

# Young People In Custody Health Survey

# 2015

## Key Findings

Number of young people surveyed: 227

Sample: 91% male

Average age: 17.2 years

### Social Determinants

- 21% of young people had been placed in care before the age of 16 years.
- 54% have had a parent in prison. Aboriginal participants were more likely than non-Aboriginal participants to have a parent that had been in prison (67% vs 37%).
- 27% were attending school prior to custody.
- 27% were working (i.e. full-time, part-time/casual, or volunteer work) in the 30 days prior to custody (26% in paid employment). Non-Aboriginal participants were more likely than Aboriginal participants (39% vs 15%) to report working in paid employment during this period.
- 36% had been bullied, with females more likely than males to have been bullied (58% vs 33%). Bullying others was also prevalent, with 50% of young people reporting that they had bullied others.
- 13% of young people reported being unsettled or having no fixed place of abode in the four weeks prior to custody.
- More than one-quarter (26%) had moved two or more times in the six months prior to custody, with females more likely than males to have done so (58% vs 22%).

### Mental Health

- 48% had been exposed to a past traumatic event.
- 68% had experienced childhood abuse/neglect.
- 28% had experienced severe childhood abuse/neglect.
- 17% had an intelligence quotient (IQ) in the "Extremely Low" (intellectual disability) range (under 70). Aboriginal young people were more likely to have an IQ in the Extremely Low range (Aboriginal 24% vs non-Aboriginal 8%).
- 39% scored in the "Borderline" range (IQ 70 to 79).

- 83% met criteria for a psychological disorder in the preceding 12 months, with substance use disorders (i.e. either abuse or dependence) (any substance use disorder: 66%; alcohol use disorder: 34%; drug use disorder: 58%) and attention/behavioural disorders (59%) the most common, followed by anxiety (24%) and mood (11%) disorders.
- 63% met criteria for two or more psychological disorders.
- 14% had self-harmed in the past and 10% during the current custodial period. Females were significantly more likely than males to have self-harmed in the past (50% vs 12%) and whilst in custody (26% vs 9%).
- 15% had thought about suicide and 12% had ever attempted suicide. Since coming into custody, 9% of young people had thought about suicide and 2% had made a suicide attempt.

### Language and Reading

- 49% had Severe Difficulties (scoring 70 or below) in core language skills, with Aboriginal young people more likely to have such difficulties (57% vs 39%).
- 78% had Severe Difficulties (scoring 70 or below) in reading comprehension, with such difficulties more likely among Aboriginal young people (84% vs 72%).

### Offending Behaviour

- 84% had been in custody prior to the current custodial period, with Aboriginal young people more likely to have previously been in custody (90% vs 77%).
- The average age at which young people entered custody for the first time was 15.1 years, with Aboriginal young people first entering custody at a significantly earlier age than non-Aboriginal young people (14.6 vs 15.6 years).
- Young people had previously spent a median of 5 times in custody.

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### Physical Health

- Among those for whom body mass index (BMI) data were available (n=159), 28% were overweight and 18% were obese.
- 27% have had ever asthma.
- 25% have had a head injury resulting in unconsciousness. Females were more likely to have had such a head injury than males (53% vs 23%).
- Diet improved while in custody. Eating fresh fruit three or more times a week increased from 40% in the community to 90% since in custody; and eating fresh vegetables three or more times a week increased from 48% in the community to 85% since in custody.
- 56% of young people were currently taking prescribed medications, with Aboriginal participants significantly more likely than non-Aboriginal participants to do so (64% vs 46%). The most common medications being taken were those for the treatment of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- There was a low prevalence of bloodborne viruses and sexually transmissible infections, with no young people found with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or gonorrhoea.
- Eighty young people tested positive for hepatitis B (HBV) surface antibodies (+3 with borderline results), suggesting immunity via past infection or vaccination. Two young people tested positive for HBV core antibodies, indicating a prior HBV infection. No young people tested positive for HBV surface antigen (i.e. recent or active infection).
- Three young people tested positive for hepatitis C (HCV) antibodies and one young person tested positive for active HCV infection.
- Six young people tested positive for chlamydia and one for syphilis.
- Of those who had ever smoked, 82% had smoked cigarettes every day/almost every day in the 12 months prior to custody and 42% of those who had smoked in the 12 months preceding custody indicated they would smoke on release from custody.
- The majority (93%) of young people had consumed a full serve of alcohol in the past and 90% had ever been drunk, with a mean age of first getting drunk of 13.6 years. Aboriginal participants first became drunk significantly earlier than non-Aboriginal participants (13.3 vs 13.9 years).
- Of participants who reported drinking in the 12 months prior to custody, 42% reported being drunk at least weekly during this period.
- Of participants who reported drinking in the 12 months prior to custody, 52% identified that their alcohol consumption had caused them problems during this period (with school, friends, health, police, parents).
- Of those who had consumed alcohol in the 12 months prior to custody, 86% of those aged 18 years or older, and 98% of those under 18, were drinking at hazardous and harmful (i.e. "risky") levels.
- 93% had engaged in illicit drug use\*, with cannabis (90%) the most commonly used illicit drug, followed by crystal methamphetamine (55%) and ecstasy (42%). Non-Aboriginal young people were significantly more likely than Aboriginal young people to have used ecstasy (55% vs 31%), cocaine (43% vs 22%) and hallucinogens (29% vs 18%), but less likely to have used methadone or buprenorphine (3% vs 13%). Males were significantly more likely than females to have used cocaine (33% vs 11%).
- 81% reported illicit drug use at least weekly in the year prior to custody.
- 65% reported committing crime to obtain alcohol or drugs.
- 78% reported that they were intoxicated (on alcohol, drugs or both) at the time of their offence.

### Smoking, Alcohol and Drugs

- 92% had ever smoked cigarettes, with a mean age of initiation of 12.2 years. Aboriginal participants initiated smoking earlier than non-Aboriginal participants (11.7 vs 12.7 years).

*\* Illicit drug use was defined as either use of illicit drugs (i.e. heroin, cannabis, methamphetamine, amphetamine, cocaine, ecstasy, gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB), lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), hallucinogens), non-medical use of over the counter and prescription pharmaceutical drugs, misuse of licit substances (e.g. volatile substances), or use of "synthetic" drugs.*