

# British Columbians weigh in on the overdose crisis and youth substance use prevention

July 2020 Public Poll



**Inner Change**  
FOUNDATION

## Introduction

**Youth are more vulnerable to addictions and mental health problems than any other age group.** In British Columbia, there has been a concerning increase of overdose deaths among youth, with over 20% of overdose cases this year occurring in youth and young adults under the age of 30. Moreover, overdose incidents and fatalities among youth under 19 are rising.

Youth are at high risk of overdose especially because of a low opiate tolerance, fluctuating explorative patterns of use, and a lack of age-appropriate addiction treatment, substitution treatment and individualized mental health support. In light of the ongoing overdose crisis and unprecedented numbers of illicit drug-related deaths from May to July 2020, there is a pressing need to critically evaluate our current approach to substance use prevention and treatment.

The InnerChange Foundation coordinated a survey to gather opinions from British Columbians about awareness and perceptions regarding substance use, prevention, and related educational programs, particularly those targeted for youth. This report summarizes results of the survey which was conducted in July 2020 by The Mustel Group. It was conducted from a panel generated through a random-sample, targeting three age groups: 1) 12-17 years; 2) 18-24 years; 3) 25 years and over. A total of 659 individuals participated.



# Sample Population



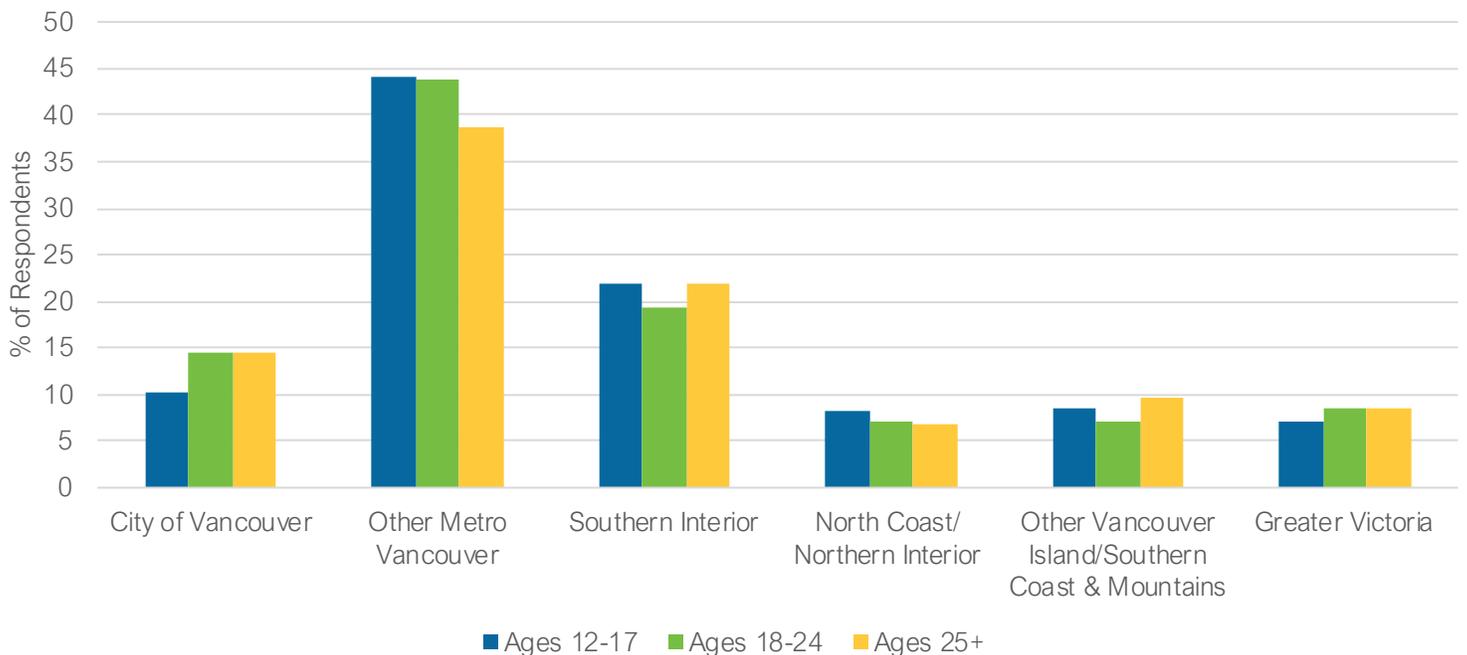
**Youth currently attending high school**  
 Ages 12-17  
 80 men, 76 women  
 156 total responses

