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## **Special Report on Youth, Piercing, Tattooing and Hepatitis C Trendscan findings**

Hepatitis C Division  
Health Canada  
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## **Executive Summary**

Health Canada financed this study of Canadian teenagers aged between 12 and 19 to determine their attitudes and behaviour toward body piercing(s) and tattoos and the potential health risks associated with these behaviours. This study was included as a part of Trendscan, a national survey of 1208 youth via random digit dialling (RDD) which took place between September 24 and November 7, 2000. This survey revealed that:

- body piercing and tattooing are visual cues suggesting that a teen wants to be associated with the experimental, risk-taking community;
- having or wanting a piercing/tattoo correlates strongly with:
  - use of alcohol, cigarettes and marijuana
  - a desire to take risks sometimes
  - an image of being a trendsetter
  - a preference for particular music genres (Goth, Punk, Metal, and Electronica)
  - a higher tendency to “hang out” with friends;
- tattooed teens are more extreme in these categories than pierced teens;
- piercing is far more common (23% are pierced and a further 20% want to be) and it starts at age thirteen. There doesn't appear to be as much of a barrier to getting a piercing as there is with a tattoo;
- more teens indicate wanting a tattoo (21%) than currently have one (8%). However, one of the reasons that comes up for not getting one is the permanence of this decision;
- there is a substantial increase in the number of teens with tattoos at age 18, which corresponds to their being of an age where parental control is removed (often);
- there is an awareness of the potential health risks associated with piercing/tattooing: regular infection, HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C are all noted far more frequently by the group either having or wanting these than by those with no plans for getting either one. But these do not seem to play a role of any significance in the decision to act one way or the other; and
- in both cases, there is a strong skew towards females - further confirmation that these are fashion statements - not the “Macho” symbol that they were in previous generations.

The tattooed and pierced teen emerges as significantly different from the mainstream teen. The tattooed teen (and to a lesser extent the piercing teen) is an early style adopter, generally prone to risky behaviour and likely to be a user of drugs and alcohol. This is a “cool” teen who is a peer influencer in terms of style and behaviour.

## Introduction

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection is a significant public health problem in Canada. Currently, although the precise number of cases of HCV infection is unknown, it is estimated that approximately 240,000 Canadians carry the virus, and of these, only 30% are aware of their infection. Although the majority (60-80%) will be asymptomatic after initial infection, between 75 - 85% will become chronically infected. Of these, 10-20% are expected to develop cirrhosis following a long latency period, which may last up to three decades. With cirrhosis, the risk of developing end-stage liver disease and hepatocellular carcinoma or cancer of the liver is 1 - 5%. It is predicted that the number of cases of hepatitis C infection requiring liver transplants will triple by the year 2008. Furthermore, cases of cirrhosis and end-stage liver disease are also expected to double. Currently there is no vaccine for HCV. It is clear that a significant burden will be placed on Canada's health care system in the upcoming years.<sup>1</sup>

Much has been done to characterize the epidemiology of HCV infection. HCV is transmitted mainly through blood and blood products contaminated with the virus. Injection drug use is the principal source of infection, although percutaneous punctures have been known to happen in occupational settings. Tattoos and body piercings may also present a risk of infection, largely because of inadequate prevention control measures (i.e. poorly cleaned instruments).<sup>2</sup>

Currently, public health sentinel surveillance sites show that 3% of new cases of acute hepatitis C (as presented in clinics in Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg and Ottawa-Carleton) show body piercing or tattooing as risk factors.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Medical Research Council of Canada. Identification of a research agenda for the diagnosis, care and prevention of hepatitis C in Canada: Report to the Minister of Health, The Honourable Allan Rock, June 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Canada Communicable Disease Report (CCDR). *Infection Prevention and Control Practices for Personal Services: Tattooing, Ear/Body Piercing and Electrolysis*. Supplement, Vol. 25S3, July 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Zou, S., Tepper, M, and Giulivi, A. Current status of hepatitis C in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 2000; 91S1:S10-S15.

## Objective

Because of the above, the Hepatitis C Prevention, Support and Research Program undertook a survey of Canadian youth to determine their attitudes and behaviour toward body piercing(s) and tattoos and the potential health risks associated with these behaviours.

## Methodology

This study was included as a part of Trendscan<sup>4</sup>, a national survey of 1208 youth via random digit dialling (RDD) which took place between September 24 and November 7, 2000. In order to qualify, respondents had to be Canadian teens between the ages of 12 and 19. All interviews required a parent's or guardian's permission before proceeding; parents of teens were also asked to provide demographic information. Questionnaire batteries were aggressively rotated to avoid positional bias. The confidence level was 95% and the statistical significance level is +/- 2.8. The full breakout of the total sample among all subgroups is as follows:

Total	Male	Female	12-13	14-15	16-17	18-19	BC	PR	ON	QB	ATL
1208	565	643	299	307	301	301	157	201	449	300	101

The study aimed for a relatively even distribution among gender and age groups. Regional quotas were established based on the total population.

