

Nearly one in five young Ontario adults shows problematic use of electronic devices

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Credit: Peter Griffin/Public Domain

As many as 19 per cent of Ontario adults aged 18 to 29 experience moderate to severe problematic use of electronic devices, which includes smartphones and tablets as well as computers and video game consoles, according to the latest CAMH Monitor survey. It's the first time the ongoing survey has measured the impact of our increasing reliance on electronic devices.

"Today's young adults entered their adolescent or adult years with a wide range of social media, apps, videos and other information and entertainment available to them 24/7," says Dr. Hayley Hamilton, Scientist in CAMH's Institute for Mental Health Policy Research and co-principal investigator of the CAMH Monitor.

Although problematic use was most prevalent among [young adults](#), it affected all ages. Overall, seven per cent of all Ontario adults—representing an estimated 716,100 people—experienced moderate to severe problematic use, defined as experiencing three or more out of six symptoms related to problematic use.

"It's clear that, for most of us, our use of [electronic devices](#) has skyrocketed over the past five to 10 years, which is why it's important to study if this use can be problematic," says Dr. Nigel Turner, Scientist in CAMH's Institute for Mental Health Policy Research and an expert in gambling and behavioural addictions. "While our understanding of problematic use is evolving, we know that some people do end up harming their career or educational opportunities by excessive use."

These results from the 2015 CAMH Monitor are based on responses from 3,007 adults aged 18 and older across the province. The survey asked about personal device use, other than for work or school. Questions about problematic use asked whether individuals or their family members believed they had a problem, if they tried to cut back on their use, if they experienced anxiety that could only be relieved by using electronic devices, or if they missed school, work or important social activities because of device use, for example.

"Research has shown that high use of electronic devices, as well as [social media](#), are linked to problems with [mental health](#), including increased psychological distress and poorer self-rated mental health," says Dr. Hamilton. "Our new findings underscore the need for each of us to

define healthy limits, and to monitor our use of electronic devices before it becomes a problem."

Rising risks on the road

A high number of drivers reported texting while driving, another new question on this year's survey. More than one in three drivers—37 per cent—confirmed texting while driving at least once in the past year, and 11 per cent of drivers had texted while driving 30 or more times in the past year.

"An estimated 3.3 million adult drivers in Ontario are involved in this hazardous behaviour on the road," says Dr. Robert Mann, Senior Scientist in CAMH's Institute for Mental Health Policy Research and co-principal investigator of the survey. "The province's stronger penalties for distracted driving came into effect in the fall of 2015, so we don't yet know the effects of these penalties—we'll be watching this closely in future years."

Mental health concerns increasing

Over the past year, the percentage of people who experienced frequent mental distress days rose significantly, from six per cent in 2014 to nearly 10 per cent in 2015. Frequent mental distress days are defined as 14 or more days, out of the last 30 days, in which a person rated his or her mental health as not good, which included stress, depression and problems with emotions.

"Generally, frequent mental distress days and self-rated fair or poor mental health have climbed over the last decade, which is concerning," says Dr. Hamilton.

Changes in smoking patterns

During the past year, 11 per cent of Ontario adults used e-cigarettes, a significant increase from seven per cent in 2013, which was the first year that the CAMH Monitor asked about e-cigarette use. By comparison, 13 per cent of people said they currently smoke tobacco cigarettes, down from 17 per cent in 2013 and a sharp drop from nearly 27 per cent in 1996.

Growing number of cannabis users aged 50 and older

Cannabis use has increased over the past 20 years, from nine per cent in 1996 to more than 14 per cent in 2015. An important change in cannabis use over the past decade has been the aging of cannabis users. Among Ontarians aged 50 and older, past-year use of cannabis increased significantly from about three per cent in 2005 to seven per cent in 2015. "In 2015, 23 per cent of [cannabis users](#) were 50 years of age and older, a substantial increase from six per cent in 2005," says Dr. Mann.

Provided by Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

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