**Young adults**  
 Ages 18-24  
 53 men, 50 women, 1 other  
 103 total responses

**Adults**  
 Ages 25+  
 193 men, 206 women, 1 other  
 400 total responses

Regions surveyed included the City of Vancouver, Other Metro Vancouver, Southern Interior (Thompson/Okanagan/Kootenay/Fraser Valley), North Coast/Northern Interior (Cariboo & North), Other Vancouver Island/Southern Coast & Mountains, and Greater Victoria.

Regional Representation per Age Group:



## Opioid crisis hits close to home

The province declared the opioid overdose crisis as a public health emergency in 2016. The overdose crisis is affecting our peers and touching the lives of British Columbians.

29% of young adults said a peer aged 18-24 had experienced a drug overdose.  
38% of adults 25+ know someone personally who has had an overdose.



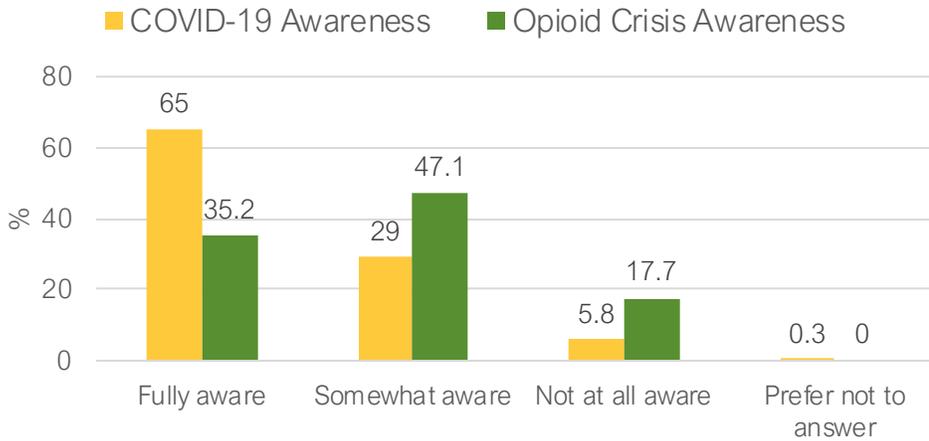
150 out of 400 adults surveyed indicated they know someone personally who has had an overdose. In a follow-up survey administered 1 week later, 101 confirmed and agreed to provide further details.

73% indicated that to their knowledge, the individual was using drugs on a regular basis for longer than 6 months, 12.5% said it was an accident while exploring drugs, and 14% didn't know.

Those who are at risk for overdose need to be in treatment, but only approximately 24% are in treatment: 24% said individual was in treatment, 55% no treatment, 21% didn't know.

# Awareness

Despite overdose deaths reaching record highs in B.C., in contrast to awareness about COVID-19, the awareness about the opioid overdose crisis is lower.



Almost 95% have some awareness about COVID-19 related deaths in B.C., which is 177 as of July 3, 2020. For the estimated 5,565 overdose deaths in B.C. from 2016 to May 31, 2020, 82% have some awareness. In the past month of May 2020, there were 170 overdose deaths in B.C., the highest number in any given month. 80% said that they have some awareness of this fact.

