



The Health of Youth

Information from the national and regional reports of the 1997 *First Nations and Inuit Regional Health Surveys*

What Questions Did The Regional Health Surveys Ask About Youth?

The Regional Health Surveys contained a combination of national questions (ones that were the same across the country) and region-specific questions. The national portion asked general questions about the health of children, but did not focus specifically on youth. However, Ontario and Nova Scotia did include a special focus on youth. They were able to cover topics that are especially relevant for teenagers, such as cultural identity, use of alcohol and drugs, and emotional health. Youth was defined as anyone being 12 to 17 years old in Ontario's survey and anyone being age 12 to 18 years old in Nova Scotia.

This fact sheet summarizes the information from those two regional surveys, based mainly on a report by MacMillan et al (2001). The statistics are based on small samples, so it is important to bear in mind that the picture they present may not apply completely to all First Nations youth across Canada.



Factors That Can Affect The Health of Youth

Youth's physical and mental health may be affected by

- The environment they live in
- Their own lifestyle habits
- Their connection to their own cultural background

The Community Environment

Conditions in many First Nation and Inuit communities are below average. For instance, the unemployment rate for First Nations youth is double the national average and their families are three times more likely to live in over-crowded houses or that need major repairs.





In Ontario, just less than half of youth reported that their community had recreational facilities for teenagers. Large proportions of youth said they would like their community to have facilities such as a swimming pool, a playground, an arena, or a drop-in centre.

On a brighter note, some conditions – especially education – have improved in recent years. The proportion of on-reserve youth who remain in school for 12 years has risen dramatically, from just 37 per cent in 1987 to 71 per cent in 1996. The proportion of youth who are enrolled in post-secondary institutions has almost doubled.

Lifestyle Habits of Youth

According to Nova Scotia’s survey, there is room for improvement in the eating habits of youth. The survey found that few youth regularly eat breakfast and that they tend to have hamburgers and soft drinks for lunch.

Many youth are also using alcohol, tobacco, or drugs. According to the Ontario and Nova Scotia surveys, between 30 per cent and 60 per cent of youth drink alcohol. More than half have tried drugs at least once, usually drugs such as marijuana or inhalants. As for non-traditional use of tobacco, 40 to 50 per cent of youth were smoking at the time of the survey.

Connection to Culture and Tradition

According to the Ontario and Nova Scotia surveys, many First Nations and

Inuit youth participate in traditional activities and can speak their Native language. The surveys found that 40 to 60 per cent of youth could speak their Native language to some extent. More than half had participated in traditional activities such as crafts, powwows, or smudging ceremonies.

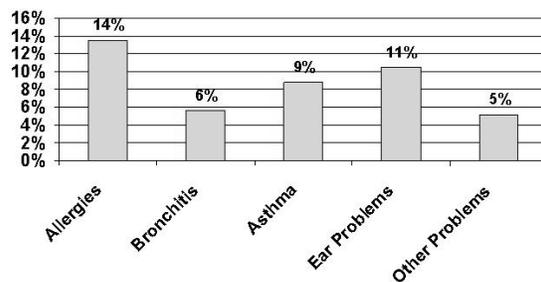
Ontario’s survey also asked youth about their hopes for the future. Youth’s hopes for themselves centred around getting an education, employment and a successful career.



Physical Health of Youth

Across the country, 80 per cent of youth had very good or excellent health. The main concerns were allergies, ear problems, asthma, and bronchitis.

Health Concerns in First Nations and Inuit Youth as Reported by their Parents
1997 RHS National Results





Mental and Emotional Health

Aboriginal youth may feel strung between two cultures, which makes issues of emotional health especially critical for them. Ontario's survey asked many questions about emotional health and about different types of abuse.

Parenting

Although most youth said their parents care for them, significant proportions reported being physically or sexually abused.

In Ontario, 78 to 85 per cent of First Nations youth said their parents take care of them and make them feel loved. But significant minorities also said their parents often don't care where they are (21 per cent) or call them things like stupid, lazy or ugly (11 per cent).

Victimization

Ontario's survey suggests a significant proportion of First Nations youth are exposed to violence. One-third of youth had been abused in some way. In terms of physical abuse, 25 per cent of youth reported instances where an adult got so mad the youth thought they were going to get badly hurt or did get hurt. Further, 14

per cent of boys and 28 per cent of girls reported some form of sexual abuse, ranging from an adult exposing themselves to sexual attacks.

Problems and Outlook on Life

Ontario's survey also asked youth about:

- Conduct disorders (e.g., aggression)
- Emotional disorders (depression, anxiety)
- Hyperactivity
- Prosocial behaviours (helping others), and
- Attitude towards life.

Depression and anxiety seemed to be areas of concern with 15 per cent of youth reporting they often felt worried, and seven per cent saying they had trouble enjoying themselves. In contrast, fewer youth showed signs of conduct disorders or hyperactivity.

Large proportions of youth reported prosocial behaviours (such as helping others in difficulty), and felt good about themselves and their ability to solve problems. Over all, a majority of youth had positive perceptions of life, as shown in the following table.



Attitudes Towards Life: Ontario First Nations Youth (N=232)					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Refused
In general, I am happy with how things are for me in my life now.	2%	15%	67%	11%	6%
The future looks good to me.	3%	9%	70%	13%	6%
I feel my life has purpose and meaning.	3%	7%	62%	22%	6%



About the Regional Health Surveys

The statistics in this Fact Sheet are drawn from the 1997 *First Nations and Inuit Regional Health Surveys*. These surveys covered people in First Nations communities across southern Canada and in the Inuit communities of Labrador.

Most of the material in this Fact Sheet is drawn from the Ontario and Nova Scotia surveys. In Nova Scotia, parents answered on behalf of 87 youth. In Ontario, 173 parents answered on behalf of their child, while another 232 youth answered for themselves. In addition, Ontario youth filled out an anonymous questionnaire about victimization and mailed it back.

