

Students' Recall of Substance Use Education in Ontario Schools, 1997-2007

Children and adolescents should receive education about tobacco and alcohol for several reasons: (1) these are the most readily-available substances in our society; (2) they are associated with many preventable diseases as well as other short-term health problems; and (3) not only are alcohol and tobacco the most common substances used by adolescents, they are typically the drugs used before all others. Education about cannabis is also crucial, as this is the most common illicit drug used by adolescents.

In 1998, substance use education was mandated for Ontario students in grades 1 to 8 as part of the new Health and Physical Education curriculum.¹ In 1999, Ontario introduced a new curriculum for high school students stipulating that at least one Health and Physical Education credit is needed in order to graduate. Most students fulfill this requirement in 9th- or 10th-grade. Substance use education is a course component in both grades 9 and 10.

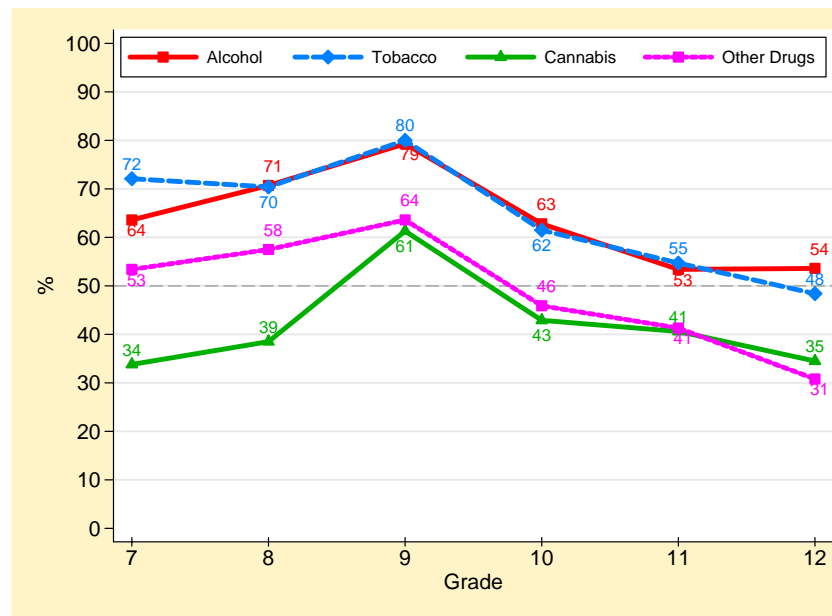
This *eBulletin* presents findings from the 2007 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (*OSDUHS*) – an Ontario-wide, anonymous school survey of students in grades 7 to 12 – showing the proportion of students that recall receiving at least one class or lecture about substance use during the 2006/2007 academic year, and changes over the past decade. The trend analysis focuses only on the younger grades (7, 8, and 9) given that first use of cigarettes, alcohol and cannabis usually occurs during this period of early adolescence.

The *OSDUHS* asks students about the number of classes or lectures they have received since the start of the school year that address cigarette smoking, alcohol, cannabis, and other drug use. Typically, the majority of schools that participate in the survey do so during the months of April, May and June.

2007 Results for Grades 7 to 12

As seen in Figure 1, students in all grades are most likely to report receiving at least one class that addressed tobacco and alcohol use since September, while lower proportions recalled a class about cannabis or other drug use. There is significant grade variation for all four substances, with recall peaking in ninth grade and declining thereafter. It should be noted that only about one-third of students in grades 7 and 8 recalled receiving at least one class about cannabis.

Figure 1.
Percentage of Students Recalling At Least One Class or Lecture about Substance Use by Grade, 2007 OSDUHS



Trends in Recall among Students in Grades 7 to 9, 1997 – 2007

Figure 2 presents the percentage of students in grades 7, 8, and 9 that reported receiving some education about tobacco, from surveys between 1997 and 2007. Generally speaking, students in all three grades have shown improvement over the past few years in recalling tobacco education.