**58% felt the public health response to the drug overdose crisis in B.C. has been somewhat insufficient or not sufficient at all.**



# Knowledge

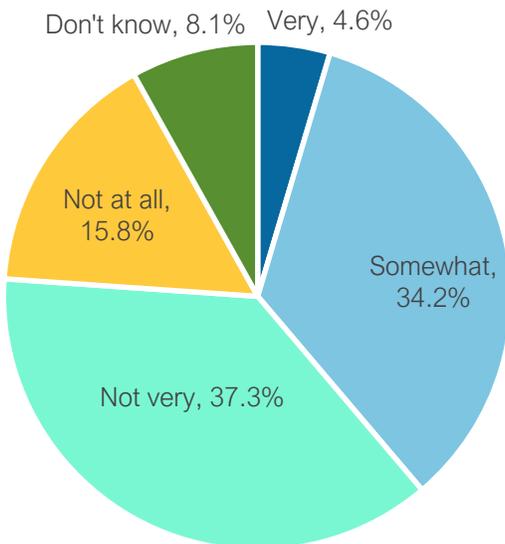
Our youth need more knowledge about high risk substance use, overdose, ways to recognize and mitigate an overdose situation and the relationship between mental health and substance use.



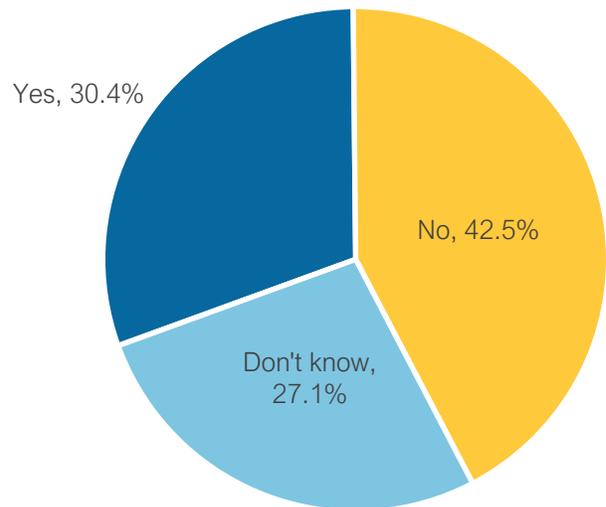
These data demonstrate that despite the continuing rise of overdose occurrences in B.C., under 40% of youth have confidence in recognizing that a person is having a drug overdose, while only 30% are aware of ways that a person who uses drugs can decrease the chance of an overdose. Moreover, one third of the young adults said that they have not been taught about different addictive substances in school.

**For youth enrolled in high school in B.C., 30% said they have not learned about different addictive substances from teachers in school.**

How confident are you in knowing how to tell if a person is having a drug overdose?

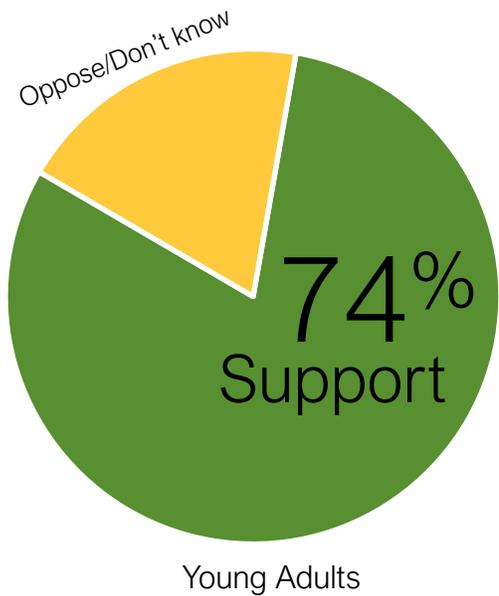


Are you aware of any ways that a person who uses drugs can decrease the chance of an overdose?

