



# The Well-Being of Ontario Students: Findings from the 2021 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey

*“A key finding is the high level of mental health problems reported such as psychological distress, self-harm, loneliness, suicidal ideation, and fair/poor self-rated mental health. Females are about twice as likely as males to report mental health problems, and problems tend to increase with grade. Further, almost half of students do not know where to turn for mental health support” (p. 26).*

## 1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

The Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey is a **cross-sectional survey** – observational research that analyzes data at a specific point in time across a population – conducted every two years by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and completed by Ontario students in grades 7 to 12. The survey aims to keep track of adolescent students who may experience issues with physical and mental health due to engagement in potentially harmful behaviours, such as substance use. It also aims to identify factors that result in these behaviours, assess trends in adolescent health, and provide a basis for programs, policy evaluation, and assessment of health goals and targets for youth-serving agencies.

## 2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research was conducted in Ontario by the Institute of Social Research at York University.

## 3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about students from grades 7 to 12 in Ontario’s publicly-funded school system.

## 4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

The research sampled 2,225 students from 122 schools and 31 school boards; 1,410 students identified as female and 815 identified as male. Students ranged from being in grade 7 to being in grade 12. The following represents the number of students per grade:

**Grade 7:** 365 students (15.4%)

**Grade 8:** 400 students (15.2%)

**Grade 9:** 440 students (16.3%)

**Grade 10:** 376 students (16.9%)

**Grade 11:** 372 students (16.3%)

**Grade 12:** 272 students (19.9%)

Students completed an anonymous questionnaire that was available online (at any time or from any location) between March and June of 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this was the first year that the survey was administered online; previously, students completed a pencil and paper survey that was handed out in the classroom during school hours.

Survey questions were based on the World Health Organization’s broad perspective of health, which considers mental, physical, and social factors in relation to an individual’s health. The survey covered a range of topics in relation to the students’ physical, emotional, and social wellbeing. These included:

- demographics
- family life
- drug use and attitudes/beliefs towards it
- indications of mental and physical health
- bullying
- technology/video game usage
- experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic

The results of the survey were then compared to results found in the previous Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey, completed in 2019, with consideration for the lower number of participants due to the changes in the formatting and distribution of the survey (note that 14,142 students were sampled in 2019).

The results of the research were organized and reported based on the sex of the student and their grade level.

## 5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

The results found that there was a high number of students facing mental health challenges. Almost half (46.8%) of respondents reported dealing with a moderate-to-serious level of psychological distress. Many students also reported having feelings of loneliness, suicidal thoughts, and fair/poor mental health, and these feelings have only increased with the pandemic. About 42.4% of respondents also reported that they did not know where they could go to receive help for mental health, despite about half (48.6%) being open to receiving it.

There are noticeable disparities between males and females in terms of mental health challenges. Females are twice as likely to report mental health problems than males, and they are also more likely to report body image issues, such as skipping meals, issues with weight, and perceiving themselves as 'fat'.

There are also issues that have worsened across respondents in comparison to the 2019 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey, including:

- a decrease in school connectedness
- an increase in non-medical use of prescription opioids
- an increase in the number of hours spent on social media, electronic devices, and video games
- a decrease in physical activity
- an increase in gambling

However, there have also been improvements in some areas, including:

- an increase in the number of young people getting at least eight hours of sleep per night
- a decrease in the number of concussions reported
- a decrease in reports of food unavailability at home
- a decrease in alcohol use, binge drinking, and vaping

## 6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

By understanding the current physical and mental status of adolescents, the sector can work to identify and raise awareness of concerning trends and adjust policies and public health programming to meet the needs of youth. For example, the rise in mental health struggles faced by adolescents indicates that more focus must be placed on providing easily accessible and more effective mental health support programs and services.



Boak, A., Elton-Marshall, T., & Hamilton, H. A. (2022). *The well-being of Ontario students: Findings from the 2021 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS)*.

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

### FIND IT ONLINE:

<https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/pdf---os-duhs/2021-osduhs-report-pdf.pdf>