

School Disconnectedness, Substance Use, and Mental Health: Is There an Association?

This *eBulletin* describes the percentage of Ontario students who do not feel connected to their school and the association with substance use and mental health. Data are from the 2013 *Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey* (OSDUHS). The OSDUHS is a repeated, cross-sectional, anonymous survey of students in grades 7 through 12 in Ontario, with the purpose of monitoring drug use, mental and physical health, gambling, and other risk behaviours. Conducted every two years since 1977, the OSDUHS is the longest ongoing school survey in Canada and one of the longest running in the world.

School Disconnectedness

For this *eBulletin*, school disconnectedness was defined as (1) not liking school, (2) not feeling close to the people at school, and (3) not feeling like part of their school. Combining these three indicators, about 2.8% of Ontario students in grades 7–12 feel disconnected to their school (see Figure 1). This percentage represents about 27,400 students. Males and females are equally likely to feel disconnected (2.5% and 3.1%, respectively). Students in secondary school (grades 9–12) are significantly more likely to feel disconnected to their school compared with students in grades 7 and 8 (3.4% vs. 1.0%, respectively).

Substance Use

As shown in Figure 2, students who feel disconnected to school are significantly more likely to report smoking tobacco cigarettes, drinking alcohol, and using cannabis in the past year than students who feel connected. These significant associations between disconnectedness and substance use held even after adjusting for sex and grade of student.

Figure 1
Percentage of Ontario Students in Grades 7–12 Feeling Disconnected to School, by Sex and Grade Level, 2013 OSDUHS (n=10,272)

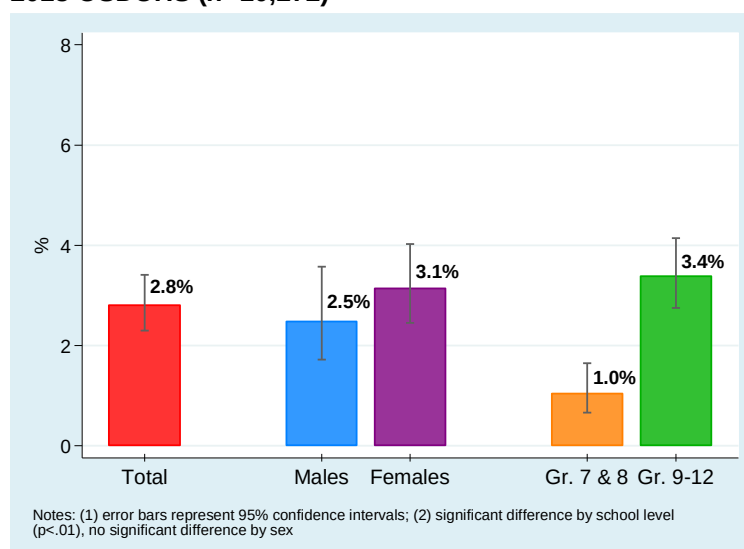
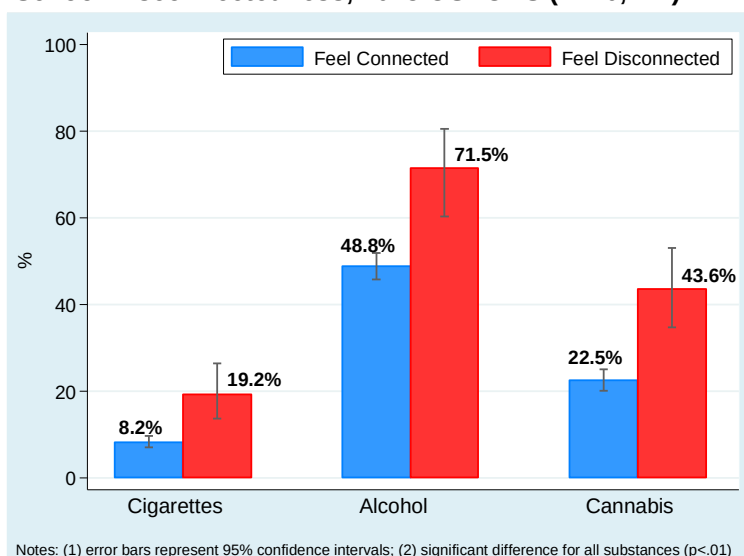


