

YOUTH EXPERIENCES

How police interactions impact youth who use drugs

SUMMARY

- In 2017/2018, the Youth Experiences Project (YEP) surveyed 449 and interviewed 38 youth aged 16-30 in Victoria, Chilliwack, and Prince George.
- This report provides findings from YEP that illustrate the impact of police interactions on youth who use drugs (YWUD)
- We also provide recommendations from youth about how police can improve the quality of their work among young people.

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I feel like every time I've dealt with a cop, it's immediately "I'm going to cuff you, you're under arrest. Don't make me pepper spray you, don't make me taser you"... there's a lot of situations you can solve just by talking.

YWUD, Chilliwack



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YOUTH, DRUGS, & THE POLICE

Substance use among youth is heavily policed in Canada. As shown in **Figure 1**, youth most commonly reported using alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis, stimulants, and hallucinogens. Drugs with the highest reported rates of daily or almost daily use were tobacco (56%), cannabis (51%), opioids (38%), stimulants (16%), and alcohol (10%).

Despite half of youth reporting at least four or more police interactions in the past year (**Figure 2**), only one-in-five reported being found in possession of an illicit drug, including marijuana, in the past five years (**Figure 3**). Of those found in possession, only one-in-five were charged by the police. This demonstrates the significant power and discretion that police exercise when making decisions about charging youth with criminal offenses.

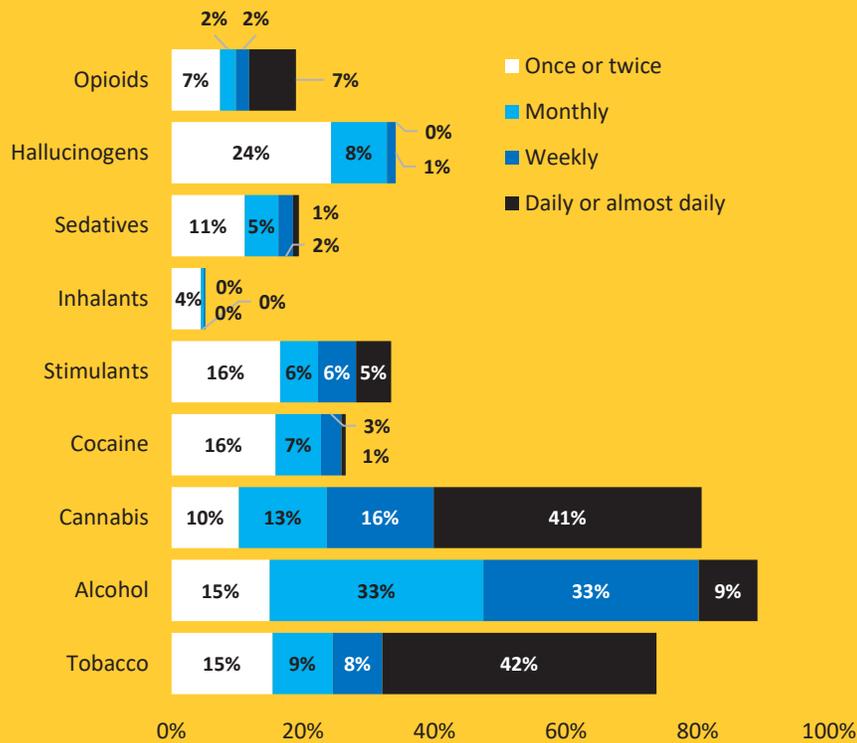


Figure 1. Substance use frequency, past six months



I told them I was a responsible drug user. I refuse to leave needles anywhere. I refuse to leave, um, anything like, just, anywhere where it could harm someone...
 “You know what? Okay, yeah. I respect that.” And they let me finish up.

