any public transit, instead relying on unpredictable community-led solutions, like a volunteer-driven van or carpooling.

They wished for structured and unstructured opportunities to foster connections in their schools and communities. Suggestions for schools included school-wide projects or events, school clubs and activities, mentorship programs, and class-wide projects. Classroom or school layout could also be modified to encourage interactions between youth.

*“In school: changing arrangements of students in a class from time to time to help students (especially shy ones) to have the opportunity to meet new people.”*

In all communities, participants wanted youth-specific and community-wide events, such as music festivals, fairs, and sports days, as well as reliable, low- or no-cost transit to help them get to and from these activities.

Many wanted to be meaningfully involved in the development of community spaces and activities, such as sharing feedback and taking leadership roles. This would help youth build valuable skills, foster a sense of purpose and belonging, and ensure initiatives were of interest to young people.

*“I think more regular, more youth-directed events should be held. Food, fun, music and games can do so much. Just simply bringing people together can massively impact the lives of the youth and give them something to look forward to.”*

## SUPPORTIVE ADULTS

**About three quarters of youth (73%) had at least one adult outside their school or family who they felt cared about them, and 49% had three or more such adults.**

In addition, 75% of youth had an adult inside their family they could talk to, 34% had one outside their family, and 26% had both. These rates were higher than 5 years earlier.

The majority of workshop participants felt they could name an adult in their community who cared about them, including sports and dance coaches, librarians, and youth centre staff. Indigenous youth commonly identified Elders and adults they considered family but were not formally related to, as caring adults in their lives. Most youth felt they had someone in their family that cared about them, though fewer felt this adult was someone they would talk to if they needed help.

In all communities, youth emphasized the importance of supportive adults in helping them navigate the challenges they faced and celebrating their successes. They highlighted how such adults played a key role in helping young people feel safe, hopeful, and cared about. Youth felt most valued when these adults took time to listen and understand the challenges they experienced, took an interest in their passions, and gently pushed them to reach their potential. When this support was not available, youth could feel dismissed, shut down, and reluctant to reach out for support in the future.

In school settings, youth felt more connected and engaged when school staff showed genuine interest in their well-being, not just their academics. They valued teachers and other adults at school who took time to build trusting relationships, provided consistent support, and created opportunities to highlight youth's strengths in and out of the classroom. This could include teachers and other school staff regularly interacting with students in the hallways and common school spaces, greeting them enthusiastically each day, and adapting course work to meet youth's interests and strengths. Building these strong and trusting connections could also make it easier for youth to reach out when they needed help.

*"Teachers being more familiar with the students in their classes, knowing their names, maybe knowing a bit about what's going on in their lives outside school—that would be helpful."*

*"Teachers that ask how you are and show they care. It is easier to talk to teachers and feel that you belong when they are personable and want to get to know you."*

*"[My teacher's class-wide] check-ins make me feel like I am part of a community and not a classroom."*

*An example of a zine created by youth to share findings and reflections about supportive friend and family relationships.*



## CONNECTION TO THE LAND OR NATURE

**In 2023, 62% of youth reported feeling connected to land or nature at least some of the time.**

*“There’s an ATV track right outside my house.”*

Some youth thought it was easy to feel connected to nature anywhere in BC. However, those in rural communities felt it was easier for them than for those in urban centres, given their proximity to outdoor spaces and activities such as mountain biking and ATV riding. A few youth noted they needed to spend time taking care of the natural environment (e.g., garbage cleanups, gardening) to feel connected to it.

Many wished to spend more time in nature through school and community programs. This could include outdoor activities in gym class, short outdoor walks with or between classes, and youth-only outdoor activities provided through community organizations.

*“Getting to see more nature in P.E. rather than being in gym. We can play outside.”*

## SUMMARY

### Youth recommendations for increasing connectedness

- **Provide** healthy relationships curriculum, including teaching healthy boundaries, communication skills, and how to recognize unhealthy relationship patterns.
- **Support** youth-led and youth-involved initiatives to build peer connections, such as through school clubs and projects, youth-specific and community-wide events, and dedicated youth spaces providing structured and unstructured programming.
- **Reduce** barriers to participating in in-person activities. This could include helping youth get to and from safely (e.g., free bus tickets, providing transportation), subsidizing program fees, scheduling activities at times that are convenient for youth, and providing food.
- **Ensure** youth have access to supportive adults who can foster trust and connection.
- **Increase** opportunities for youth to connect with nature by spending more time outdoors at school (e.g., through gym class, outdoor class walks) and in the community.

