

Lifestyles among high school students in Montreal.

In 1991, the research department of the Quebec Ministry of Education and the Centre de recherche sur les services communautaires de l'Université Laval conducted a survey on the lifestyles of young Quebecers between 12 and 18 years of age.

The survey was reproduced, but limiting it to students attending French high schools of the Catholic School Board of Montreal. Its objectives were, first, to describe the lifestyles of adolescents and, secondly, to note the differences between boys and girls, as well as between the different grades and ethnic groups. The term "immigrant" was used for a student who was not born in Quebec. Another objective was to establish possible relationships between suicidal behaviors, drugs use and family, school or personal characteristics.

The questionnaire used in the study was an adaptation of the one used in the Ministry of Education survey. It consisted of 84 questions on different issues such as eating habits, sleep, alcohol and drug use, adjustment to school life, relationships with parents, suicidal behaviours, etc. Questionnaires were distributed throughout the schools. The final sampling (11 557 questionnaires) was made up of data collected to respect the relative importance of each school and to create a significant global sample.

(It is important to remember that the data represent those adolescents who were in school the day of the survey. Drop-out or adolescents frequently absent usually have more problems, thus slightly underestimating the problem behaviors in this survey).

Descriptive data

The sample is composed of 50.2% girls and 49.8% boys (all between 11 and 18 years of age), 25% immigrants. 57% of students lived with their biological parents, 23% lived in a single-parent family and 12.1% in a reconstituted family. 43.8% of families had two children and 25% three children. Finally, there were more traditional families among immigrants (64.2%) than among Quebecers (54.8%).

Eating and sleeping habits: Eight students in ten eat an average of three meals a day, seven in ten have dinner everyday and a little more than half of them have breakfast everyday. Moreover, most young people (83.5%) consider they always or often eat well. Although three quarters of respondents claimed they sleep an average of eight hours or more a day and over 90% maintained they sleep a minimum of seven hours, one quarter say they have difficulty sleeping, that is, 30.7% of girls and 22.2% of boys. The majority of these (57.8%) pointed out that the main cause of their sleep problem was neither school, family, friends nor health. However, 14.4% of those attributed their problems to difficulties in school and 12.2% to family problems.

Relationship with parents: Over 75% of youth are happy or quite happy about their communication with parents and, although half of the respondents consider their parents more severe than other parents, another half consider them less severe. Moreover, most claim that their parents listen to them often or very often (76.1%), that they are available (84.9%) and that they encourage them (68.9%). When parents are not at home, one third of respondents look after

themselves, one third watch television and one third go out or invite friends. Furthermore, 68.2% of respondents always or often tell their parents about what they do when they go out.

School: One student in two claims to have average results in school, 30% consider they are above average and 11.6% below. Although one third feels comfortable at school, and half often like it, one student in five rarely or never feels comfortable. More than half the young people surveyed want to attend university, that is, about 60% of girls, 50% of boys and 60% of immigrants. 29.1% think of going to college (CEGEP), 12.9% want to finish their secondary education and 13.6% do not count on finishing it. Girls are more comfortable at school and boys think more about finishing their education at the end of high school or college.

Problems: Most youth maintain that they are happy (86.6%) and feel good about themselves (83.2%) and that their life is a little or not stressful (64.7%). Boys feel better about themselves (than girls) but this diminishes from Grade 7 to Grade 11. When they have a problem, more than 50% of youth confide in their friends and more than one third confide in their family. Although boys confide more in their family than girls do, girls confide more in their friends. On the other hand, 14.5% of respondents have nobody to confide in, a percentage that is higher among boys and immigrants. Recourse to professional help increases with age. Girls consult more. Three students in ten have already thought seriously about suicide while more than one in ten have attempted it. For these two last questions (about suicide) rates increase with age and are twice as high among girls. Finally, more than two thirds of those who have already thought seriously about suicide never talked about it.

Leisures: Students spend an average of 2.3 hours per week doing homework, about 2 hours reading and 3.5 hours watching television (about 40% are watching television more than 6 hours a week). Girls study more (than boys), read more and watch television less. One third of the students have a paid job and work an average of 3.4 hours per week, especially on weekends. Finally, 75% of youth participate in sports, boys in a greater number.

Tobacco, alcohol and drug use.

Almost half the students have already smoked cigarettes; almost one third smoke at the moment, that is, 16% regularly and 15.5% occasionally. Girls smoke more than boys. Three out of four begin to smoke between 11 and 14 years of age (average age of 12.5). Among smokers, the average number of cigarettes smoked in a week is 29.6. Almost 60% of smokers live in a family that includes at least one smoker, and less than half of them are given permission to smoke at home.

