

# Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy – Youth Substance Use Project

## Research Summary Report

### **Background and Purpose of Research:**

In Spring 2020, the Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy (WGDS) conducted a survey on youth opioid use. The purpose of the research was to examine how youth in Guelph and Wellington County use and access opioids. This work was an outcome of the Youth Survey conducted by Wellington Dufferin Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) in 2018 which reported that 17% of grade 7 and grade 10 students in Wellington County used a non-prescription opioid at least once in the last year<sup>1</sup>. The provincial average for these grades is 9%<sup>2</sup>, indicating that Wellington County is experiencing youth opioid use that is nearly double the provincial average. These results were concerning to the WGDS partners since opioids are not recreational drugs; they are highly addictive and can cause accidental overdose. Opioids are not appropriate for use by youth unless this is under medical supervision.

### **Funding:**

This project was supported by an RBC Future Launch Community Grant and the Guelph Community Foundation. A condition of the funding was that youth (ages 15-29) are involved in developing, designing and conducting the project, under the guidance of a WGDS Advisory Group.

### **Ethics Approval:**

The research received ethics approval by the Community Research Ethics Office (CREO) at the University of Waterloo.

### **Methods:**

Through consultations with youth groups and the Youth Substance Use Project Advisory Committee\*, it was determined that a questionnaire was the most appropriate method to obtain information from youth about their opioid use. A sample size of 160 was calculated in order for the findings to be statistically representative of all youth in Guelph and Wellington County. (\*Membership on the Advisory Committee represented youth addiction services, youth shelter services, Public Health, lived experience, funders, and WGDS staff.)

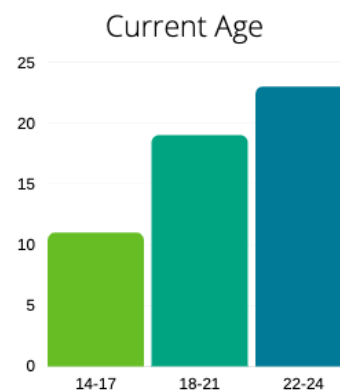
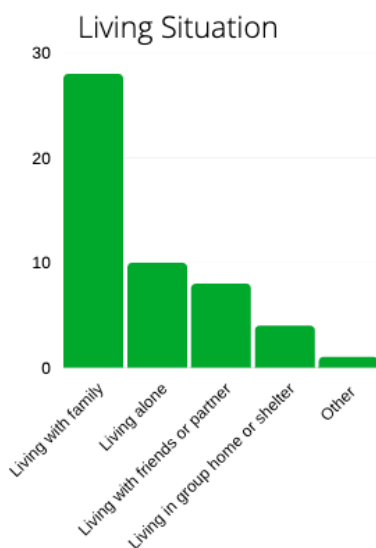
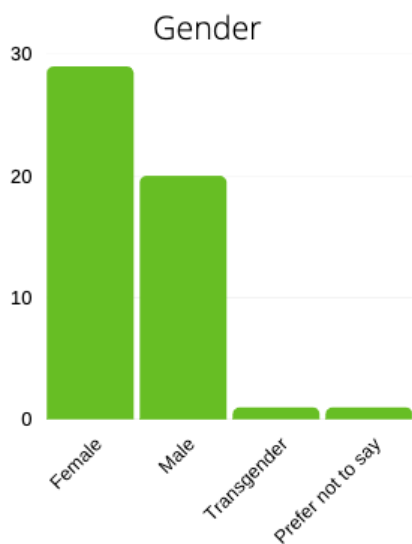
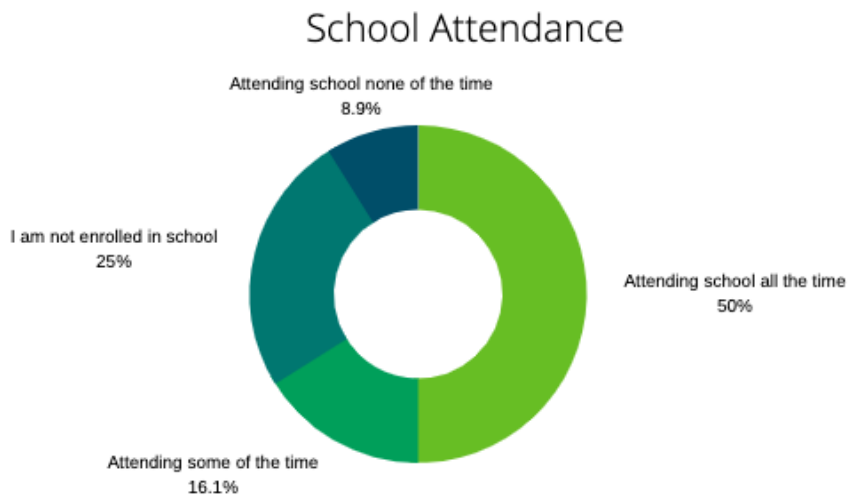
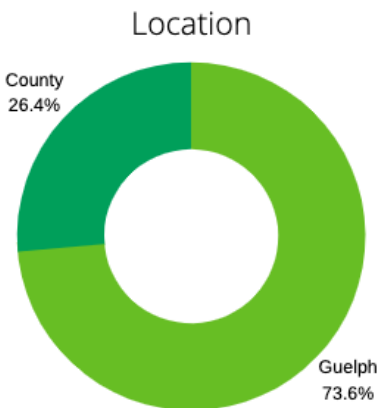
The questionnaire was designed using Qualtrics Survey Software. The questionnaire was open for 4 weeks in May and June 2020. It was distributed through the social media platforms Instagram and Facebook, as well as through the WGDS website, and word-of-mouth from WGDS partner organizations and the youth who participated in research design consultations. To be eligible to complete the questionnaire, youth had to be 14-24 years old, live in Guelph or Wellington County, and have used opioids.

