

## 2019 Saskatchewan Youth Data & COVID-19 Research Review

### LEARN: How COVID-19 is Affecting Youth

The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound economic, employment, physical and mental health effects.<sup>1</sup> It is expected to disproportionately affect youth in terms of mental health, due largely to social isolation at a stage in life where connections with peers and adult mentors is essential for healthy development and well-being. While social media provides a familiar means for youth to connect with friends, the shortcomings that social media have compared to in-person contacts are expected to be amplified during the pandemic.<sup>1,2,3</sup> The effects of the pandemic will be especially harsh for marginalized youth (e.g., affected by domestic violence, foster homes, learning disabilities, etc.).<sup>2</sup>

Beyond social isolation, COVID-19 has created erratic routines, a sense of helplessness and lack of control, barriers to physical activity, and a shortage of activities that provide meaning and personal growth.<sup>3</sup> Within mental health, depression and anxiety are especially likely to be impacted by pandemic restrictions. Developing multiple mental health disorders will create comorbid trauma. Not only are many youth hurting, but they also see their friends, family, and community suffering, which amplify the negative mental health effects of the pandemic. Youth are already profoundly influenced by their parents, and prolonged confinement will amplify the positive and negative impacts that families have on youth health.<sup>3</sup>

In a survey of 1,472 Canadians, parents reported that since the pandemic began their children were less physically active, spent less time outdoors, and were more sedentary (i.e., engaging in more leisure screen time and social media).<sup>4</sup> However, parents also reported their children getting more sleep, and learning new skills and hobbies such as arts, crafts, and games. Youth were more active if parents encouraged and modeled physical activity.

A study of 1,054 Canadian adolescents during the shut-down phase showed that the pandemic dramatically changed many youth behaviours.<sup>5</sup> For example, 32% of youth reported more than 3 hours/day on social media prior to the pandemic, compared to 77% during the pandemic (the majority of responses shifted from 30 min-5 hrs per day to 5-10 hrs). Increased stress (including anxiety and concern about COVID-19) was associated with depression and loneliness. Increased time spent with family and on schoolwork were associated with lower depression. Youth who spent more time with friends and family, and being physically active, were less lonely. Youth who spent more time connecting virtually with friends and on social media experienced mixed effects on depression and loneliness, suggesting that the quality of those activities determines their impact on health. The authors suggest that cyberbullying and co-ruminating about problems and negative feelings can intensify depression. Two factors that can help to improve mental health - despite anxiety, isolation, and other negative factors - were high physical activity and low screen time. It should be noted that females reported higher rates of stress, loneliness, depression, and social media use.



## CONNECT: What Saskatchewan Youth Say

Most of the key topics being researched with COVID-19 are included in SAYCW's [survey](#) and [reports](#). As such, self-reported 2019 survey data from 10,574 Grade 7-12 youth are explored on this page. These data represent youth voices from across the province and focus on these COVID-19 related topics.

Based on the literature presented on page 1, SAYCW explored the connections between worry; sense of control; family, friends, school, and community support; screen time; sleep; physical activity in school; and four health outcomes: depressive symptoms, self-harm (ever), general health, and substance use. Findings for substance use (not shown) were similar to other outcomes, but with smaller differences: differences between the positive (green) and negative (orange) factors ranged from only 4.1% to 13.0%.

As an example, let's walk through the depressive symptoms table (below): Province-wide, 38.6% of youth reported depressive symptoms, but the point of this figure is to show how that proportion changes across different groups and experiences. For example, of youth who reported very low worry (a sub-group representing 15.7% of youth), 15.9% reported depressive symptoms compared to 70.5% of youth who reported very high worry (a sub-group representing 8.7% of youth). Values that are underlined in the tables below are at least 10%-points above/below the province-wide average (which are shown in the grey centre-box below the title). A summary of all these findings is provided on the next page.