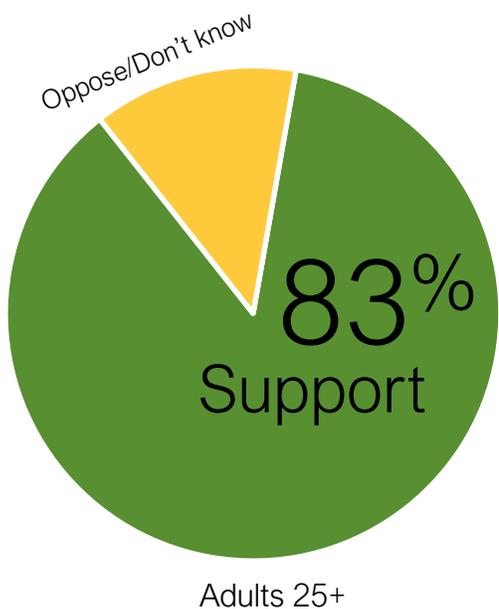
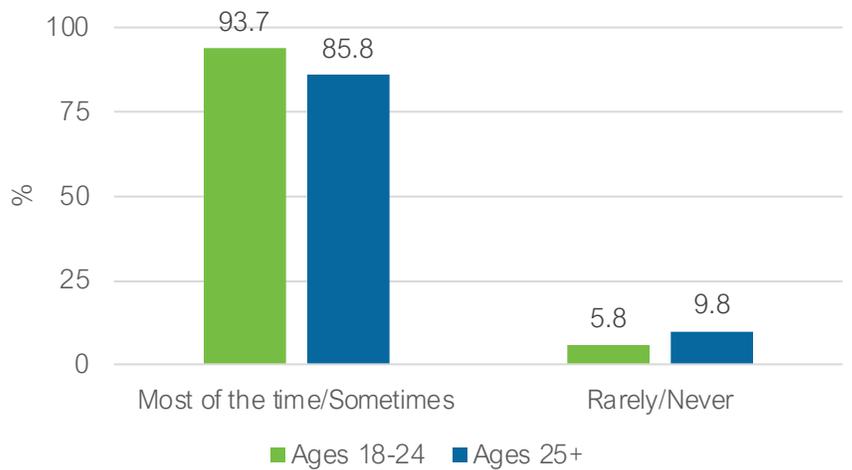


# Prevention Programs

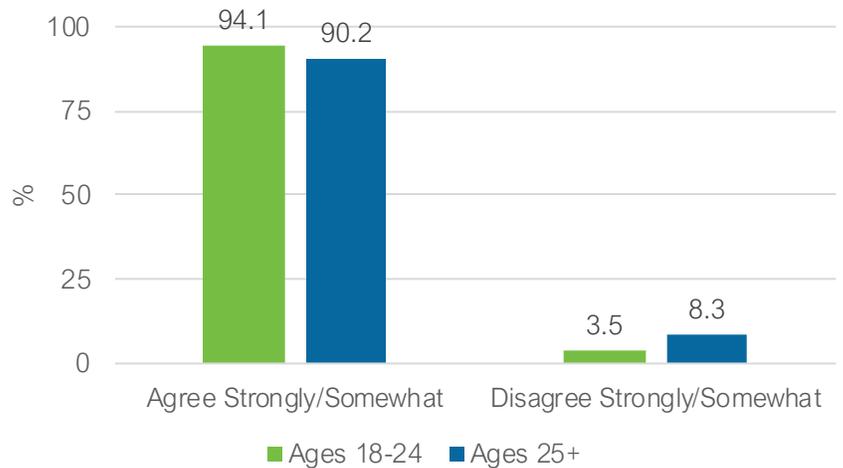
74% of young adults and 83% of 25+ are supportive of our provincial government making prevention of high-risk substance use and overdose a higher priority and spending a larger budget on it.



Do you think addiction to high-risk substances is preventable?



To what extent do you agree that effective preventive strategies could save healthcare money by having fewer people need treatment for drug addiction?

