

Canadian Youth Mental Health Survey

The results of the Canadian Youth Mental Health Survey, carried out by Compas inc. for the Canadian Psychiatric Association (CPA) are presented. The survey was designed to provide the CPA with a broad profile of the opinions, awareness and behaviour of Canadian youth on mental health issues. COMPAS inc. conducted telephone interviews in June 1993, among a random sample of 800 Canadian youth, 13-18 years of age, proportionately distributed across the country. A sample of this size produces results which are accurate for the population of interest as a whole to within +/- 3.5 percentage points, 95 times out of 100 (most conservative estimate).

The telephone methodology dictated that isolated and special groups of youth were not included. For example "street kids", those in institutions or on reserves and group home residents are not part of the survey sample. Given these exclusions, some might argue that the survey findings present the most "optimistic" assessments of mental health issues among Canadian youth. However, the data are weighted to ensure that they are reasonably representative of the age, sex, community size and region characteristics of the "real" universe of the 13-18 year-old Canadians and they compare favorably with those of the Statistics Canada 1991 census.

Many percentages don't add up to 100% because many choices of answers were possible.

Socio-demographic data

The sample included an equal number of boys and girls. The mean age is 15.5 years. About 14% of respondents live with one parent, 6% with one parent and a step-parent and 80% with both natural parents. Three quarters of the respondents are English speaking, and while one in three live in a rural area, the same proportion lives in a city of more than a million inhabitants. About then percent of adolescents belong to a visible minority group, but 94% were born in Canada. Whereas 80% of the respondents are second generation Canadian or more, 20% of their parents were not born in Canada.

School and family

During the year preceeding the survey, 97% of respondents were attending school full or part time. Sixty percent were in regular classes, 31% in advanced classes and 9% in special classes. When asked how often they missed school in the past year, 71% missed less than 10 times, 16% missed 11-20 times and 13% were absent more than 20 times. For most of them, 60%, the reason for missing school was a disease, 5% had an appointment, 20% simply skipped classes and the other 15% had diverse motives (holidays, sport trips, bus problems, death in family, etc.). Finally, 45% of the adolescents describe their school performance as average, 13% below average and 42% above average.

Eight out of ten respondents are happy or very happy with their current home life, while only 4% are not very happy with it. Generally speaking, 75% of the adolescents believe that their parents expect about the right amount from them, while 22% think they expect too much and 3% too little.

Well-being and self-esteem

All things considered, 79% were satisfied or very satisfied with their current life situation, while 21% were not very or not at all satisfied. What they see as the most positive aspect of their life at the time of the study is as follow school/education (28%), friends/relationships (23%), family (15%), sports/culture/music (11%). To what degree they like themselves as a person overall, 90% answered moderately or very much. More than 80% describe themselves as happy or very happy persons. Overall, 22% like very much the way their body looks, while 72% like it moderately or somewhat and 6% not much or not at all. Nearly half of the respondents are satisfied with their weight, 27% would like to lose some and 19% to gain some weight; only 3% want to lose a lot.

Finally, 13% said they never feel really depressed, 54% feel really depressed once or a few times a year, 23% once a month, 9% a few times a week and 1% all the time.

Stress and worrying

About one in twenty feel really stressed all the time, while 46% feel really stressed once a month to a few times a week, 45% a few times a year and 4% never. While 58% cope well or very well with stress, 34% are coping moderately well and 7% are not coping at all. School is the biggest source of stress for 65% of the respondents, while it is family life for 11%, friends for 8% and money for only 4%.

Respectively 8% and 23% of the adolescents have regularly or occasionally trouble sleeping because of worrying about things. Whereas nearly 20% have been concerned regularly about their physical health in the last year, an equal percentage never experience such concern. In the last year, 13% have been regularly concerned about their mental health, 19% occasionally, 26% seldom and 42% never.

When they have a problem, 32% usually keep it to themselves, because they feel they can best solve the problem themselves (58%), or they feel uncomfortable discussing their problems with others (40%) or because they don't have anyone they feel they can go to (10%). But those who tell someone, do so in the first place with friends (63%), with parents (29%), or with brothers and sisters (6%). In second place, they mainly go to parents (45%), friends (24%) and brothers and sisters (11%). Altogether, 86% go to friends, 84% go to parents, 33% to brothers and sisters, 11% to other family members, 18% to schoolteachers or counsellors and 5% go to professionals.