Figure 3 presents the percentage that could recall at least one class about alcohol, over the past decade. While recall among grade 9 students improved

slightly (but not statistically significantly) between 1999 and 2007, grade 7 and 8 students showed declines in recall, with the drop reaching statistical significance only among 7th-graders, from 78% in 1999 down to 64% in 2007.

Similarly, as seen in Figure 4, recall of cannabis education among grade 9 students increased slightly, but not statistically significantly, between 1999 and 2007. However, recall among grade 8 students significantly decreased between 1999 (52%) and 2007 (38%). Trends among 7th-graders remained stable over the past decade.

Figure 2.
Percentage of Students in Grades 7, 8, and 9 Recalling At Least One Class or Lecture about Tobacco, 1997– 2007 OSDUHS

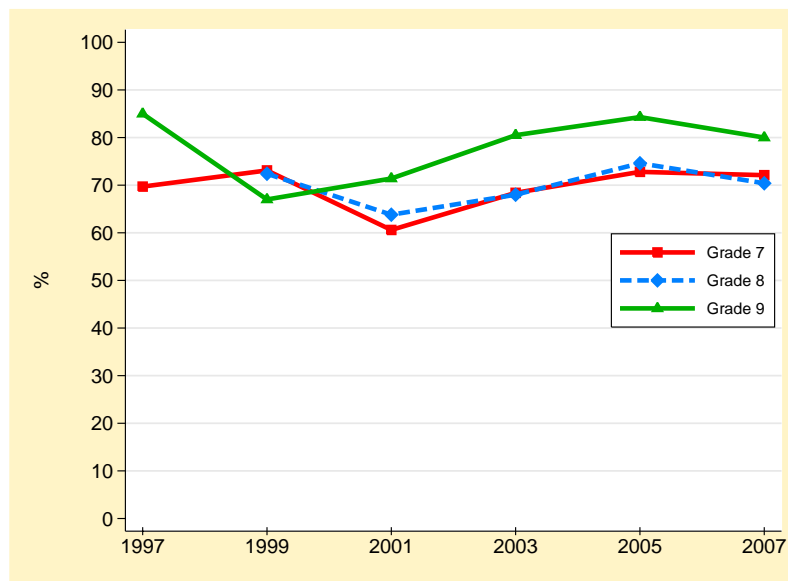


Figure 3.
Percentage of Students in Grades 7, 8, and 9 Recalling At Least One Class or Lecture about Alcohol, 1997– 2007 OSDUHS