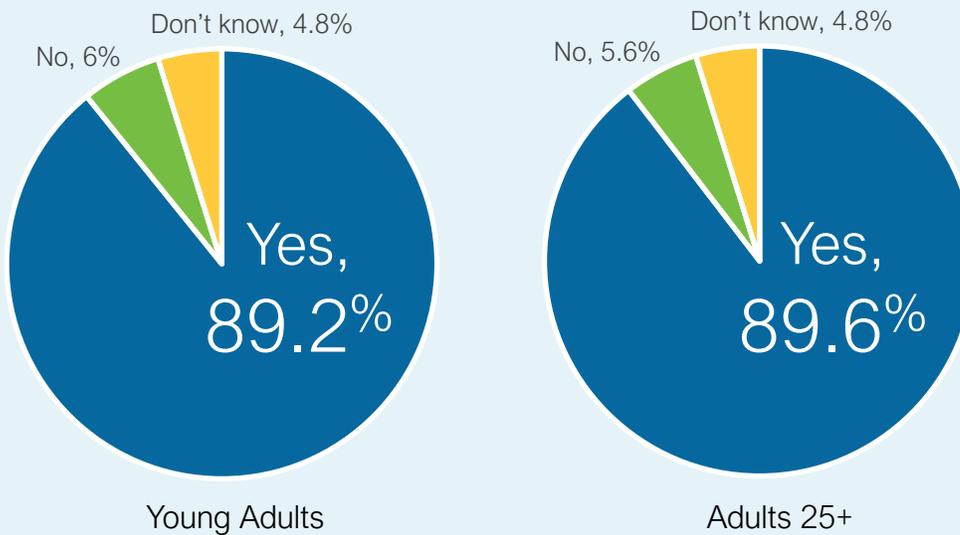


# Implementation in High School

Prevention programs delivered in high school can influence later decisions and behaviours towards substance use.

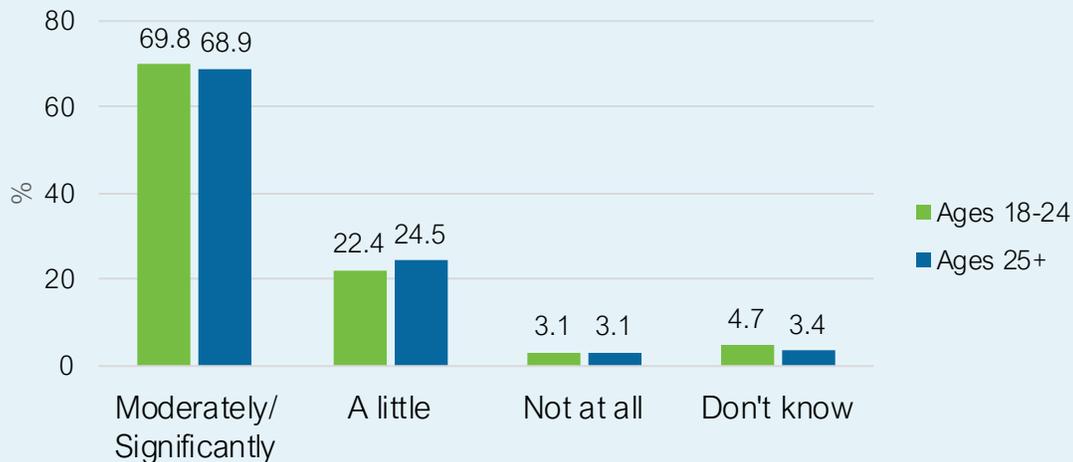
Among the young adults (aged 18-24) surveyed, 67% did recall attending talks or programs at their school about drug overdose and of those individuals, 66% said this information had an influence on their decisions and behaviors about substance use. 87% support the implementation of an accessible online prevention program with mental health content to help youth learn about substance use prevention into the school curriculum.

Should drug prevention programs be part of the high school curriculum?