Very Low Worry (15.7%)	<u>15.9%</u>	<b>Depressive Symptoms</b> (SK Average is 38.6%)	<u>24.9%</u>	Healthy Screen Time (9.4%)
Very High Worry (8.7%)	<u>70.5%</u>		<u>48.4%</u>	Very High Screen Time (30.8%)
High Control in Life (11.7%)	<u>22.4%</u>		<u>29.2%</u>	Sleep within Guideline (47.7%)
Low Control in Life (20.8%)	<u>59.7%</u>		<u>47.2%</u>	Low Sleep (52.3%)
Very High Support (20.0%)	<u>16.9%</u>		<u>30.1%</u>	Very Active in School (18.1%)
Low Support (20.1%)	<u>65.1%</u>		<u>49.0%</u>	Rarely-Never Active (22.3%)

Very Low Worry (15.7%)	<u>8.9%</u>	<b>Self-Harm (Ever)</b> (SK Average is 21.6%)	<u>13.3%</u>	Healthy Screen Time (9.4%)
Very High Worry (8.7%)	<u>50.2%</u>		<u>28.5%</u>	Very High Screen Time (30.8%)
High Control in Life (11.7%)	<u>12.5%</u>		<u>14.1%</u>	Sleep within Guideline (47.7%)
Low Control in Life (20.8%)	<u>42.1%</u>		<u>29.0%</u>	Low Sleep (52.3%)
Very High Support (20.0%)	<u>7.0%</u>		<u>13.8%</u>	Very Active in School (18.1%)
Low Support (20.1%)	<u>48.0%</u>		<u>33.2%</u>	Rarely-Never Active (22.3%)

Very Low Worry (15.7%)	<u>9.5%</u>	<b>Poor General Health</b> (SK Average is 16.4%)	<u>10.4%</u>	Healthy Screen Time (9.4%)
Very High Worry (8.7%)	<u>27.8%</u>		<u>23.9%</u>	Very High Screen Time (30.8%)
High Control in Life (11.7%)	<u>8.1%</u>		<u>10.9%</u>	Sleep within Guideline (47.7%)
Low Control in Life (20.8%)	<u>31.4%</u>		<u>22.1%</u>	Low Sleep (52.3%)
Very High Support (20.0%)	<u>4.8%</u>		<u>7.7%</u>	Very Active in School (18.1%)
Low Support (20.1%)	<u>36.9%</u>		<u>32.7%</u>	Rarely-Never Active (22.3%)

## Summary of 2019 Survey Findings:

- ◆ Depressive symptoms and self-harm were reported by Saskatchewan youth at concerning rates before the pandemic. Based on early research, the pandemic is intensifying the already concerning numbers.
- ◆ Worry, low sense of control in life, and low sense of support/connection were associated with much higher reports of depressive symptoms and self-harm. These same factors had a similar but smaller relationship with poor self-reported general health and with higher substance use.
- ◆ Less screen time, more sleep, and more physical activity were associated with fewer reports of depressive symptoms, self-harm, poor general health, and substance use. But screen time, sleep, and physical activity were generally less impactful than worry, control, and support/connection.

## Conclusion:

The purpose of this brief report is to highlight the impacts of COVID-19 on youth in Canada, and to share what youth in our province reported about the relationships between these factors prior to the pandemic. SAYCW's survey findings show that youth who experienced high worry, helplessness, and isolation (i.e., feeling low support and connection with others) also reported depressive symptoms, self-harm, and poor self-reported general health at alarming rates. Too much screen time, not enough sleep, and too little physical activity - based on national guidelines for all three factors - were also connected with these negative health outcomes.

Based on the early scientific literature, the number of youth who report their worry, control, support, screen time, and physical activity at negative levels is drastically increasing because of COVID-19.<sup>3,4,5</sup> Based on the youth voices in SAYCW's 2019 survey, these same factors shared strong connections with negative health outcomes. If the number of youth who experience high and very high worry was to double as a result of the pandemic, over half of all youth in Saskatchewan would report depressive symptoms. This report helps to give youth a stronger voice; helps to highlight the experiences, challenges, and health risks that Saskatchewan youth faced prior to and since the pandemic; and helps to make the effects of the pandemic clearer and more relatable for readers.



## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> StatsCan (May 15, 2020). The impact of COVID-19 on youth. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200515/dq200515e-eng.htm>
- <sup>2</sup> Power, E., et al. (2020). Youth mental health in the time of COVID-19. *Irish J of Psychiatric Med.*
- <sup>3</sup> Courtney, D., et al. (2020). COVID-19 impacts on child and youth anxiety and depression. *Canadian J of Psychiatry.*
- <sup>4</sup> Moore, S.A., et al. (2020). Impact of the COVID-19 virus outbreak on movement and play behaviours of Canadian children and youth: a national survey. *Int J of Beh Nutrition and Phys Act.*
- <sup>5</sup> Ellis, W.E., Dumas, T.M., & Forbes, L.M. (2020). Psychologically isolated but socially connected. *Cdn J of Beh Sci.*
- <sup>6</sup> Rutledge, K. (2020). Anticipating the mental effects of COVID-19 in youth: social isolation in a digital age. *J Am Academy of Child and Adol Psychiatry Connect* (online companion journal).
- <sup>7</sup> Health Canada. COVID-19 Resources for Youth, Students, and Young Adults. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19/resources-youth-students.html>

## ACT: Next Steps for Health Promotion Action

SAYCW strives to learn, connect, and act to improve youth health and well-being. Having reviewed the COVID-19 research and shared related Saskatchewan youth survey data, this report ends by focusing on action. SAYCW hopes that these health promotion actions will help youth to manage the challenges brought about because of the pandemic.<sup>6,7</sup> All statistics below are from SAYCW's 2019 survey, helping to localize these actions.

- ◆ **Exercise** – Youth who were more active at school were nearly twice as likely to meet national standards for their total physical activity in school and away from school. We all have to find safe ways to remain physically active during the pandemic, especially for youth with restricted school activity.
- ◆ **Sleep well** – Only 47% of youth reported meeting national guidelines for healthy sleep in their age group on weekdays. There is an opportunity to improve this behaviour and that will benefit health.
- ◆ **Have consistent routines, including bed and wake up times**
- ◆ **Eat balanced meals** – Based on SAYCW survey results, this means eating more fruits and vegetables: nearly 90% of youth did not meet those daily serving guidelines.
- ◆ **Avoid vaping, smoking, drinking, and other substance use** – This is an important issue in Saskatchewan because of our high vaping and smoking rates. Over 2 in 5 youth reported ever vaping, and 1 in 5 reported ever smoking. The [Thriving Youth, Thriving Communities Report](#) provides numerous breakdowns of substance use, which vary considerably by grade.
- ◆ **Find safe ways to have fun and learn new hobbies/skills** – Engaging in activities that are more challenging and stimulating improve health and well-being. Passive activities like watching TV, YouTube, and following social media can be unhealthy.
- ◆ **Practice good hand hygiene** – Wash hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer.
- ◆ **Practice deep breathing, stretching, or other relaxation and mindfulness strategies** – Three of the 61 grants that SAYCW's [Healthy Schools & Communities Grant Program](#) funded included mindfulness and breathing skills that helped youth to reduce stress and improve well-being.
- ◆ **Connect with family, friends, and others who provide emotional support** – Youth reported strong support & connection with their family, friends, school, and community. Feeling disconnected may have a greater impact on youth who are used to strong support and connection.
- ◆ **Be safe online and take breaks from social media** – According to research, youth who spent more time on social media were more likely to feel depressed.<sup>5</sup>
- ◆ **Stay connected and informed, but avoid overwhelming and negative news**
- ◆ **If spending time with people in-person, physically distance and wear masks**
- ◆ **Ask for help and help others when needed**

In addition to all of these tips, one study recommended that youth **rally around a common cause and advocated taking an altruistic approach to the pandemic.**<sup>2</sup> This might help youth to feel that they are working with others and are not alone – providing a sense of purpose and more optimistic feelings about the future.

