

How Many Ontario Students Go to School or Bed Hungry?

This *eBulletin* looks at the prevalence of food insecurity, defined here as going to school or bed hungry, and related problems experienced by students in Ontario. Data are from the 2015 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS). The OSDUHS is a repeated, cross-sectional, anonymous survey of students in grades 7–12 in Ontario, with the purpose of monitoring drug use, mental health, 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.

As seen in Figure 1, the majority (76.5%) of students in grades 7–12 reported that they never go to school or bed hungry. At the other end of the spectrum, about 4.6% (95% CI: 3.9%–5.5%) reported that they often or always go to school or bed hungry. This percentage represents about 43,800 students in Ontario. The likelihood of going to school or bed hungry often or always did not significantly differ by sex, grade, or region of the province. Students living with one parent were more likely to report going to school or bed hungry often or always compared with students living with two parents (7.0% vs 4.0%, respectively). There was also a significant difference between students attending schools in rural areas versus suburban or urban areas (7.1% vs 4.5%, respectively).

As seen in Figure 2, compared with students who reported never or sometimes going to school or bed hungry, those who reported often or always going to school or bed hungry were more likely to report the following problems: poor marks at school, not liking school, getting less than eight hours of sleep on a school night, poor self-rated physical and mental health, elevated stress, and serious psychological distress.

Figure 1
Percentage of Ontario Students in Grades 7–12 Reporting the Frequency of Going to School or Bed Hungry, 2015 OSDUHS

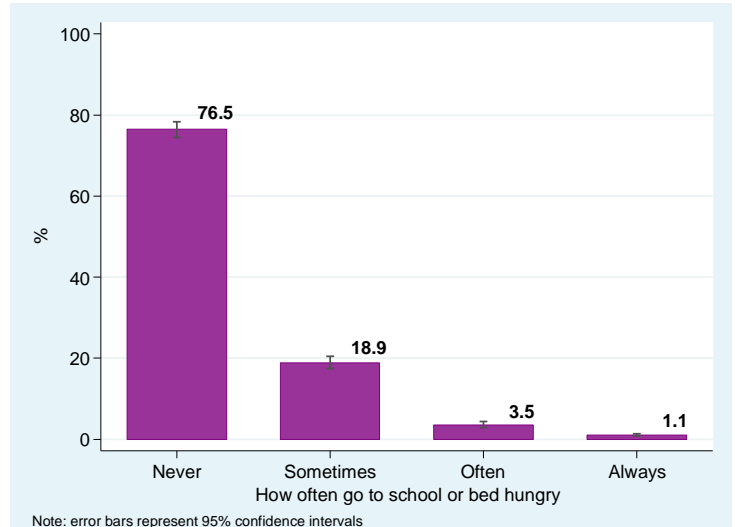
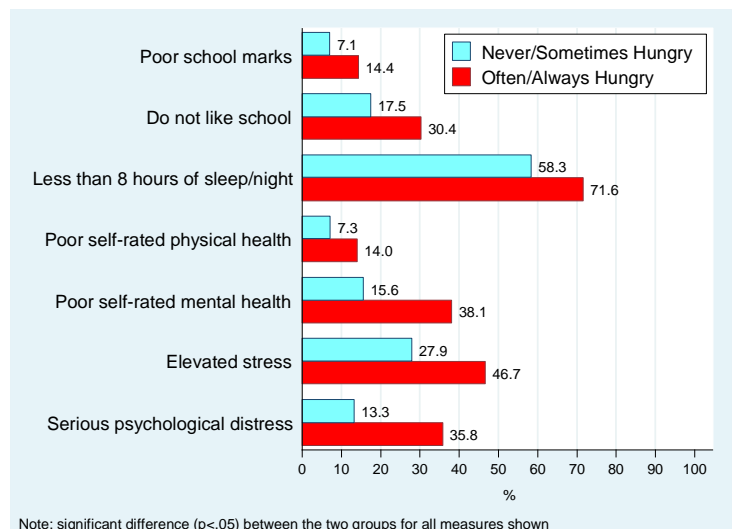


Figure 2
Problems Experienced by Students Often or Always Going to School or Bed Hungry, 2015 OSDUHS (Grades 7–12)



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 2015 survey, which used a stratified (region by school level) two-stage (school, class) cluster design, was based on **10,426 students in grades 7 through 12** in 750 classes, in 220 schools, in 43 public and Catholic school boards. Self-completed questionnaires, which promote anonymity, were group administered by staff from the Institute for Social Research, York University in classrooms between November 2014 and June 2015. Sixty-three percent (63%) of selected schools, 88% of selected classes, and 59% of eligible students in participating classes completed the survey. Students in French-language schools completed French questionnaires. The 2015 total sample of 10,426 students is representative of just under one million students in grades 7 to 12 enrolled in Ontario's English and French publicly funded schools.

All estimates were weighted, and variance and statistical tests were accommodated for the complex survey data. Logistic regression tests of significant differences in mental health and other problem indicators between the two food insecurity groups shown in Figure 2 controlled for sex, grade, region, and living in a one-parent household.

Measures & Terminology

- **Food insecurity** was measured with the question "Some young people go to school or to bed hungry because there is not enough food in the home. How often does this happen to you?" The response options were "always," "often," "sometimes," or "never."
- **Poor school marks** was defined as reporting usually receiving marks of less than 70% in school.
- **Do not like school** was defined as responding "I don't like school very much" or "I don't like school at all" to the question "Some people like school very much while others don't. How do you feel about going to school?"
- **Poor self-rated physical health** was defined as responding "fair" or "poor" to the question "How would you rate your physical health?"
- **Poor self-rated mental health** was defined as responding "fair" or "poor" to the question "How would you rate your mental or emotional health?"
- **Elevated stress** was defined as responding "Yes, a lot" or "Yes, almost more than I could take" to the question "In the last 4 weeks, did you feel that you were under any stress, strain, or pressure?"
- **Serious psychological distress** (symptoms of depression and anxiety) was measured with the *Kessler-6 Psychological Distress Scale* (K6). Serious psychological distress experienced during the past four weeks is defined as scoring 13 or higher out of a total of 24.
- **Region:** The survey design divided the province into the following four regions: Toronto; Northern Ontario (Parry Sound District, Nipissing District and farther north); Western Ontario (Peel District, Dufferin County and farther west); and Eastern Ontario (Simcoe County, York County and farther east).

(continued...)

- **95% CI** (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 $p < .05$ 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., Henderson, J. L., & Mann, R. E. (2016). *The mental health and well-being of Ontario students, 1991–2015: Detailed OSDUHS findings* (CAMH Research Document Series No. 43). Toronto, ON: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. [Available online at <http://www.camh.ca/research/osduhs>]

Suggested Citation

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. (2017, June). How many Ontario students go to school or bed hungry? *CAMH Population Studies eBulletin*, 18(2). Retrieved from www.camh.ca/en/research/news_and_publications/Pages/research_population_ebulletins.aspx

For information about CAMH's population health surveys, please visit our webpage:

www.camh.ca/en/research/research_areas/institute-mh-policy-research/Pages/population_health_surveys.aspx

Media Enquiries: please email media@camh.ca