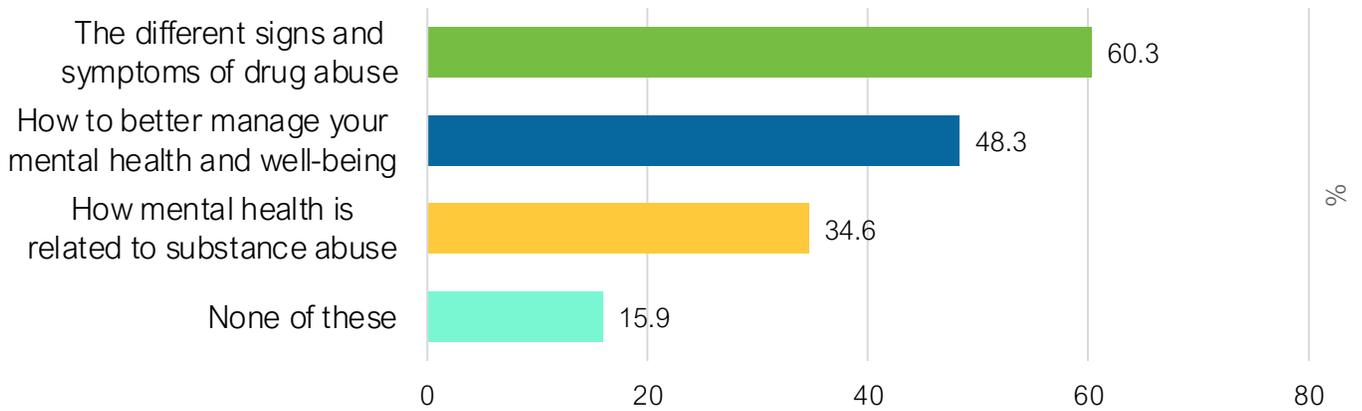
90% of respondents think that drug prevention programs should be a part of the high school curriculum.

To what extent do you think youth-targeted drug use prevention strategies (for youth aged 12-24) could reduce our current overdose crisis in B.C.?

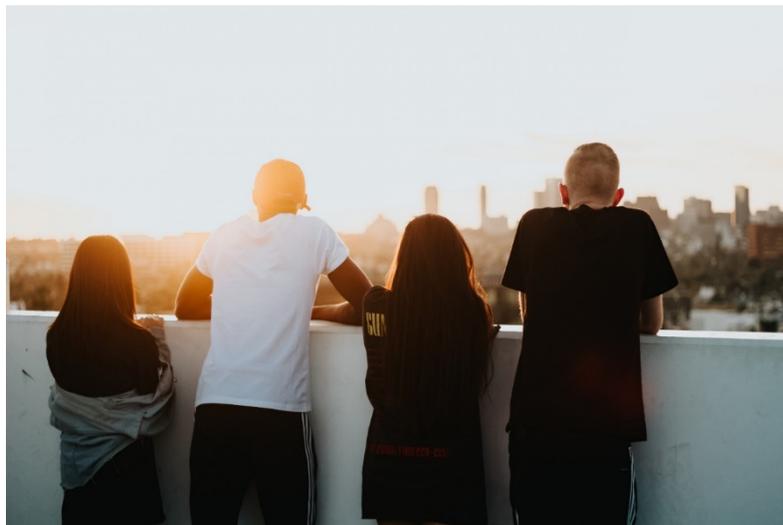
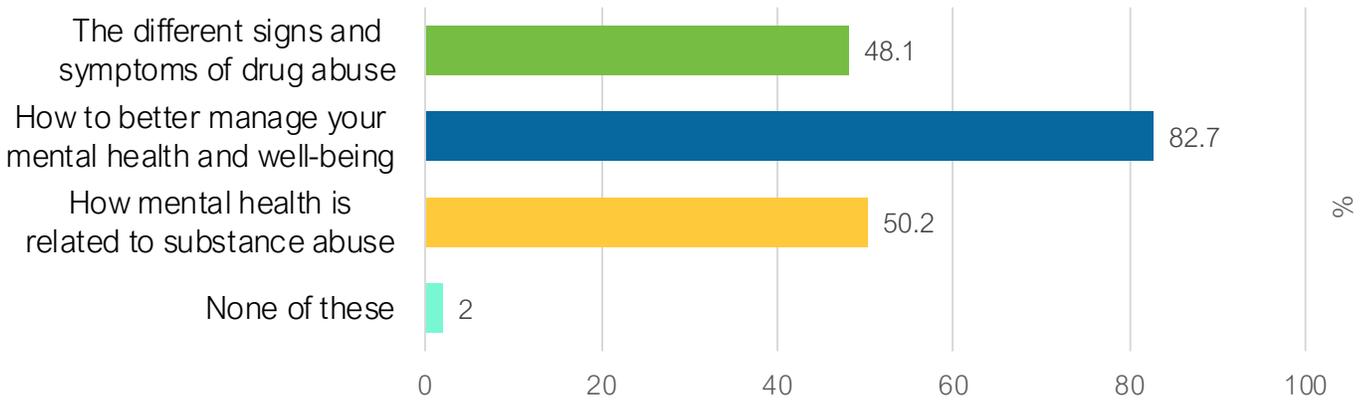