Seven percent of the respondents have a handicap or chronic disease. Among the most frequent of these problems, we find: asthma (28%), bronchitis (9%), diabetes (5%), epilepsy (3%), hay fever (3%), arthritis (3%), migraines (3%), bladder problems (4%), cholesterol (5%), paralysis (2%), etc.

Mental health

The following categories are specific conditions or problems that first come to their mind when they think about mental illness: depression (15%), stress (12%), schizophrenia (11%), handicap/mental retardation (11%), emotional problems (8%), insanity/psychopathy (7%),



family/social problems (7%), physical problems such as Alzheimer's, AIDS, anorexia (6%), alcoholism/drug abuse (6%), suicide (3%); 29% had no opinion.

For 30% of the respondents, mood swings or social isolation are things they might notice in a friend that would make them think that he is suffering from some type of mental illness. General behaviour changes (19%), depression (15%), school problems (7%) were also mentioned by many respondents.

About 23% of the adolescents said there are times when they feel they might have a serious emotional problem. Four percent of the adolescents were diagnosed as depressed by a professional. While 19% had experienced suicidal ideation, 4% had attempted suicide. Two thirds of those who had suicidal thoughts or had attempted suicide had told someone: a friend (81%), a family member (36%), a schoolteacher or counsellor (16%), a family doctor (7%).

What type of professional they would be willing to see to discuss any problems they might have with their mental health: family doctor (54%), counsellor (41%), psychiatrist (20%), psychologist (20%), hotline/teen centres (16%), family member (10%), social worker (10%), teacher (6%), friend (6%), etc. Ten percent had seen a professional for help with mental health issues or problems.

What might keep a person of their age from getting help for problems related to mental health was answered as follows; embarrassment (31%), fear (22%), stigma (23%), peer pressure (21%), denial (19%), not knowing where to go (12%), family influence (5%), etc.

To find more about mental health and mental illness, they would ask to: family doctor (48%), school counsellor (33%), library (15%), family (15%), medical clinic (12%), hospital (12%), teacher (8%), psychiatrist (6%), etc. However, 43% of the respondents are not very or not at all interested in learning more about mental health or mental illness, while only 8% are very interested.

Family history and mental health

Eighteen percent of the respondents have a family member (including themselves, parents, siblings, grandparents) diagnosed at some point with depression or mental illness. Three percent have a family history including both problems.

Respectively 25% and 15% of the respondents said a family member was an alcoholic or drug abuser

Eight percent of the respondents, reported knowing a family member who had been a victim of physical or sexual abuse.

Finally, 2% have a family history including alcoholism, drug abuse and sexual/physical abuse, and 33% have a family history including one or two of these problems.

Conclusion

It is frequent, in different surveys of this kind, to conclude that most adolescents seem to do well.

However, adolescents at higher risk of problems were perhaps not included in the survey, as pointed out by the researchers. Thus, the problems are somewhat underestimated. Also, not all teenagers in this survey had gone through all their adolescence since the mean age was 15.5 years. Some will eventually develop mental health problems before reaching 18 years old.

Even if the picture seems reassuring, 4% had been diagnosed as depressed at some time, 4% have attempted suicide; and 20% are confronted with some mental health problem, be it their own or a family members, this must have consequences for the adolescent if a member of the family experiences mental health problems.

Moreover, 30% of those who had suicidal ideation or had attempted suicide had not talked to anyone about it. Also, a third of the respondents said they preferred not to talk to anyone when they are worried. Fear, embarrassment, shame, fear of stigma and peer pressure are some of the reasons given not to talk about their problems to a professional. Mental health and mental illness are still taboo. Health professionals, teachers, counsellors, community workers and all those involved with adolescents should broach the subject with them, especially when there are worrisome symptoms or behaviours.

Finally, while the survey answers many questions on the issues, it raises many more for discussion and possible future research.

Report available at a cost of \$100. Canadian Psychiatric Association: 237 Argyle Ave., suite 200, Ottawa, ON, K2P 1B8. Tel.: (613) 234-2815. Fax: (613) 234-9857.