YWUD, Victoria

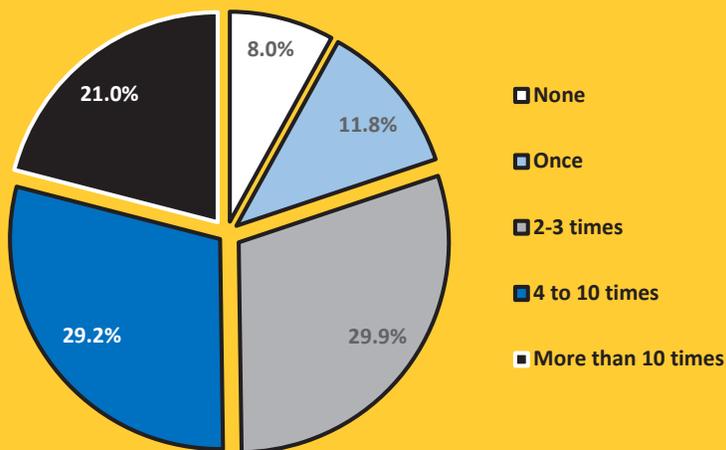


Figure 2. Number of police interactions, past five years

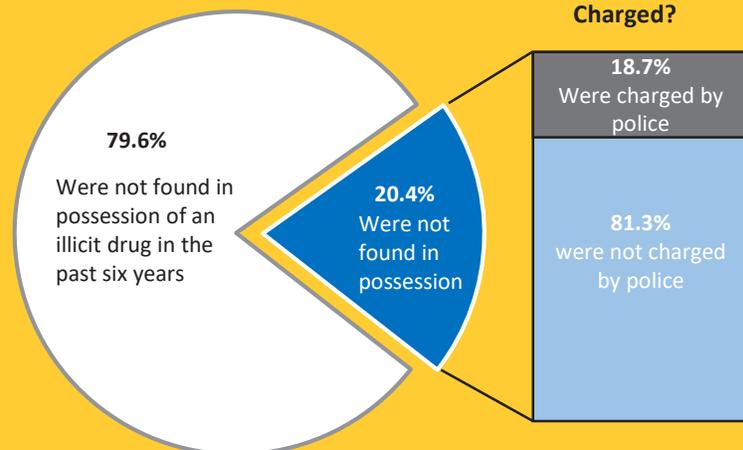


Figure 3. Experiences with substance use and policing

POLICE ENCOUNTERS & ATTITUDES

Attitudes towards police are important to the efficiency of policing services. Individuals who do not trust the police may be less likely to rely on police for help or to cooperate with police. As shown in **Figure 4**, youths' attitudes towards police skewed slightly more positive than negative across most indicators. That said, youth rated police higher in the performance of their duties than they did on politeness and respect. In addition to surveying the attitudes of youth, we

also asked about specific experiences they had with police. Altogether, they reported details on 770 interactions with police officers. After most encounters, youth felt that they were treated respectfully (67.4%) and fairly (72.0%). For better or worse, encounters with police seemed to play an important role about how youth felt about police – with youth reporting that 42% of events changed how they felt about police.

