

Demographic Correlates of Early Substance Use

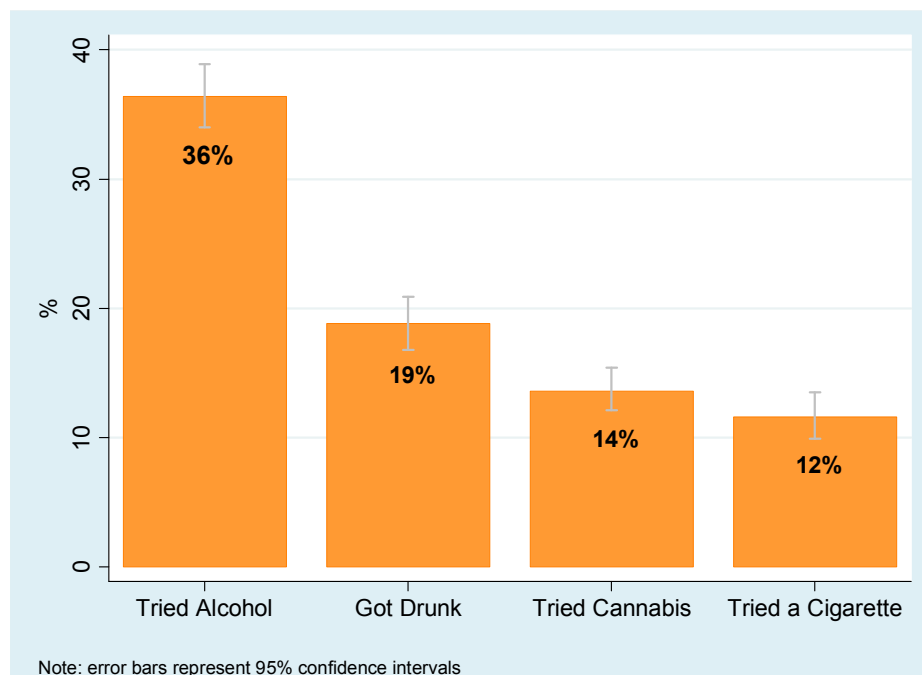
This *eBulletin* examines who uses or tries substances at an early age, based on data from the 2009 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS). The OSDUHS is an Ontario-wide school survey of students in grades 7 to 12 that repeats every two years. Early substance use is defined here as use before grade 9 (about age 14), therefore the findings are based only on students in grades 9 to 12, and exclude the 7th- and 8th-graders. Early substance use is known to be an important risk factor for subsequent problems during late adolescence and/or adulthood, such as substance dependence, school problems, and mental health problems.

As seen in Figure 1, just over one-third (36%; 95% CI: 34%-39%) of all high school students reported trying

alcohol (more than just a few sips) before entering high school. About one-in-five (19%; 95% CI: 17%-21%) reported getting drunk at least once before entering high school, 14% (95% CI: 12%-15%) reported trying cannabis, and 12% (95% CI: 10%-13%) reported smoking a whole cigarette.

Figures 2 to 5 presents the percentage of high school students who reported early substance use according to sex, region, and suburban/urban location versus rural. Overall, males were significantly more likely than females to report early use of alcohol, getting drunk, and cannabis use. There was no significant sex difference for early smoking.

Figure 1.
Percentage of Ontario High School Students (Grades 9-12) Who Reported Trying Alcohol, Getting Drunk, Trying Cannabis, and Trying a Cigarette Before 9th-Grade, 2009 OSDUHS



Regional differences were found only for getting drunk at an early age, and for early cannabis use. High school students in Northern Ontario were most likely to report early use, while students in Toronto were least likely.

Significant differences between students in suburban/urban areas of the province versus those in rural areas were found for all indicators except early cannabis use. Students living in rural areas were more likely than students living in non-rural areas to report early alcohol use, early drunkenness, and early smoking.