## Results

A clear portrait of the tattooed and pierced teen emerges from the Trendscan data. The clarity of this profile itself indicates that tattoos (and to a lesser extent piercings) are badges of identity and ways in which young people express themselves as individuals. This is supported by the fact that the number one reason teens want a tattoo or piercing is because "It looks good."

The profile of the tattooed teen is similar to that of the pierced teen in many respects, but the tattooed teen is generally farther from the mainstream than is the pierced teen. The tattooed teen is in some respects a more extreme version of the pierced teen.

At the time of the study, 23% of teens aged between 12 and 19 had a piercing and 8% had a tattoo. An additional 20% want a piercing and 21% want a tattoo. Half of the teens have no plans for either.

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<sup>4</sup> Overall Trendscan survey results can only be viewed by contacting Youth Culture Inc. in Toronto, Canada.

- 69% of pierced teens are girls and 61% of tattooed teens are girls;
- the desire for a piercing is also greater in girls (29%) than boys (13%);
- the desire for a tattoo is split somewhat evenly between boys (20%) and girls (22%);
- piercing is initiated at the age of 13; and
- tattoos show a surge at age 15 (5%) and then an increase at age 18 (15%), which probably corresponds to teens being of an age where parental control is removed.

There is a greater number of teens that want tattoos than have them (21% vs. 8%) and there is a greater frequency of tattoos within the 18-19 age group (15%). This combination suggests that tattooing is a trend that is still growing.

Across the regions, attitudes toward piercings and tattoos are consistent, except in Quebec. In Quebec, teens are less likely to have or want piercings and less likely to want tattoos.

The survey reveals that the tattooed and pierced teen is style conscious. This teen is more likely to be interested in rising brand names (e.g. Ecko) than mainstream brands (e.g. Nike). This is supported by the fact that Trendsca's Early Style Adopter ("ESA") is much more likely to have a tattoo or piercing than the mainstream teen. The ESA is profiled in the main Trendsca report. Essentially, the ESA is more style-conscious and risk-taking than the average teen and is a social leader who influences the style behaviour of his or her peers.

In support of this, tattooed teens are more likely to do things "dangerous or forbidden" and are more likely to enjoy entertainment with violence in it.

Tattooed and pierced teens are also more likely than other teens to listen to punk and alternative music. This is possibly due to a connection between the punk and skateboarder cultures and piercing and tattoo styles.

Perhaps the clearest difference between tattooed teens and all teens is their engagement in other risky behaviour. For example, tattoo owners are almost four times as likely to be daily smokers than teens in general, and twice as likely to be weekly drinkers of alcohol.

Regarding perceived health risks, in most cases males and females did not identify hepatitis C as a perceived danger (only 4%), although 11% and 15%, respectively, identified HIV/AIDS. Awareness of both HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C increases as the teen ages (see appendix for details).

## **Quick Facts**

- Owners of tattoos and piercings are more likely to be from households of higher income
- In general, females are more likely to have a tattoo or piercing
- Females are more likely to identify health risks with body piercing, although the proportion of teens who identify hepatitis C as a potential health danger is low
- Piercings increase as teen ages (18% in 12-13yr olds vs 26% in 18-19 yr olds)
- Substantial increase between the 12-13 age group (3%) and the 18-19 age group (15%)
- 18-19 year olds are more likely (7% ) to be aware of hepatitis C as a health risk associated with piercing or tattoos than 12-13 yr olds (2%)
- While our total sample was 57% urban, teens who have or want tattoos and piercings were more heavily urban. For example, tattoo owners were 62% urban and piercing owners were 63% urban, those who want a tattoo were 59% urban, and those who want a piercing were 60% urban
- 67% of teens sampled say they're about the right weight; teens who have or want tattoos and piercings are less likely to agree
- teens who have or want tattoos and piercings are more likely to feel stressed out (54%-57%) than average teens (46%)
- Tattoo owners are less likely to be very happy
- Tattoo owners are more oriented towards rising rather than mainstream style brands (e.g. Ecko)
- Teens who listen to Punk, Rhythm and Blues and Alternative music are more likely to own or want tattoos
- Tattoo owners are more likely to want marijuana to be legalized
- Tattoo owners are more likely to agree with: "From time to time I like to do things that are dangerous or forbidden"
- Tattoo owners are more likely to like entertainment with elements of violence
- Tattoo owners are almost four times as likely to be daily smokers than teens in general, and twice as likely to be weekly drinkers of alcohol.
- Tattoo owners are less confident about their future ten years from now.