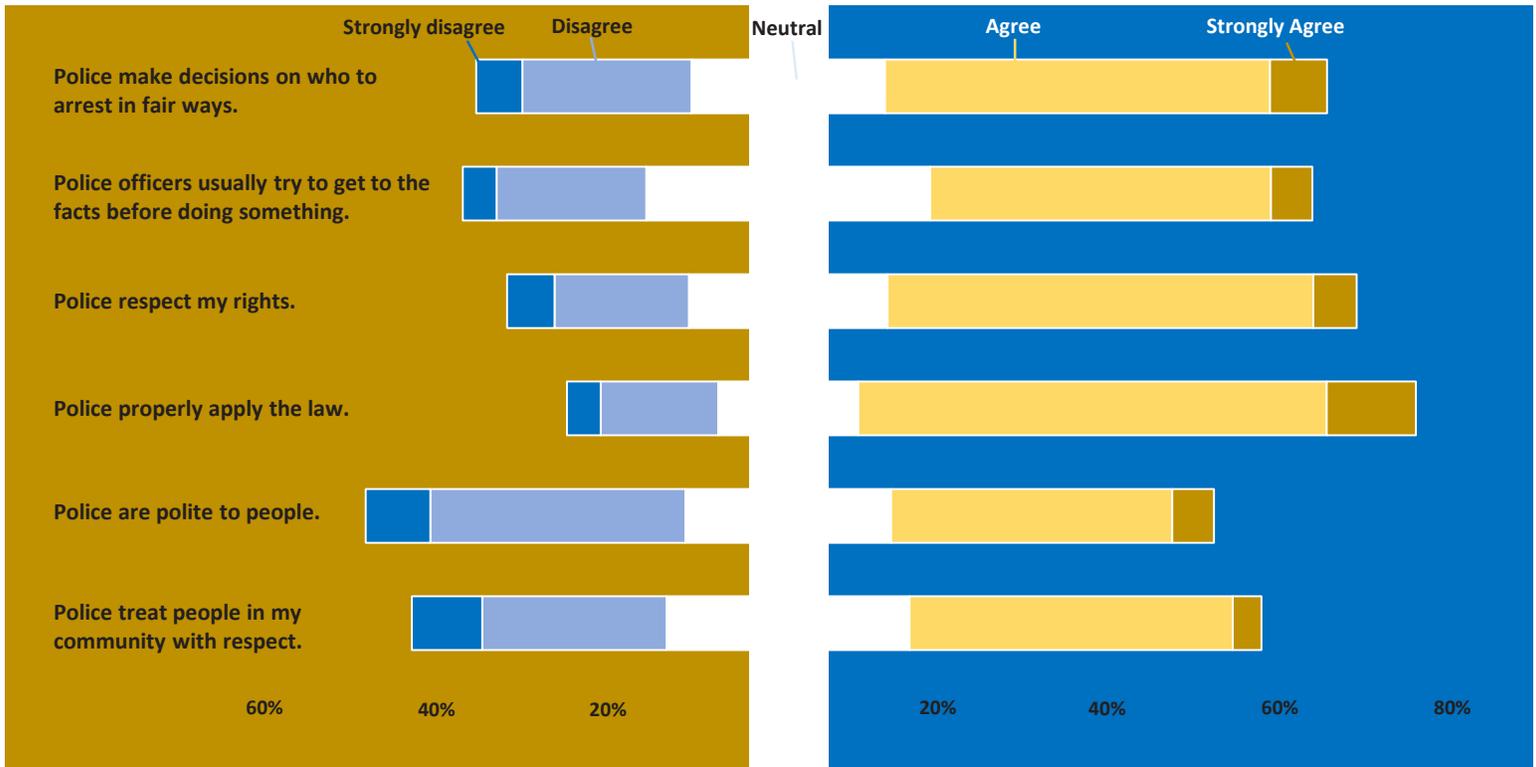


Figure 4: Young peoples' attitudes about police

In interviews, youth described negative encounters with the police where physical force was used and they or their friends were injured by being choked, dragged, stomped on, or beaten up so badly they were hospitalized. Troubling patterns existed where intersectional forms of discrimination were present: negative encounters and emotions were more common in encounters with police by youth who were Indigenous or otherwise racialized, homeless youth, youth whose sexual or gender identity was questioned, or youth whose drug use was more extreme. Youth also described supportive encounters when police reassured and comforted them, and felt that police attention is sometimes warranted, or even desired, to help navigate dangerous or violent situations. They even said that at times, police aggression was expected and necessary. While youth related some respectful and supportive encounters with police, it was, for them, the negative ones that had a lasting impact.

Youth were aware that police work is hard - police attend violent and potentially dangerous events which can make them distrustful or afraid of youth and the impacts of these emotions can be cumulative. Youth also reasoned that repeated interactions can create contempt, antipathy, or annoyance among police. While youth acknowledged that policing was intensive and often emotional work, their narratives underscore how some kinds of encounters with police were deeply stigmatizing and harmful.

“ After dealing with one person [police] probably start carrying that stress. And then like when they're dealing with another person, [the police] probably taking that out on them. ”

YWUD, Prince George



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RECOMMENDATIONS FROM YOUTH

1. RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION AND ACTION

Although youth recognized that police encounters may be inevitable, the way that police conduct themselves and communicate with YWUD was vital for increasing trust and respect for police. Respectful communication meant being kind and courteous when possible and actually listening to youth, and police taking the time to consider the situation before acting, and getting the facts before jumping to conclusions. Youth hoped for more empathy from police, so they could be treated with patience and compassion instead of judgement, especially for those who are struggling with drug and mental health issues. Youth understood that police were impacted by the difficult situations they had to navigate, but requested they try not take their previous experiences out on youth. Reducing violence and threats towards YWUD is paramount; youth said police must not use their power more than required, finding a balance between having too much authority or being a pushover. Youth wanted police to follow required procedures to protect the rights of youth.



I get it, it's a stressful job. But you're obligated to protect and serve. And protection shouldn't mean living with that little mind in the back of your head saying like "What if this police officer isn't in a good mood or anything."