Figure 2.
Percentage of Ontario High School Students (Grades 9-12) Who Reported Trying Alcohol Before 9th-Grade, by Demographic Characteristics, 2009 OSDUHS

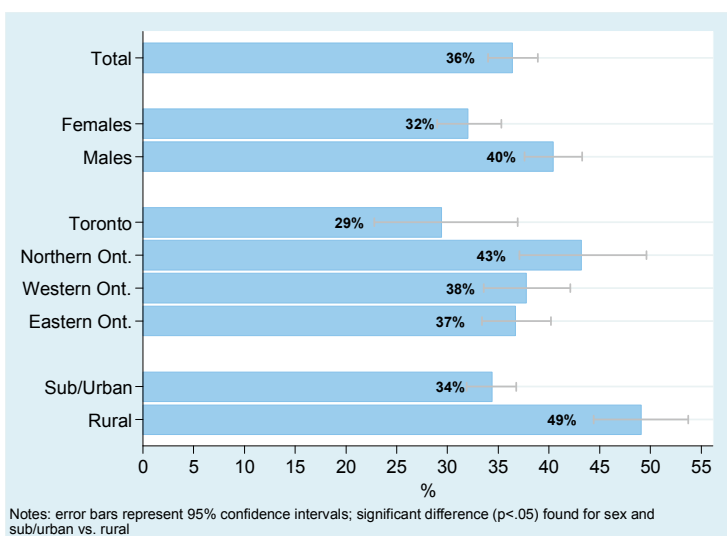


Figure 3.
Percentage of Ontario High School Students (Grades 9-12) Who Reported Getting Drunk Before 9th-Grade, by Demographic Characteristics, 2009 OSDUHS

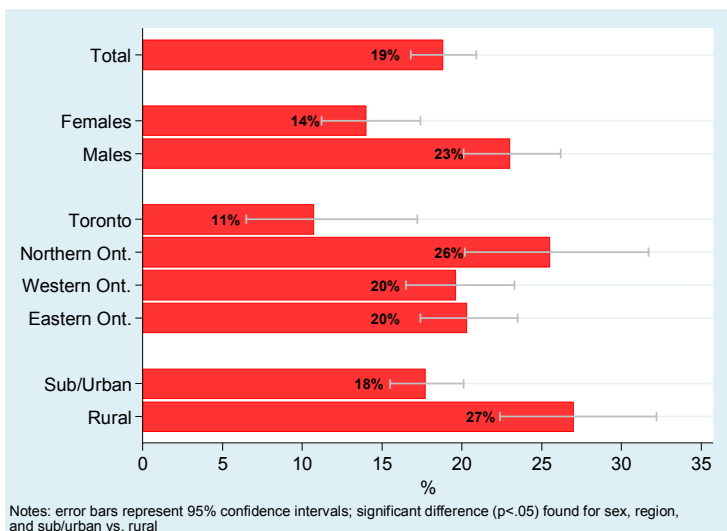


Figure 4.
Percentage of Ontario High School Students (Grades 9-12) Who Reported Trying Cannabis Before 9th-Grade, by Demographic Characteristics, 2009 OSDUHS

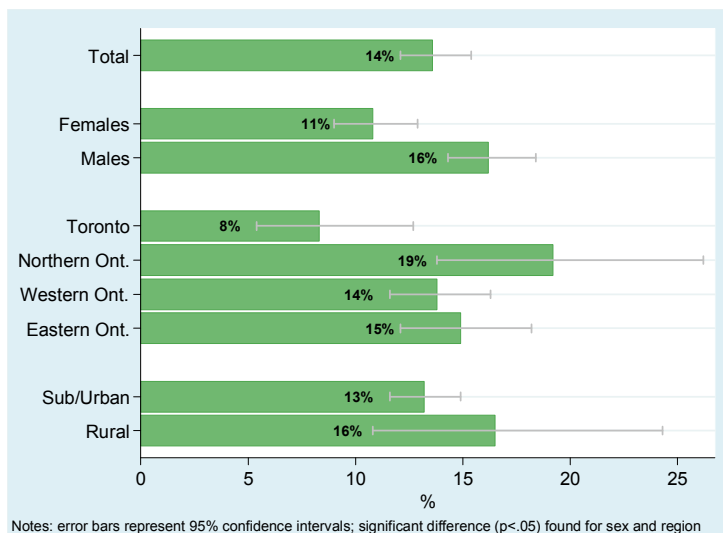
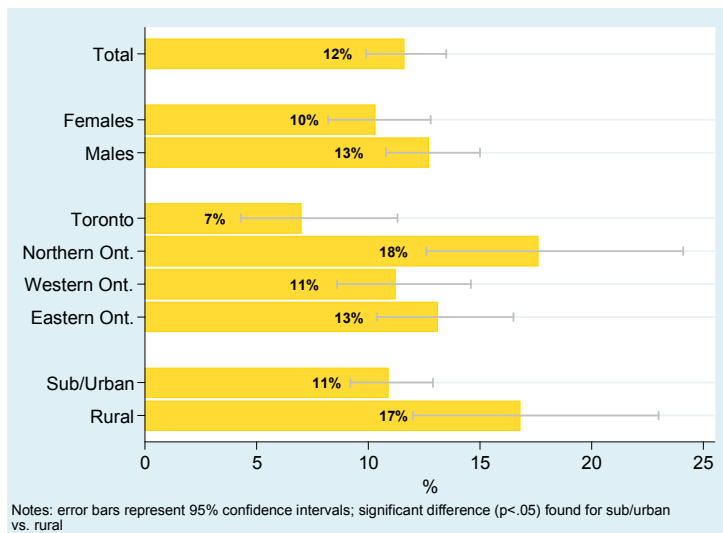