## **APPENDIX**

# Frequency of Body Piercing and/or Tattoos

	% Total (1208)	Male (620)	Female (588)	12-13 (296)	14-15 (310)	16-17 (302)	18-19 (300)	BC (157)	PR (201)	ON (449)	QB (300)	ATL (101)	ESA (113)
Yes, have piercing	23	14	32	18	22	24	26	26	26	26	15	20	32
Yes, have tattoo	8	6	9	3	5	7	15	7	8	7	8	6	14
Yes, plan to get piercing	20	13	29	22	21	18	21	24	19	23	16	19	26
Yes, plan to get tattoo	21	20	22	13	21	23	27	22	27	21	17	21	34
No, don't have and don't plan to	48	60	35	58	48	47	39	44	44	46	55	50	34

Among Those Who Have or Intend to Get a Piercing/Tattoo - Top Reasons

# Reasons For Wanting a Tattoo or Piercing

	% Total (630)	Male (249)	Female (380)	12-13 (124)	14-15 (162)	16-17 (159)	18-19 (183)	BC (88)	PR (113)	ON (244)	QB (134)	ATL (51)	ESA (75)
It looks good/I just like them	32	28	34	30	34	32	32	31	25	25	55	21	38
Always wanted one	12	12	12	9	14	15	9	10	21	13	-	21	16
Its cool/in	9	9	9	24	7	6	4	11	12	11	1	15	3
Expression of my individuality	6	6	6	2	6	9	5	7	5	5	7	6	6
For the fun of it	5	6	4	2	4	6	6	5	3	5	5	2	7
Peer pressure/everyone's doing it	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	5	3	4	2	2	1
Just to display symbol/art form that I like	3	4	2	1	2	2	5	1	1	4	2	2	-
Make a statement	2	2	1	1	1	3	2	3	2	2	1	2	1

Top Mentions

# Perceived Dangers Associated with Piercing/Tattoos

	% Total (1208)	Male (620)	Female (588)	12-13 (296)	14-15 (310)	16-17 (302)	18-19 (300)	BC (157)	PR (201)	ON (449)	QB (300)	ATL (101)	ESA (113)
Regular infection	53	48	58	46	51	57	56	63	58	57	38	51	62
HIV/AIDS infection	13	11	15	8	11	15	18	9	13	12	15	17	13
Disease (unspecified)	8	7	9	6	7	8	11	10	7	8	8	8	6
Ink in blood/poisoning	5	6	5	7	4	5	6	5	8	6	1	13	4
Cancer	4	5	4	6	5	5	1	2	3	3	8	5	2
Hepatitis C infection/Hepatitis B	4	4	4	2	3	3	7	3	6	3	4	2	6
Skin allergy/reaction/effects/rash	3	1	5	5	2	3	3	1	3	4	2	3	2
Using unclean needles	2	2	3	2	2	2	4	4	2	3	*	3	5
Paralysis/numbness	2	2	2	1	2	3	2	3	3	1	2	1	7
Pinch nerve/damage	2	1	3	1	2	2	3	2	2	2	*	3	3

# Frequency of Activity - Smoke Cigarettes

- Over three-quarters of teens claim that they never smoke cigarettes.
  - Those least likely to smoke are teens aged 12 and 13 - 95% stated that they never smoke.
- Among the heaviest smokers (i.e. smoking daily) are teens aged 18 and 19 (24%) and Early Style Adopters (20%).

	<b>% Total</b> <b>(1208)</b>	<b>Male</b> <b>(565)</b>	<b>Female</b> <b>(643)</b>	<b>12-13</b> <b>(299)</b>	<b>14-15</b> <b>(307)</b>	<b>16-17</b> <b>(301)</b>	<b>18-19</b> <b>(301)</b>	<b>BC</b> <b>(157)</b>	<b>PR</b> <b>(201)</b>	<b>ON</b> <b>(449)</b>	<b>QB</b> <b>(300)</b>	<b>ATL</b> <b>(101)</b>	<b>ESA</b> <b>(113)</b>
Daily	12	10	15	1	7	18	24	11	13	13	14	8	20
Weekly	3	2	3	2	2	3	5	3	2	2	5	1	3
Less once a week	2	2	1	-	2	2	3	2	3	1	2	2	2
Less than once a month	5	4	5	3	5	6	4	3	5	4	5	6	11
Never	78	81	75	95	84	70	65	82	77	79	75	83	64



# Frequency of Activity - Smoke Marijuana

- More than three-quarters of teens indicate that they never smoke marijuana.
  - As with the other substances evaluated, usage of marijuana increases greatly with age.
  - Younger teens and teens living in the Atlantic are the least likely to smoke pot at all (98% and 87% respectively).
  - Older teens and Early Style Adopters are among the most likely to smoke pot to some extent.

	% Total (1208)	Male (565)	Female (643)	12-13 (299)	14-15 (307)	16-17 (301)	18-19 (301)	BC (157)	PR (201)	ON (449)	QB (300)	ATL (101)	ESA (113)
Daily	2	3	1	-	2	3	5	3	2	2	4	-	5
Weekly	6	7	4	1	6	8	9	7	6	5	7	4	9
Less once a week	4	4	3	-	4	5	6	3	2	3	7	2	4
Less than once a month	10	10	10	1	7	17	15	10	14	9	10	7	20
Never	78	75	81	98	82	67	65	77	77	81	72	87	62