The questionnaire was analyzed through Qualtrics, using both direct data and cluster analysis.

## Results:

### Demographics

Fifty-three youth who have used opioids responded to the survey.



Below are key highlights from the research findings.

### What opioids are youth using?

- Prescription opioids (84%)
  - Most commonly used – Tylenol 3, Percocet, Codeine
  - Majority of prescription substances are being used orally
  - Most commonly used by those attending school all the time or some of the time

- Most commonly used by those in the 14-17 age category; with some use by those in the 18-21 and 22-24 age categories
- Street opioids (16%)
  - Most commonly used – Fentanyl
  - Majority of street opioids are smoked or injected
  - Most commonly used by those in the 18-21 and 22-24 age categories

#### How are youth using opioids?

- 55% are consuming orally
- 44% are combining use of opioids with the use of other substances
  - Most commonly combined substances: Alcohol, cannabis, and benzos
- 72% are consuming at a home, either their own or a friend's
- 68% are using with friends or a partner
- 32% are using by themselves

#### Other Highlights:

- 87% reported it is easy or somewhat easy to obtain opioids
- 53% reported first use between the ages of 15-18
  - 22% reported first use of opioids occurring under the age of 14
  - 19% reported first use of opioids occurring at ages 19+
- 38% reported getting opioids from a friend
- 56% have purchased their own supply of opioids
- 88% know what a naloxone kit is
- Relationship between age and frequency of use:
  - Participants in the 14-17 age groups responded with "Tried it once or twice" and "A few times a year"
  - Participants ages 18-21 and 22-24 were the age groups who indicated they are using every day or almost every day

#### Perception of Youth Opioid Use:

- When asked what the biggest reasons for youth opioid use are:
  - 25% responded with relieving emotional pain
  - 25% responded for pleasure
  - These were the most frequently provided reasons for use of opioids
- When asked what the potential risks of youth opioid use are:
  - 39% responded with addiction
  - 35% responded with overdose
  - These were the most frequently identified concerns youth had regarding the use of opioids
- To make youth who use opioids safe, youth would like to see the following in their community:
  - More resources for support and treatment
  - More restrictions re: prescribing opioids/pain relief pills

- More information/education
- Safe injection sites
- Safe supply re: opioids
- Drug checking

**Limitations of this project:**

- Since the questionnaire was offered online, youth who use opioids but are without access to the internet, were unable to participate.
- The project was undertaken during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. This limited the ability of various WDGS partner organizations, such as School Boards, to actively partner in promoting this project.
- 53 participants responded to the questionnaire. For statistical significance, i.e. to have a sample size that statistically represented all 14-24 year olds in Guelph and Wellington County, we would have needed to collect 160 completed surveys.

**Recommendations:**

The research findings led to the creation of the following six recommendations:

1. Involve youth in addressing youth substance use issues.
2. Expand the scope of, and access to, existing initiatives in the community to address the needs of at-risk youth.
3. Increase resiliency programming for children, youth, and families in Guelph and Wellington County by augmenting community services and programs to improve youth and family wellbeing.
4. Create barrier-free harm reduction and treatment programming for youth who use substances. Include peer/lived experience workers in these programs.
5. Engage key community stakeholders (parents, schools, youth) to take action on youth use of opioids and other prescription substances.
6. Work with local pharmacies in Guelph and Wellington County to increase safe storage of prescription substances, especially opioids.

**Conclusion:**

The Youth Opioid Use Survey collected valuable self-reported information from youth who use opioids in Guelph and Wellington County. The research findings and the six recommendations outlined in this report will be used by a variety of key stakeholders in Guelph and Wellington County to implement programs and policies that will address youth opioid use.

**References:**

1. Macleod J, Wilson K. 2017-18 Youth Survey Discussion Background [Internet]. Guelph, ON; 2019 [cited 2020 Aug 20]. Available from: [https://www.wdgpulichealth.ca/sites/default/files/file-attachments/basic-page/bh.01.feb0619.\\_r04\\_-\\_2017-18\\_youth\\_survey.pdf](https://www.wdgpulichealth.ca/sites/default/files/file-attachments/basic-page/bh.01.feb0619._r04_-_2017-18_youth_survey.pdf)
2. Tara AB, Robert E-M, Mann E, Osduhs HAH. Detailed Findings from the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey Among Ontario Students [Internet]. Toronto, ON; 2020 [cited 2020 Aug 20]. Available from: [https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/pdf---osduhs/drugusereport\\_2019osduhs-pdf.pdf?la=en&hash=7F149240451E7421C3991121AEAD630F21B13784](https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/pdf---osduhs/drugusereport_2019osduhs-pdf.pdf?la=en&hash=7F149240451E7421C3991121AEAD630F21B13784)