Over 25% of students have already taken drugs. Although 16% take drugs at the moment, only 3.4% take them regularly. Nearly 95% of those who have already taken drugs did so for the first time between 11 and 16 (average age 13.4). Marijuana and hashish are the most popular drugs. Girls take more medicine, while boys take more cocaine and crack. Three drug-takers in four do it for fun; 8.4% say they do it to forget their problems, and less than 5% say they do it to be part of the group. Over 95% of drug-takers consider that drugs have a positive effect on them, that drugs make them happy and calm. Finally, 15% of those who take drugs have already felt uncomfortable or guilty about it.

Although most youth (65.4%) have already had a (alcoholic) drink, regular drinkers represent only 3.4%. About half the respondents drink from time to time or on special occasions. Furthermore, only a quarter of young regular drinkers get drunk often or every time they drink. Almost 95% of respondents who have already had a drink did so for the first time between 10 and 16 (average age of 13). Most adolescents drink for fun or to forget their problems (6.3%).

Generally, immigrants are less keen on cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. Moreover, the use of these substances increases with age. One youth in four has never talked about drugs and alcohol, and the same proportion talk about them regularly. Girls and older students talk about them more but this discussion occurs less frequently among immigrants.

Typical lifestyles profiles

To study the relation between the use of toxic substances and suicidal behaviours in a more appropriate manner, twelve indicators were established taking into account certain aspects of a youth's personal, school and family life. To define an indicator, two or three related questions were grouped together.

For example, **the indicator of personal well-being** includes 1) feeling comfortable at school, 2) feeling good about oneself and 3) being stressed. A respondent is categorized as "**very well**" if he answered the three questions positively, that is, if he feels quite or very good about himself, if he is a little stressed or not stressed and if he is always or often comfortable at school. He will be categorized as "**quite well**" if he answered two elements positively, "**quite bad**" if he answered one element positively and "**very bad**" if there is no positive element. According to this indicator, half the youth claim they feel very well and one third quite well. Furthermore, one youth in twenty claims to feel very bad. Girls are more negative about themselves and personal well-being seems to decrease with age.

School results and unexplained absences were used for **the indicator of adjustment to school life**. Firstly, three students in four have no problems in school, while one in ten is frequently absent without an explanation, a comparable number of students has less than average results and 5% of students have difficulties with marks and absences. Note that absenteeism increases with age.

Satisfaction with communication between parents and adolescent is **the indicator of the quality in teen-parents relationships**. Over 60% of respondents describe their relationship with parents as essentially positive and almost 20% describe it as quite positive. On the other hand, almost 15% estimate that this relationship is quite or completely negative. The youngest students, boys included, evaluate more positively the relationship with their parents.

The indicator of parental presence at home was calculated from the presence of parents in the home on weekends, on week nights and at suppertime. Over 80% of the students said that their parents were often home at these times while 10% said they were home less often at these times.

The indicator of alcohol and drugs use by peers was determined by three factors: 1) peers who take drugs and drink, 2) peers who drink and 3) peers who do not take drugs or drink. There is no category for peers who take drugs only because those who take drugs also drink. One third has

no friend who uses drugs and/or alcohol, less than a quarter has friends who drink alcohol and 44% have friends who take drugs and drink. There are more girls in the latter category. The older they get, the more they make friends who take drugs and drink.

The frequency of drinking in the four weeks preceding the survey, getting drunk often and drinking alone were the three elements for **the indicator of alcohol use**. From this indicator, seven groups were identified. Half the youth drink less than once a week, do not drink alone and never get drunk. A little more than one youth in ten drink once or twice a week, but never alone and without getting drunk. Some drink less than once a week and get drunk often (11.1%) or drink alone (8.4%). Some others drink once a week or more and get drunk (7.6%) or drink alone (6.3%). One youth in twenty drinks once a week or more, gets drunk often and drinks alone.

Six indicators regarding **drug use** were established. The first one, **experience with drugs**, reveals that more than one youth in ten have already tried drugs, although not presently, that 16% take some at the moment and that a little less than 75% have never taken any. The second indicator, **the number of drugs tried**, reveals that among those who have taken drugs, about 57% have tried more than one type. **The indicator of the number of drugs taken at the moment** shows that 47% of present drug-users take more than one type of drugs. For **the indicator of the context of drug-taking** (when, where and with whom) seven young users in ten take drugs on weekends, away from school and with friends, while one youth in five takes drugs on weekends and during the week, away from school and with friends. Finally, about 8% take drugs during the week, in school, alone or with friends, while less than 3% take them alone on weekends. **The indicator of multi-drug use** compares the frequency of alcohol consumption in the four weeks preceding the study with present drug use. Four groups stand out. A little less than half the youth use neither drugs nor alcohol, less than 30% only drink less than once a week and 7.6% only drink, but more than once a week. 8% of youth take drugs at the moment and drink less than once a week, and the same percentage takes drugs and drinks more than once a week. To conclude, **the indicator of cigarette smoking** reveals that seven youth in ten are non-smokers, 12% smoke from 0 to 10 cigarettes a week, 6% smoke 11 to 25 and, 11,4% smoke 26 cigarettes or more.