# Educating Youth

Youth want to learn to recognize a drug overdose, to better manage their mental health and well-being, and about how mental health is related to substance use.



In hindsight, most young adults also indicated they would have wanted a more intensive program in high school.



## Summary

The year 2020 has brought about significant changes to populations worldwide. Here in British Columbia, the COVID-19 pandemic is one of two public health crises. 58% of British Columbians feel the public health response to the drug overdose crisis in B.C. has been somewhat insufficient or not sufficient at all. Over 1 in 3 adults in B.C. know someone personally who has had an overdose and of those individuals, less than 25% were receiving treatment for their ongoing addiction.

An overwhelming majority agree that the provincial government should increase spending on making prevention of high-risk substance use and overdose a higher priority. Close to 90% support implementing mental health and substance use prevention programs into the high school curriculum.

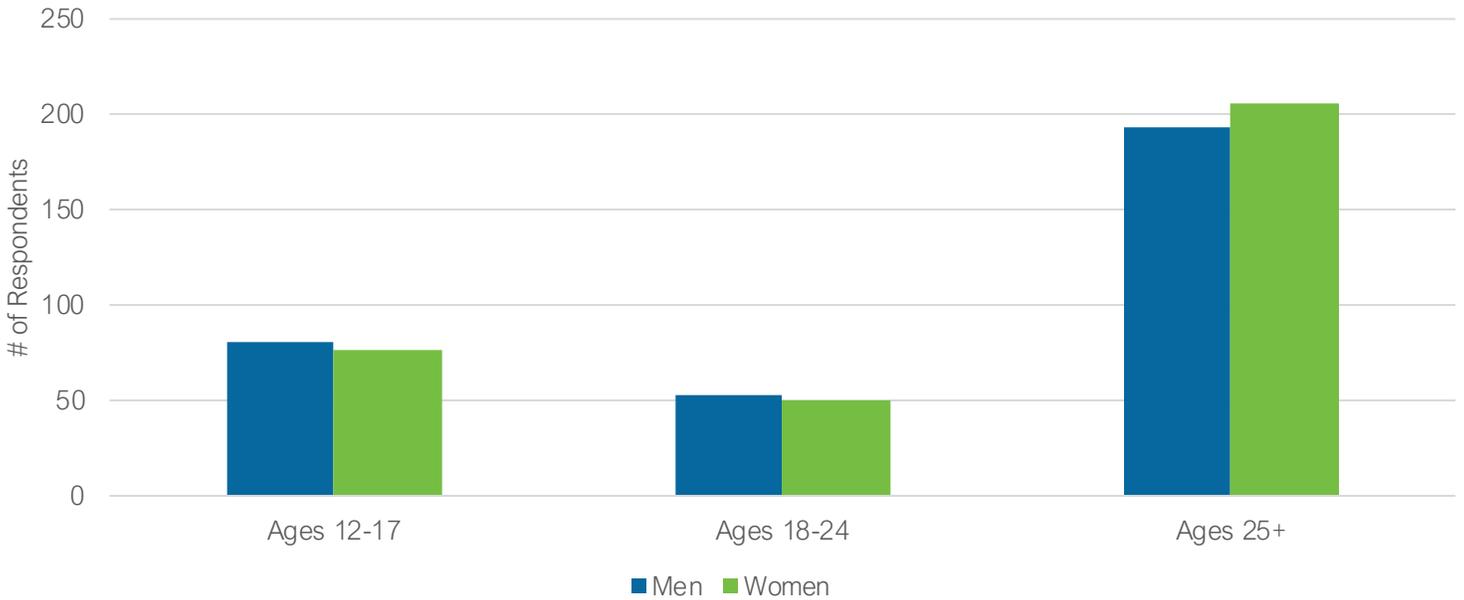
Youth themselves want more knowledge about high risk substance use, overdose, ways to recognize and mitigate an overdose situation and the relationship between mental health and substance use. Interestingly, a majority of young adults felt they would have benefited from having a more intensive program in high school about managing their mental health and substance use.

