

Foreign homestay students exposed to major health risks; need better safety net: Study

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Foreign homestay students who come to Canada to attend high school without their parents are exposed to major health risks such as smoking, drug use and early sexual intercourse, according to University of British Columbia research.

In the first study of its kind, lead author Assoc. Prof. Sabrina Wong found that East Asian homestay students are more likely to be smoking and using cocaine when compared to Canadian-born East counterparts or immigrant teens living with their parents. The study also shows that homestay teen girls are more vulnerable than the other groups to being sexually abused or sexually exploited. The paper appears in the May/June issue of the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* made available today.

Wong estimates that B.C.'s homestay student industry generates about \$60 million per year from agency fees, public school tuition costs and monthly fees for host families to provide a furnished private room, meals and shared amenities. As there is no formal oversight of the homestay industry, there are no requirements for screening or licensing homestay families.

"Until now, we haven't really known how homestay teens compare healthwise, because homestay placement agencies are unregulated, and nobody is keeping track of the teens who come to Canada to study," says Wong, an associate professor who is jointly appointed in the School of Nursing and the Centre for Health Services and Policy Research in the

Faculty of Medicine.

Wong and colleagues analyzed data from the 2003 B.C. Adolescent Health Survey, conducted by the McCreary Centre Society. The province-wide survey interviewed 30,500 students between Grades 7 and 12. Wong looked at survey results for East Asian homestay students who mostly originate from China, Korea and Japan.

The study's key findings include:

- A much higher rate of [sexual abuse](#) among homestay girls: 23 per cent of homestay girls compared to nine per cent of immigrant or Canadian-born girls
- One in five homestay students were current smokers, compared to only five to nine per cent of other students
- Homestay students were two to six times more likely to report using cocaine compared to other students their same age
- They were twice as likely to be sexually active; 25 per cent of homestay students had had [sexual intercourse](#), compared to nine per cent of immigrant students and 12 per cent of Canadian-born students
- Homestay students were far less likely than other students to be involved in extracurricular activities
- Just over half of homestay students had skipped school in the month before the survey, while only a quarter of immigrant or Canadian-born East Asian students did

"When it comes to their health, teenagers need parents - or parent-like adults - to provide guidance and support, not just room and board," says Wong. "How do we ensure that homestay families are well-prepared to care for these teens, and the teens are protected and supported when their real parents are far away?"

"The rates of [sexual abuse](#) among homestay girls are far higher than we would expect," says Elizabeth Saewyc, study co-author, professor in the School of Nursing and research director of the McCreary Centre Society. "When you add to that the higher numbers of homestay girls using cocaine, a fairly uncommon drug among high school students, and their pattern of sexual behaviours, it raises a concern that some of them may be experiencing sexual abuse or exploitation here in Canada."

Saewyc, who holds a Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Applied Public Health Chair in Youth Health, calls for greater oversight. "We have systems in place for licensing day care providers and foster parents for Canadian children and youth. Shouldn't we also have systems for protecting foreign teens when they are here for years without their parents?"

Provided by University of British Columbia

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