Factors associated with use of toxic substances and suicide.

The purpose of the following section is to compare the different lifestyles among young people with the use of toxic substances and suicidal behaviours. First of all, links between the different substances uses are examined. Then aspects of a youth's life are described using the indicators of multi-substance use. Finally, the different aspects of a youth's life are compared with the indicators of alcohol and cigarette use, as well as with suicidal thoughts and attempts.

First, non-smokers constitute 90% of youth who neither drink (alcohol) nor take drugs, two thirds of those who only drink, and one third of the multi-substance users. We observe that using substances seems to lead to greater use of substances. Moreover, those who drink the most (once a week or more) get drunk more often, drink alone more regularly, and have tried more than one type of drugs, in comparison with those who drink with more moderation. As a matter of fact, almost half the heavy drinkers have tried more than one drug, in comparison with a third among moderate drinkers.

The students who did not take drugs or drink evaluated their personal well-being more positively and seemed to get along better at school, i.e. they were absent less and had better results than those who took drugs and drank. The same phenomenon can be observed in regards to time spent doing homework and aspirations in school. One quarter of non-users spend less than one hour while a little more than half heavy users spend as much. Furthermore, while three-quarters of non-users want to pursue higher education, less than 40% of young drug users have such aspirations. Only four young drug users in ten live in a traditional family. Among drinkers and non-drinkers, between six or seven youth in ten live in this type of family. The education level of the father does not vary according to the groups of users; on the other hand, the mothers of drug users and drinkers have more education. Generally, the quality of the relationships with parents and their presence at home seem to decrease with the use.

In order to better evaluate **drinking** among youth and variables related to it, present drug-takers have been excluded to isolate those who only drink. Getting drunk and/or drinking alone is associated with a reduction of personal well-being. Furthermore, the quality of eating habits and participation in sports are reduced with the increase of use. The reduction of well-being and of the quality of eating habits is more important among girls. Those who drink more than once a week, who drink alone or who get drunk have more problems at school than those who do not. Moreover, regular drinkers more often have a paid job and rarely come from a traditional family, unlike occasional drinkers. Regular drinkers have parents with a higher education who are less severe and less present at home.

As for **smoking**, young people seem to smoke more if they come from a family with smokers or if they have permission to smoke. Heavy smokers pay for their own cigarettes or have their parents buy them more than their friends. Non-smokers have fewer friends who smoke, drink and take drugs. Moreover, smokers eat less healthily, are more stressed and unhappy, have problems and fewer aspirations in school, participate in sports less, more often have a job and live more rarely in a traditional family.

Drinking is clearly associated with an increase of thoughts and attempts of suicide. For instance, if one non-drinker in five has seriously thought about suicide, half of the young people who drink regularly, alone and often get drunk, have had such thoughts. Moreover, non-drinkers attempted suicide five times less than drinkers. The same correlations exist between drug use and suicidal behaviours.

Youth who have considered or attempted suicide eat less healthily, have more difficulty sleeping, enjoy a lesser degree of personal well-being, participate in sports less, have problems in school, rarely live in a traditional family and do not have a very good relationship with their parents.

Conclusion

Although it is reassuring to observe that the majority of young people do not have serious difficulties in their personal, school and family lives, we cannot ignore the fact that they smoke, drink and take drugs, and demonstrate suicidal behaviours. The province of Quebec has one of the highest rates of suicide among youth in the world. In short, there are four main groups of students attending the Montreal Catholic School Board schools: 1) those who seem to have no problems, 2) those who have problems with tobacco, alcohol and drug use only, 3) those who have serious emotional problems which are often related to a poor relationship with parents, and

finally, 4) those who suffer from all these problems in a more severe way. It is therefore difficult to set up uniform intervention strategies. The hard task of preparing a specific report in all of the 25 schools has its reward two-fold: on the one hand, it provides personalized information and, on the other hand, it makes us aware of the fact that what has been described for the whole territory is not necessarily the reflection of local realities.

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