The InnerChange Foundation appreciates that making difficult policy decisions requires a range of facts and opinions. We hope the results of this survey, obtained through the generous work of Mustel Group, will provide further incentive to our officials for exploring new solutions. We also hope that these results can provide the catalyst for increased funding, to ensure that British Columbians in need receive the help they deserve. Mental health, substance use, and overdose are not fringe issues – they harm British Columbians from all walks of life. We can and we must do more.

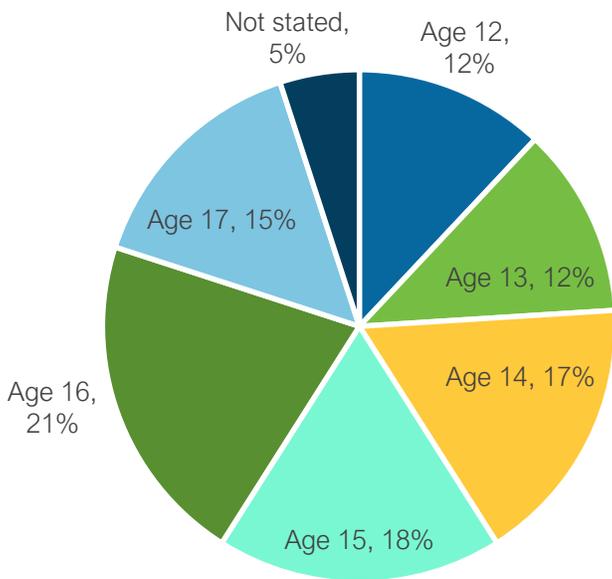


# Appendix

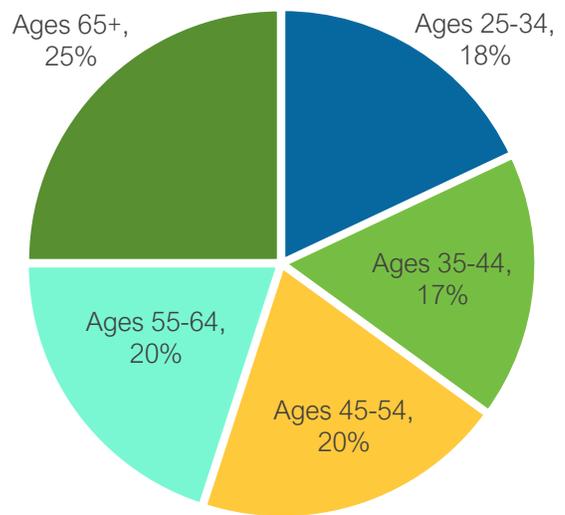
Gender Representation per Age Group:



Results were weighted proportionate to census data on gender, age groups, and regional representation.



Ages of Youth in High School



Different Age Groups of Adults 25+

**Full details of poll results are available upon request.  
Contact: [info@InnerChangeFoundation.org](mailto:info@InnerChangeFoundation.org)**