



Backgrounder: Improving the Health and Well-Being of Canada's Youth

Toward a Healthy Future: Second Report on the Health of Canadians summarizes the most current information we have on the health of Canadians and the factors that influence or “determine” health. It suggests several priority areas for action in the new millennium.

A number of things are going well for young Canadians. For example, youth volunteering has increased dramatically and the number of young women completing post-secondary levels of education is at its highest point ever. At the same time, *Toward a Healthy Future* alerts to us some conditions affecting the psychosocial well-being of Canada's youth.

Highlights

- ◆ In contrast to the high levels of physical health enjoyed by most young people, psychological well-being is, on average, lowest among this age group. Young Canadians aged 18 and 19 were the most likely to report high stress levels (37%) and to report being depressed. Young women aged 15 to 19 were the most likely of any age-sex group to show signs of depression (9%).
- ◆ The 1996 suicide rate of 19 per 100,000 among young men aged 15 to 19 was almost twice as high as the 1970 rate. Suicide rates among young men aged 20 to 24 were even higher (29 per 100,000). The suicide rate for Aboriginal youth is much higher than for their peers in the general population. As in the case of the population at large, young men are the most likely to commit suicide.
- ◆ Despite some recent improvements, youth unemployment and underemployment rates remain high.
- ◆ Between 1990 and 1995, the proportion of young people aged 18 to 24 (with their families or alone) who lived in low-income situations (i.e. below Statistics Canada low-income cut-offs) increased from 21% to 26%.
- ◆ Education is often an important factor in determining whether young people obtain jobs that enable them to support themselves and their families. Young people who leave school before high school graduation (22% of young men and 14% of young women in 1995) are more likely to dislike school, to have failed a grade in the past, to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and to be young parents.
- ◆ Young women aged 12 to 17 are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse by a family member or date. Young women aged 18 to 24 are most likely of all age groups to report being assaulted by an intimate partner.
- ◆ Despite recent high profile events of youth violence, in 1997, the percentage of young people aged 12 to 17 charged with *Criminal Code* offences dropped 7% from the previous year. The 1997 rate, however, was still more than double that of a decade ago.

- ◆ Over the last 10 years, the rate of young women charged with violent crimes has increased twice as fast as that of young men; however, young men are still three times more likely than young women to be charged with violent crimes.

Risk Taking by Young People

- ◆ Increased risk taking among young people may be a reflection of reduced opportunities and increased pressures to succeed.
- ◆ Unintentional injuries, most often due to motor vehicle collisions, are the leading cause of death and disability among young people.
- ◆ Teenagers are the only age group in which smoking levels continue to increase. Young women aged 12 to 17 are more likely than young men the same age to smoke. Many of them report that they smoke to manage stress and control their weight.
- ◆ Underage drinking and the combined use of alcohol, tobacco and cannabis increased dramatically between 1991 and 1998 in several provinces.
- ◆ In 1996–97, almost 50% of sexually active young people aged 20 to 24 and 40% of young people aged 15 to 19 reported an inconsistent or non-use of condoms.

Investing in the Well-Being of Canada's Young People

Young people themselves must be involved in identifying both problems and solutions, and in providing input to policy and program decisions related to their well-being.

Key strategies to address this priority include:

- ◆ **Helping young people prepare for intimate relationships and family life.** Young people who are ready for intimate relationships respect each other and share roles between the sexes. Family members are young people's most important role models. Older peers and adult leaders in schools, the community, media and sport and recreation programs can also help young people learn to form and maintain relationships. At the same time, school and community programs are needed to help young men and women prepare for parenting.
- ◆ **Helping young people make a successful transition from school to meaningful employment.** A number of factors may help young people stay in school: stimulation in early childhood, nurturing schools that promote success, involved parents who value education, community support for troubled young people, efforts to prevent teen pregnancy and increased financial support (debt relief) for students who wish to attend universities and colleges. Mentoring, cooperative education, apprenticeship programs and school curricula that teach generic work-related skills can also help young people make a smoother transition from school to work.
- ◆ **Helping young people prepare to participate in community life.** Partnerships among schools, community agencies, businesses and parents are an effective way to help young people learn the civic and social skills they need for adulthood. Community service and volunteer work give youth an opportunity to develop meaningful roles, to apply academic learning in real life situations, to learn job skills such as cooperation and decision-making, to develop self-respect and to earn the respect of the community.

- ◆ **Making the healthy choices the easy choices.** Programs to address and reverse risk-taking behaviours are needed. At the same time, we need to recognize that personal lifestyle choices are linked to the capacity of homes, schools, communities, workplaces and governments to make “the healthy choices, the easy choices”. Crowded housing, neighbourhoods where there may be drug dealing, isolated living conditions with little to do, and threatening school environments contribute to increased violence, youth misuse of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, and increased feelings of alienation and depression. Involving young people in the healing process is critical.

For More Information

Toward a Healthy Future: Second Report on the Health of Canadians was developed by the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health in collaboration with Health Canada, Statistics Canada, the Canadian Institute for Health Information and the Centre for Health Promotion, University of Toronto. The full text can be found on the Health Canada Web site: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca>. Printed copies of the *Report* are available from Provincial and Territorial Ministries of Health or from:

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