# Beyond the Next Steps workshops

THE NEXT STEPS WORKSHOPS ARE INTENDED TO ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE BC AHS DATA AND SPARK INTEREST IN ADDRESSING YOUTH HEALTH ISSUES INCLUDED IN THE SURVEY. HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF HOW INSIGHTS FROM THESE WORKSHOPS HAVE INFORMED THE WORK OF SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES.

## HAIDA GWAII SCHOOL DISTRICT

To build on findings from the 2023 BC AHS, the Haida Gwaii School District partnered with McCreary to support a group of Grade 11 and 12 students to develop a survey about the unique needs of students on Haida Gwaii. The student survey team administered the first Haida Gwaii Student Voice Survey in 2024, then learned to analyze the survey results. The students presented their findings and recommendations to leaders in the school district and community, and these informed strategic planning for the district. In 2025, a group of students revised and administered the second Haida Gwaii Student Voice Survey, and the results are being used to continue improving the well-being of students on Haida Gwaii.

## PACIFIC RIM SCHOOL DISTRICT

As part of a Next Steps workshop in the Pacific Rim School District, students in a land-based learning program developed project ideas and applied for Youth Action Grants. They successfully submitted their grant applications and received funding for several youth-led initiatives, including an avalanche safety course, wilderness first aid training, and an outdoor survival skills course.

## SOOKE SCHOOL DISTRICT

In the Sooke School District, a regional youth council has been formed as a result of sharing the 2023 BC AHS data with students and local adult stakeholders. Youth's perspectives shared during the Next Steps workshop also served to inform a road map for supporting youth in Sooke and the West Shore communities for the next 5 years. Action has already been taken to address students' biggest challenges, including a lack of safety on public transit.



The roadmap created from conversations with Sooke School District students during a Next Steps workshop. Learn more at [thevillageinitiative.ca](https://thevillageinitiative.ca).

# Next Steps workshop feedback

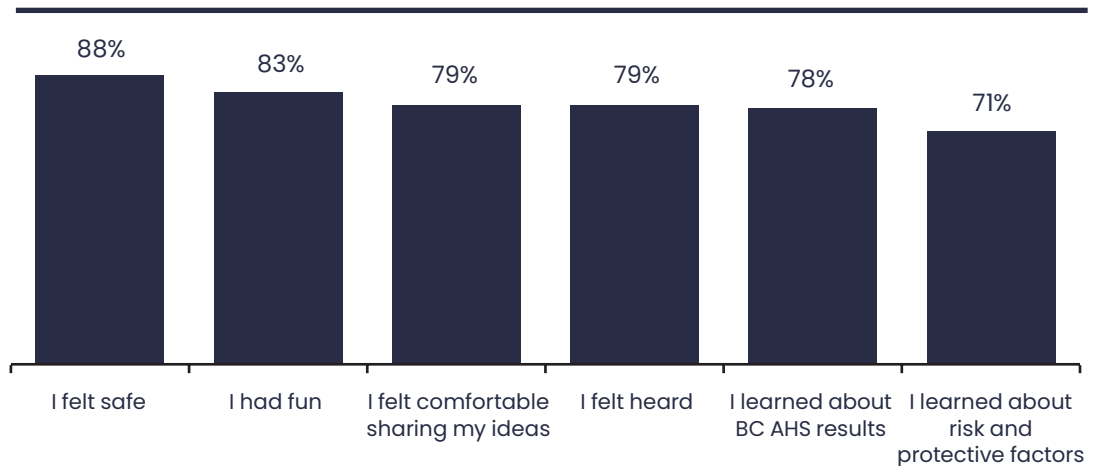
AT THE END OF EACH NEXT STEPS WORKSHOP, PARTICIPANTS ARE INVITED TO COMPLETE A BRIEF, VOLUNTARY, ANONYMOUS, AND CONFIDENTIAL FEEDBACK FORM.