Figure 5.
Percentage of Ontario High School Students (Grades 9-12) Who Reported Smoking a Whole Cigarette Before 9th-Grade, by Demographic Characteristics, 2009 OSDUHS



Methods:

CAMH'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 to 12. The survey has been conducted every two years since 1977 with the purpose of monitoring substance use, perceptions about substance use, mental health, physical health, and risk behaviours among students. The 2009 survey, which used a stratified (region, school type) two-stage (school, class) cluster design, was based on 9,112 students in grades 7 to 12 from 47 public and Catholic school boards, 181 schools, and 573 classes. Self-administered questionnaires, which promote anonymity, were administered by staff from the Institute for Social Research, York University on a classroom basis between November 2008 and June 2009. The student participation rate was 65%.

The questions about first alcohol use and first cannabis use were asked of the total sample of high school students (N=5,783), whereas the questions about first whole cigarette and first drunkenness episode were asked of a random-half sample only (N=2,728). The percentages presented here are based on the total number of high school students asked and, therefore, include those who never used the substance at all. All survey estimates were weighted, and variance and statistical tests were corrected for the complex sampling design.

Measures & Terminology:

- **Early/first alcohol use** is defined here as first trying alcohol before grade 9. The question used was “*When (if ever) did you first drink more than just a few sips of alcohol?*” Response options ranged from “Grade 4 or before” up to “Grade 12” and also included an option for those who had “Never drank more than a few sips of alcohol in lifetime.”
- **Early/first drunkenness episode** is defined here as first getting drunk before grade 9. The question used was “*When (if ever) did you first drink enough alcohol to feel drunk?*” Response options ranged from “Grade 4 or before” up to “Grade 12” and also included an option for those who had “Never been drunk in lifetime.”
- **Early/first cannabis use** is defined here as first trying cannabis before grade 9. The question used was “*When (if ever) did you first try cannabis (also known as marijuana, weed, grass, pot, hashish, hash, hash oil)?*” Response options ranged from “Grade 4 or before” up to “Grade 12”, and also included an option for those who had “Never used cannabis in lifetime.”
- **Early/first cigarette use** is defined here as first smoking a whole cigarette before grade 9. The question used was “*When (if ever) did you first smoke a whole cigarette?*” Response options ranged from “Grade 4 or before” up to “Grade 12”, and also included an option for those who had “Never smoked a whole cigarette.”
- **Region:** the survey design divides the province into 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).
- **Suburban/urban versus rural** was determined using the school's six-digit postal code. It is assumed that students live near the school they attend. Among secondary students, 14% attended a school in a rural area.
- **95% confidence interval (CI)** can be crudely interpreted as being 95% likely to include the “true” value if every student in grade 7 to grade 12 in Ontario was surveyed.
- **Statistically significant difference** refers to a difference between two percentages that is not likely due to chance. For example, a difference found at the $p < .05$ level of statistical significance is one that is less than 5% likely to occur by chance alone.

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To receive future issues of the *eBulletin*, please contact Christine Vrbanac at: christine_vrbanac@camh.net

For information on the OSDUHS and other CAMH population health surveys please visit our website: http://www.camh.net/research/population_life_course.html

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