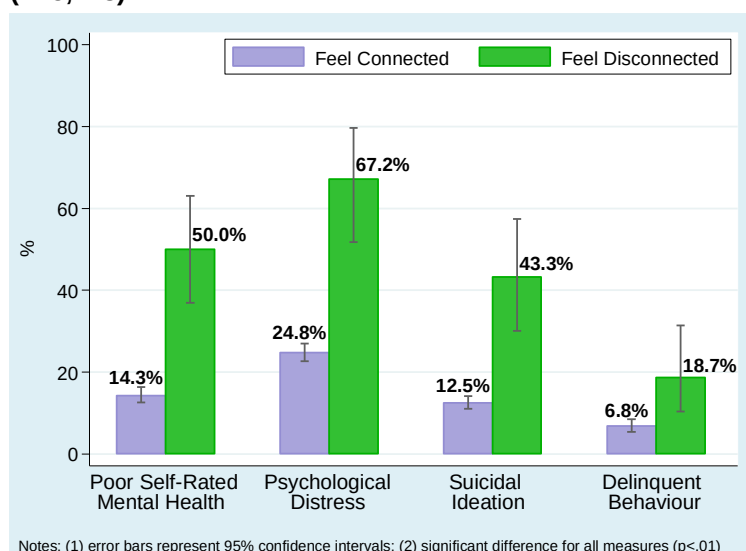
Figure 2
Percentage of Ontario Students in Grades 7–12 Reporting Past Year Substance Use According to School Disconnectedness, 2013 OSDUHS (n=10,272)



Mental Health

As shown in Figure 3, students who feel disconnected from school are significantly more likely to rate their mental health as poor/fair, to report psychological distress, suicidal ideation, and delinquent behaviour in the past year. These significant associations between disconnectedness and poorer mental health and delinquent behaviour held even after adjusting for sex and grade of student.

Figure 3
Percentage of Ontario Students in Grades 7–12 Reporting Mental Health Indicators and Delinquent Behaviour According to School Disconnectedness, 2013 OSDUHS (n=5,478)



Suggested Citation

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Methods

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS) is an Ontario-wide survey of elementary/middle school students in grades 7 and 8 and secondary school students in grades 9 through 12. This repeated cross-sectional survey has been conducted every two years since 1977. The 2013 survey, which used a stratified (region by school level) two-stage (school, class) cluster design, was based on **10,272 students in grades 7 through 12** from 42 public and Catholic school board districts, 198 schools, and 671 classes. Self-completed questionnaires, which promote anonymity, were group administered by staff from the Institute for Social Research, York University in classrooms between November 2012 and June 2013. Sixty-one percent (61%) of selected schools, 87% of selected classes, and 63% of eligible students in participating classes completed the survey. The 2013 total sample of 10,272 students is representative of just under one million students in grades 7 through 12 enrolled in Ontario's provincially funded schools.

All estimates were weighted, and variance and statistical tests were accommodated for the complex survey data. Logistic regression tests of significant differences according to school disconnectedness adjusted for sex and grade. The mental health and delinquency measures were asked of a random half sample of students and therefore those analyses were based on a sample size (n) of 5,478.

Measures & Terminology

- **School disconnectedness** was defined as (1) responding not liking school "very much" or "at all" to the question "How do you feel about going to school?"; (2) responding "somewhat disagree" or "strongly disagree" to the statement "I feel close to people at this school."; and (3) responding "somewhat disagree" or "strongly disagree" to the statement "I feel like I am part of this school."
- **Poor self-rated mental health** was defined as responding "fair" or "poor" to the question "How would you rate your mental or emotional health?"
- **Psychological distress** (symptoms of depression and anxiety during the past four weeks) was measured with the *Kessler-10 Psychological Distress Scale* (K10). A moderate or high level of distress was defined as a score of 22 or higher of a maximum 50.
- **Delinquent behaviour** was defined as participating in three or more of nine behaviours (e.g., theft, vandalism, assault, car theft/joyriding, drug selling) at least once in the past 12 months.
- **95% confidence interval** shows the probable accuracy of the estimate – that is, with repeated sampling, 95 of 100 sample CIs would contain the "true" population value. Design-based confidence intervals account for characteristics of the sample design (i.e., stratification, clustering, weighting).
- **Statistically significant difference** refers to a difference between (or among) estimates that is statistically different at the $p < .01$ level, or lower, after adjusting for the sampling design. A finding of statistical significance implies that any differences are not likely due to chance alone; it is not necessarily a finding of public health importance

Source

Boak, A., Hamilton, H. A., Adlaf, E. M., Beitchman, J. H., Wolfe, D. & Mann, R. E. (2014). *The mental health and well-being of Ontario students, 1991–2013: Detailed OSDUHS findings* (CAMH Research Document Series No. 38). Toronto, ON: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. [Available online at <http://www.camh.ca/research/osduhs>]