A total of 225 youth in Grades 7 to 12 participated in an evaluation of the Next Steps workshop. The majority of evaluation participants identified as female (53%), 42% as male, and 5% as non-binary. Youth in every grade completed a feedback form, however the majority were in Grade 11 (35%) and 12 (22%).

## WORKSHOP FEEDBACK

The majority of participants reported positively on the Next Steps workshop they attended. For example, most felt safe, had fun taking part, and learned results from the BC AHS.

### YOUTH PARTICIPANTS' FEEDBACK ABOUT THE BC AHS NEXT STEPS WORKSHOP (THOSE WHO INDICATED 'QUITE A BIT' OR 'VERY MUCH')



## WHAT YOUTH LIKED ABOUT THE WORKSHOP

When asked an open-ended question about what they liked about the workshop, youth commonly reported enjoying the welcoming, respectful, and accepting environment. They also felt comfortable sharing their thoughts openly and honestly.

*"I liked how welcoming the environment felt, and how it felt like I was an equal."*

*"The freedom and support to engage in conversations without judgement."*

*"The workshop was very open to all ideas, which is highly appreciated, and ideas were explored in a rather safe environment."*

*"Loved the diversity in people sharing ideas, as well as the accepting environment that made sharing easy."*

Youth also appreciated feeling their feedback could contribute to making change in their schools and communities. They expressed a desire for similar opportunities in the future.

*"I liked being able to share my ideas/concerns, and knowing that it's for something bigger."*

*"How we were asked for our true opinions with the intention of making it heard. I liked being heard."*

Many youth commented that they valued the interactive format of the workshop. They described it as fun and engaging, and an opportunity to gain new perspectives and meet new people.

*"I learnt about stuff I would otherwise never have learned."*

*"I liked how involved we were. Not so much a lecture and more learning through activities. I feel like I learned a lot about things that aren't talked about so much."*

*"They made a boring topic much more engaging."*

Some youth identified particular activities they enjoyed. These included the trivia activity, world café small group discussions, and the pyramid activity. Others enjoyed having different modalities available to them to convey their thoughts (e.g., sharing aloud as well as sharing on sticky notes).

*"I enjoyed how there were both large and small group activities. I loved how all of our ideas + solutions were written down in clear points."*

*"I liked the variety of activities and ways to express thoughts."*

*"I liked the trivia and the way everyone was included."*

Some youth shared their suggestions for improving the workshops, and most commonly wanted more time for discussions or to focus conversations on a single topic, to fully explore the barriers youth faced and their recommendations for reducing these.

*"We have to have more like this event, and I was glad that I took part in this workshop."*

# Summary of key themes and recommendations

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Across the Next Steps workshops, youth provided their insights into the factors driving the BC AHS results. They identified barriers to healthy development, including lack of sleep, food insecurity, time spent online, and reduced in-person connections. They also proposed a range of strategies that schools, communities, and governments could consider to better support young people.

## PHYSICAL HEALTH

Youth stated that increased screen time and being too busy (e.g., with work, caretaking, extracurricular activities) contributed to the decline in health ratings, sleep, healthy eating, and exercise, as seen in the BC AHS results. They recommended increased education around sleep hygiene and food literacy, as well as improved access to healthy foods at school and the option to provide feedback about school food programs. They also suggested schools incorporate regular physical activity into the school day and provide fun, diverse options for exercise to help youth find an activity they enjoyed.

## MENTAL HEALTH

Youth attributed the decline in positive mental health ratings seen in the BC AHS to increased school-related stress, the impacts of social media, and a lack of connection to peers and the community. They wanted to learn more about mental health, healthy coping strategies, and how to access needed support. They also emphasized the importance of adults being equipped to have non-judgemental conversations with youth, and to support them to access needed resources.