YWUD, Chilliwack



2. CHANGES TO DRUG POLICY

Although youth had various opinions around the police's role in drug policy, many thought that laws and procedures that criminalize drugs were not working and that police are caught by current drug laws: "if you cut off like one of the snake heads, three more are going to appear. You cut one drug dealer out, others are going to sprout up and take over...Because when there's demand, supply will always follow". Instead, decriminalization works to change values and perceptions around drugs themselves, "coming out of more of a place of concern, rather than conviction" for police and others.



The best way to deal with drugs is not through violence and force, and action, and putting people in prisons... [Let's] not...cast these people aside out of communities, but kind of bring them in and pull them back together.

YWUD, Victoria



Many youth saw the damaging effects of addiction and criminalization and saw a need for more robust and accessible drug and alcohol treatment services available to youth and other people who use drugs, safe consumption sites, more housing, employment and other services that connect YWUD to community. They thought police could have an active role in directing and referring YWUD to resources, especially if they had more specialized training related to the connection between mental health, trauma and drug use. Youth wanted to ensure that police prioritized investigating and charging people for violent crimes, rather than targeting youth drug and alcohol use.

3. ENHANCED SCREENING AND TRAINING FOR POLICE

Youth wanted to ensure that new police recruits were psychologically fit for the job and that anyone who was not motivated by helping, caring for people and keeping them safe was weeded out by supervised, on-the-ground, interactions with people. Enhanced training for police included increased knowledge of harm reduction and social determinants of health, a more structural understanding of why certain people end up using drugs and are criminalized to “delve deeper into why maybe these laws are problematic or why, um, some populations are more vulnerable for arrest for certain things”. A key goal was shifting policing culture, decreasing the targeting of YWUD and racialized, including Indigenous, people, and reducing the stigmas and stereotyping that youth felt. Police were viewed as just one part of the public imagination of racism, stereotyping certain youth as more likely to conceal weapons, sell drugs or be violent.

“ So I just think like training, accountability, and then like proper repercussions... because there are times where I believe the police are in the wrong and you should be able to tell them that and not have to worry about “Okay, you know what? They’re going to take that the wrong way.” They’re either going to get aggressive or slap you for something and then all of a sudden you’re in the wrong.

YWUD, Prince George

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4. ACCOUNTABILITY IF POLICE ABUSE THEIR POWER

“ I don’t think it’s healthy to be an us-and-them kind of thing. Because, you know, if we start seeing it that way, they do too... we shouldn’t be at war with them, we should be all working together, right? We’re all in the same community.

YWUD, Chilliwack

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Youth wanted to ensure there was suitable accountability when police overstepped their authority or were violent or disrespectful. Although several youth had followed a complaints process, this had not been a very satisfying experience. They felt there is a long history of police not getting caught or authority turning a blind eye. Instead, youth said there should be meaningful repercussions for police. Youth had seen many incidents where they perceived police to be above the law, such as texting while driving or speeding through red lights, and wanted police to play by the same rules.

5. STRONGER CONNECTIONS TO COMMUNITY

Finally, youth said that police would be more trusted and relationships may improve if police were more visible in community, especially in non-threatening ways. Having neutral or positive interactions with police, getting to know them through community events, social media, or simple interactions on the street all were suggestions to help youth empathize and humanize police. Youth also suggested longer relationships with communities that build over time, sharing history together with the community as a way to get more deeply connected in a positive way. Youth had had some positive experiences with Tribal police and generally appreciated when the police force was more diverse and representative of the communities where they live.

“

I think there’s a difference. Like because Native cops seem like they, ah, try to like understand more with the Native person, rather than the RCMP did. Because it seemed like the RCMP was just like, “Oh, we’re here to...do our job and get it done...But then Tribals would like try to actually like assess the situation, and see what happened, and ask questions, and try to help people.”

YWUD, Chilliwack

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STIGMA & DISCRIMINATION

YWUD experienced high rates of perceived stigma and discrimination. Stigma contributes to negative stereotypes and legitimizes discrimination. It can lead to social exclusion and limit access to social support, health care, housing and other resources. Stigma is a fundamental cause of health inequalities and is an important determinant of health¹.

