



August 21, 2024 (Toronto, Canada) – The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) today released results from the [2023 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey \(OSDUHS\)](#), revealing a worrying decline in overall mental health among Ontario students.

Key findings show that 38 per cent of students rate their mental health as fair or poor, while a similar number (37 per cent) reported experiencing elevated stress levels. In addition, more than half (51 per cent) of students indicate a moderate-to-serious level of psychological distress, a figure that has doubled over the past decade. One-in-five (19 per cent) students report harming themselves on purpose and one-in-six (18 per cent) had serious thoughts about suicide in the past year.

The data were collected between November 2022 and June 2023 among 10,145 students in grades 7 to 12 in 235 schools in 46 school boards across Ontario. The 2023 OSDUHS reports provide one of the most comprehensive snapshots of youth mental health and drug use in the province, offering valuable insights into both current conditions and long-term trends.

“These results paint a concerning picture of youth mental health in Ontario,” said Dr. Hayley Hamilton, Co-Director of the Institute for Mental Health Policy Research, and survey lead. “Currently more than half of Ontario students report symptoms of depression and anxiety and a third of students (31 per cent) rate their ability to cope as fair or poor. This trend points to a generation under increasing stress and the need for continued and increased investments in youth mental health.”

### **Drug Use**

On a more positive note, the survey revealed a significant decline in drug use among Ontario youth over the past several decades. Seventeen percent of students reported using cannabis in the past year, a number that has decreased since 2019, the year after cannabis was legalized for adults. Alcohol use among students has also steadily declined over the past 25 years, with only about one-third (36 per cent) reporting consumption in the past year. Similarly, the percentage of students smoking cigarettes has substantively dropped, reaching just 3.2 per cent in 2023. Additionally, about one in eight students (13 per cent) reported vaping in the past year, a figure that has declined since 2019.

Of note however is that, for the first time, the percentage of female students using certain drugs has surpassed that of males. Specifically, girls are more likely than boys to use cannabis (21 per cent vs. 15 per cent), vape (18 per cent vs. 9 per cent), and drink alcohol (39 per cent vs. 33 per cent).

“While we’ve seen significant decreases in alcohol and cannabis use among youth over the past few decades, the elevated rates of drug use among girls relative to boys is certainly concerning,” noted Dr. Leslie Buckley, Head of the Addictions Division. “We need more data to better understand what is underlying this trend, but it may speak to increased pressure specifically for girls.”

## **Screen time and social media**

More than three-quarters (78 per cent) of students report spending three or more hours per day in front of an electronic screen in their free time. In addition, the vast majority (94 per cent) of students use social media daily. About one-quarter (23 per cent) of students spend five hours or more on social media every day.

Dr. Alexia Pollilo, Staff Scientist at the Slight Family Centre for Youth in Transition, commented: “While there is some evidence linking increased use of electronic screens with poor mental health in kids and teens, there’s just not enough data at this point to conclude that social media causes increased distress among youth. Today's young people are navigating a digital landscape that's become integral to their lives, bringing both opportunities and challenges. We need more targeted research on social media's impact to develop evidence-based guidelines and strategies that promote a healthy digital engagement.”

## **Impact of Climate Change**

The survey reveals that climate change continues to weigh heavily on students' minds. About one-in-six (18 per cent) report being very or extremely worried about climate change, while just under half (45 per cent) say they feel depressed about the future due to this issue. These figures are consistent with those from 2021, when these questions were first introduced, underscoring the ongoing environmental anxiety faced by this generation of young people.

## **Barriers to seeking support**

The OSDUHS survey asked youth about barriers to seeking mental health support. One-third (33 per cent) of students report that they felt they needed mental health support from a professional during the past year, but did not seek it. The most common reasons cited for not seeking help are thinking they could manage it themselves, being afraid of what others would think about them, and being “too busy.”

“Let this be a call to action for parents and young people,” added Dr. Buckley. “It's crucial that we continue to break down barriers to seeking support. If you're struggling, please know that help is available and that asking for it is a sign of strength, not weakness.”

## **About OSDUHS**

*The Institute for Mental Health Policy Research at CAMH has conducted the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS) every two years since 1977. The OSDUHS is the longest-running ongoing school survey of adolescents in Canada, and one of the longest running in the world. The survey results are described in two reports—one for mental health and the other for drug use—and include data on drug use, mental health, physical health, gambling, bullying, and other risk behaviours, as well as identifying risk and protective factors among Ontario students. All data are based on self-reports derived from anonymous questionnaires. The survey was administered in classrooms by the Institute for Social Research (at York University) on CAMH's behalf.*

## **About the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)**

*CAMH is Canada's largest mental health and addiction teaching hospital and a world leading research centre in this field. CAMH combines clinical care, research, education, policy development and health promotion to help transform the lives of people affected by mental illness and addiction. CAMH is fully affiliated with the University of Toronto, and is a Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization Collaborating Centre. For more information, please visit [camh.ca](http://camh.ca) or follow @CAMHnews on Twitter.*