## SUBSTANCE USE

Participants discussed the underlying reasons why youth used substances, including boredom, coping with difficult emotions, and peer pressure. Youth wanted

honest, non-judgemental education about substance use, including vaping and nicotine addiction; improved access to resources and support for youth seeking to quit; and meaningful activities to build connection and reduce boredom. They also recommended addressing the underlying reasons why youth used substances, such as stress or anxiety.

## TIME SPENT ONLINE

Youth shared that social media and gaming could have positive impacts, such as making and maintaining connections, as well as negative ones, like reduced sleep and cyberbullying. They recommended more education about digital literacy, including healthy digital boundaries and behaviours, staying safe, and recognizing scams and misinformation. They wanted adults in their lives to model healthy digital boundaries, and wanted more opportunities for in-person connections.

## RELATIONSHIPS AND CONNECTIONS

Many youth felt they did not know how to foster healthy peer and dating relationships. They wanted education about healthy relationships provided through school, and more opportunities to foster in-person peer connections through school and community activities, events, and spaces. They highlighted the value of caring adults as role models and sources of support, as well as the importance of building other sources of support and connection, such as a connection with nature.

# McCreary resources

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TO JOIN OUR COMMUNITY MAILING LIST, REQUEST A PRESENTATION OR WORKSHOP, AND FOR FURTHER DETAILS ABOUT THE RESOURCES LISTED BELOW, EMAIL [MCCREARY@MCS.BC.CA](mailto:MCCREARY@MCS.BC.CA).

## 2023 BC AHS DISSEMINATION MATERIALS

For the latest reports, fact sheets, infographics, and other resources produced using data from the 2023 BC AHS, please visit [mcs.bc.ca/about\\_bcabs](https://mcs.bc.ca/about_bcabs).

## ENGAGING YOUTH IN THE 2023 BC AHS RESULTS

### **NEXT STEPS WORKSHOP**

A toolkit is available that provides facilitators (e.g., teachers, Public Health Nurses, youth workers) with a template to share the results of the BC AHS with youth aged 12-19. It includes an introduction to the results, interactive activities to learn about risk and protective factors, and discussion questions to explore local youth health issues. The toolkit is available at [mcs.bc.ca/next\\_steps](https://mcs.bc.ca/next_steps).

### **BC AHS RISKS & PROTECTIVE FACTORS GAME**

McCreary's Youth Advisory & Action Council (YAC) has created a board game for adult supports to facilitate with youth aged 12-19, as an engaging way to share 2023 BC AHS findings, explore barriers and supports to healthy youth development, and discuss health topics important to young people in BC. To purchase a copy, please email [mccreary@mcs.bc.ca](mailto:mccreary@mcs.bc.ca).

### **YOUTH ACTION GRANTS (YAGS)**

The YAG program is led by McCreary's YAC, and offers up to \$750 for youth-led projects that address findings from the BC AHS and seek to support or improve youth health. For more information on how youth can apply, please visit [mcs.bc.ca/youth\\_action\\_grants](https://mcs.bc.ca/youth_action_grants).

## **YOUTH HEALTH AMBASSADORS (YHA)**

The YHA are a team of school-aged youth across BC who facilitate conversations with their peers about youth health topics, and support the sharing of the BC AHS. For information about the YHA and how to join, please visit [mcs.bc.ca/yha](https://mcs.bc.ca/yha).

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### **CURRICULUM TO FACILITATE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GAMBLING AND GAMING**

Following the release of *From loot boxes to lottery tickets*, McCreary has created an interactive curriculum to facilitate discussion with youth aged 12-18 about gaming and gambling among BC youth. The curriculum includes exercises and discussion questions to support youth to recognize and reduce related risks, and provides information about available resources. To learn more, please contact [mccreary@mcs.bc.ca](mailto:mccreary@mcs.bc.ca).

### **TAKING PRIDE: HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WORKSHOP SERIES CREATED BY AND FOR YOUTH**

In partnership with UBC's Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre and 2SLGBTQ+ youth across BC, McCreary supported the design and development of *Taking Pride*. This six-workshop series supports youth in learning healthy relationship skills, such as communication, boundaries, and conflict resolution. A manual to facilitate the workshops is available at [mcs.bc.ca/taking\\_pride](https://mcs.bc.ca/taking_pride).



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