Their perceived stigma was high (4.2/6) (SD = .7), on the Perceived Devaluation-Discrimination Scale² compared to other marginalized populations and similar to sex workers³. Stigma was perceived to be higher for youth who used illegal drugs, such as amphetamines, cocaine and opioids, than those who

used cannabis weekly or had limited use. More than half the youth acknowledged perceived stigma in all categories, with the highest levels of stigma affecting their ability to work with children.

Youth experienced discrimination in multiple areas including at school, on the street or in a public setting, at work or getting hired for a job, getting service in a store or restaurant, or with the police or in the courts. Physical appearance, race/ethnicity/colour, age, and substance use were the most common reasons given by youth for perception of discrimination.

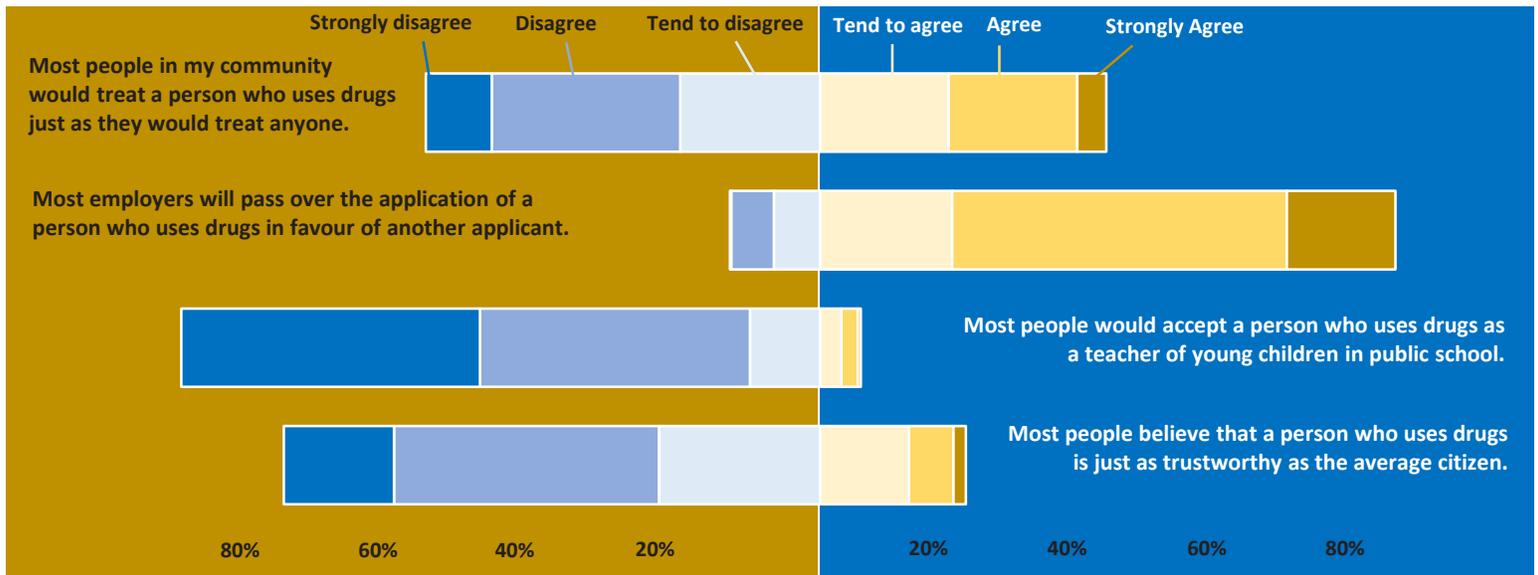


Figure 5: Youth descriptions of stigma on the Perceived Devaluation-Discrimination Scale

INDIGENOUS YOUTH

In all three communities, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth identified that Indigenous youth were subjected to negative stereotypes and stigmatizing language by both police and others. Nearly a quarter of the youth we spoke to identified as Indigenous (107/449) and many said that they were racially targeted by the police. Indigenous youth were 41% more likely to report discriminated by the police or courts than white youth and 65% of Indigenous youth had four or more encounters with police in the last five years, compared to only 44% of white youth. This was significant, even when drug use and community visibility was considered. In their police encounters, Indigenous youth (vs. white) were 300% more likely to be handcuffed/arrested/ taken into custody rather than let go/given a ticket, even after adjusting for history of police interactions and situational factors related to

the circumstances of each interaction. Our findings suggest that Indigenous youth may be vulnerable to discretionary policing practices and discrimination, which may perpetuate structural violence, over-policing, and high incarceration rates among Indigenous youth.

