

Ontario, Canada: Youth smoking at all-time low; teen binge drinking, driving after cannabis use remain concerns

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Fewer Ontario teens are smoking cigarettes than ever before -- good news that is tempered by continuing concerns around binge drinking, and driving while under the influence of cannabis, according to the 2011 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey released today by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). The survey, which included 9,288 students across Ontario in grades 7 to 12, is the longest running student survey in Canada.

"We were pleasantly surprised to find that students' use of most of the substances tracked by this survey declined during the past decade, even for those substances that historically have been used at high rates," said Dr. Robert Mann, CAMH senior scientist and principal investigator on the survey. "Most notably, the proportion of students who smoke cigarettes dropped from 12 per cent in the previous 2009 survey to 9 per cent, an all-time low since 1977. Also, the proportion using [cannabis](#) dropped from 26 per cent to 22 per cent. However, pockets of real concern remain. For instance, one in eight students (13 per cent) reported symptoms of a [drug use](#) problem, and among those who drink, a third reported drinking hazardously or harmfully as measured by a validated screening instrument." One in six students (16 per cent) reported being drunk or high at school a least once in the past year.

Drinking

The survey found alcohol was the substance used by the largest number of students, as 55 per cent of respondents reported [drinking alcohol](#) in the past year. While [binge drinking](#) rates have dropped from 28 per cent, seen a decade ago, to 22 per cent, this still represents 223,500 [high school students](#) in Ontario who are drinking five or more drinks on one occasion at least once a month. Five per cent reported binge drinking four or more times in the past month. "An important concern is that about one in 10 (9 per cent) students report harmful drinking patterns in conjunction with elevated [psychological distress](#)," Dr. Mann said.

Alcohol is the major contributor to injuries, trauma and death of young people through drinking and driving and other high risk behaviours. An estimated 175,600 students (18 per cent) reported hazardous or harmful drinking behaviours, and one in 10 students reported injuring themselves or someone else as a result of their drinking. These behaviours were highest amongst students in grades 11 and 12, with boys and girls equally likely to engage in dangerous drinking patterns.

Alcohol, drug use and driving

Seven per cent of adolescent drivers reported driving within an hour of consuming two or more drinks containing alcohol, representing an estimated 21,500 students. One in four students (24 per cent) reported getting into a car with a driver who had been drinking.

"Drinking and driving has dropped by five percentage points since the last [survey](#). The drop has been even more significant since the late 1970s and early 1980s, when it peaked at 46 per cent," said Dr. Mann. "This substantial drop over the long-term shows that attitudes toward alcohol use and driving have changed."

For the first time, students were also asked whether they had ever operated a snowmobile, boat, Sea-Doo or all terrain vehicle after

drinking alcohol, with seven per cent reporting that they had done so at least once in the past year.

Vehicles and drug use other than alcohol is another concern. Students were more likely to drive after consuming cannabis than alcohol. Twelve per cent of adolescent drivers reported driving within an hour of using cannabis and 16 per cent of students reported being a passenger in the car of someone who had been using drugs.

Regional differences

Students in Toronto were below the provincial average in the use of alcohol, cannabis, cocaine and in binge drinking behaviours. Students in the North were above the provincial average for those same substances. Students surveyed in the East showed no significant difference from the provincial average in the use of any substance.

Other highlights

- In Ontario, 8,900 [students](#) reported that they have been in a treatment program in the past year because of their or [alcohol](#) use.
- Measured for the first time this year, high-caffeine energy drinks were the second-most commonly consumed substance, with 50 per cent of youth using them.
- Use of opioid pain relievers has dropped to 14 per cent from 17.8 per cent in 2009.

Provided by Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

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