“ They were all white cops. And you could tell that I’m Native...They probably were just thinking “Just a drunk Indian. Probably nobody cares about her.” Like that was kind of my first thought.

YWUD, Victoria



EXPERIENCE WITH OVERDOSE

A dramatic increase in drug-related overdoses in Canada means that YWUD are at risk. Nearly 10 people died each day of an illicit drug overdose in Canada from January 2016 to March 2018 and 1,542 people died of overdose in BC in 2018⁴. In 2017-18, 20.4% of those who died were under 30⁵.

In response, there has been an increase in harm reduction services and policies such as the Good Samaritan Act (GSDOA), which exempts people who experience or witness an overdose and call 911 from being charged for possession of drugs or for breach of conditions. It does not, however, provide legal protection for outstanding warrants, production and trafficking of controlled substances or other crimes not listed in the bill⁶. Fear of police continues to be a barrier to calling 911.

Just over 76% of YWUD surveyed in this study said they were concerned about overdose. Youth in this study often tried to take care of the overdose themselves to avoid embarrassment,

“ They came and sat with me...weren’t judgmental at all...it seemed like they really did care about me and my boyfriend...like kind of crazy because I’d never experienced that before. ”

YWUD, Victoria

punishment from parents or other adults, criminalization and stigma. Although the youth were hesitant to call 911 because of fear of being charged, they said they called if they were concerned the overdose may be fatal, and would hide drugs or lie about the circumstances to minimize their risk of charges. Although they were concerned about police, none of the youth described being charged or arrested during an overdose incident. This may indicate that the shifts in police policies and legislation have positively impacted some YWUD.

When police were perceived to be dismissive, disrespectful, or lacking care or compassion for the person overdosing, these negative experiences created distrust and may make youth less likely to call or call later, when time is of the essence. When police were perceived to respect youth, prioritizing safety over criminalizing or charging youth, ignoring or leaving drugs and paraphernalia alone, youth noticed. Youth want to be seen and heard and treated with compassion in the difficult and often traumatic experience of overdose.

Youth had very mixed knowledge of the GSDOA and many were concerned about criminalization due to drug use if they called 911. Public campaigns such as towardtheheart.com help so youth know about the GSDOA. Changes to policing cultures that prioritize health issues rather than criminalize YWUD may increase youths’ trust of police and increase calls to 911 when needed.

METHODOLOGY (HOW WE DID THIS RESEARCH)

YEP met with youth in Victoria, Chilliwack and Prince George, BC in 2017-18. We wanted to learn more about interactions between the police and YWUD and how these experiences affect their lives. We were particularly interested in street checks, youths’ perceptions of police and procedural justice, social support, perceived stigma and discrimination, the actual encounters youth had with police, overdose, normalization of marijuana and youths’ recommendations on improving relationships between YWUD and police.

Thirteen research assistants recruited youth, aged 16-30, many who used drugs (marijuana, ecstasy, cocaine, heroin, or illicit prescriptions), by hanging posters at local agencies, marijuana dispensaries, and coffee shops, Facebook pages and Instagram posts, and approaching youth directly at skateboard parks, campus hangouts and spaces where youth congregate. Youth could also refer other youth to participate in the study. In total, 449 participants were surveyed, 38 of whom provided in-depth descriptions about their experiences with police. Demographic information for all participants is provided in Table 1. For more information about the Youth Experiences Project visit yep.cisur.ca

	N	%
Age (in Years)		
≤20	193	43.8
21 – 25	166	37.6
≥26	82	18.6
Gender		
Female	219	48.8
Male	215	47.9
Other	15	3.3
Sexual Minority		
No (Heterosexual)	353	78.8
Yes (Sexual Minority)	95	21.2
Ethnic Group		
White	280	62.5
Indigenous	107	23.9
Other	61	13.6
Housing Situation		
Stably Housed	390	86.9
Unstably Housed	59	13.1
Current Student		
No	223	49.8
Yes	225	50.2

Table 1: YEP participant demographics

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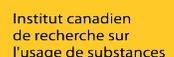
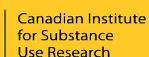
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