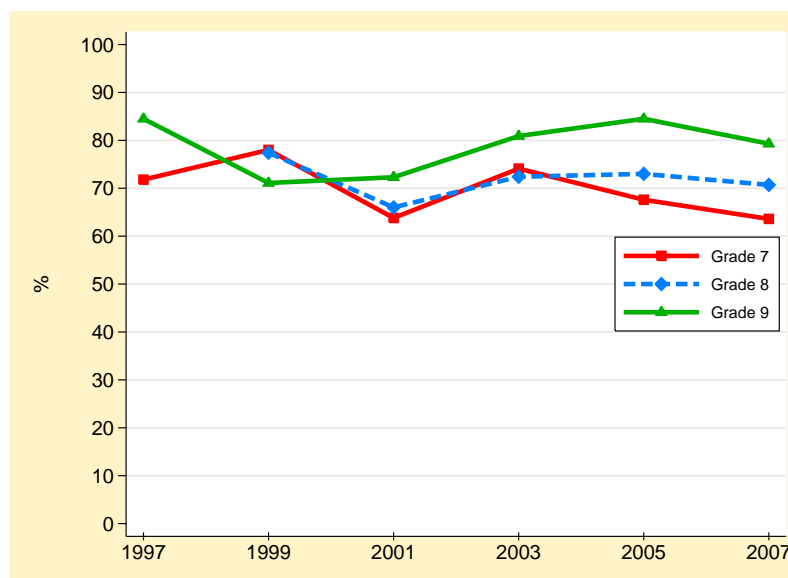
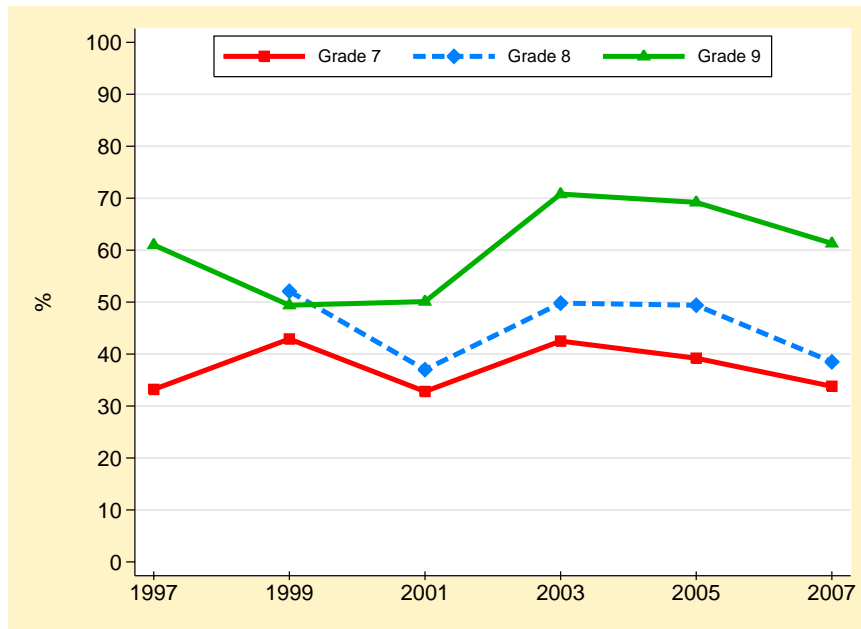


Figure 4.
Percentage of Students in Grades 7, 8, and 9 Recalling At Least One Class or Lecture about Cannabis, 1997– 2007 OSDUHS



Conclusion

While self-reported education has limitations in assessing what is actually delivered in the classroom, it does reflect what is memorable, which, at the very least, is one indicator of effective education. The 2007 *OSDUHS* shows that while tobacco and alcohol education is reported by a majority of students, especially among those in grades 7 to 9, education about cannabis and other drugs seems to have a smaller role in the health curriculum in Ontario schools.

Trends over the past decade show that classes about alcohol and cannabis are less likely to be recalled by grade 7 and 8 students today compared to their counterparts from almost a decade ago. Recall of classes for all substances among 9th-graders seems to have slightly improved over the past decade.

Prevention researchers recommend that any school-based drug education program begin during the elementary grades and intensify during the “high risk of onset” grades, from 7 to 9. To be effective, they must be of sufficient duration. Although there is no consensus on how many classes should be delivered per grade, experts do agree that one or two classes is not sufficient. The 2007 *OSDUHS* showed that substance use education is most likely to be recalled by 9th-graders. However, the *OSDUHS* findings also show that the average age of initiation for smoking and drinking is about age 13, and age 14 for cannabis use. Therefore, delivering or intensifying substance use education in grade 9 (age 14) may be inefficient in terms of preventing or delaying substance use.

Finally, it should be noted that any school-based substance education program should be part of a larger comprehensive prevention strategy, incorporating policy, family-based and community-based programs.

Methods:

The *Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS)* is an Ontario-wide survey of elementary (grades 7 and 8) and secondary (grades 9-12) school students conducted every two years since 1977. The 2007 survey, which used a stratified (region) two-stage cluster design (school, class) included 6,323 students in grades 7 to 12 from 43 school boards, 119 schools, and 385 classes. The student participation rate was 68%. The 2007 sample represents about 1,011,000 students in grades 7 to 12 in public and Catholic schools across the province.

Self-administered questionnaires, which promote anonymity, were administered by staff from the Institute for Social Research, York University on a classroom basis between November 2006 and June 2007. The substance use education questions were asked of a random-half sample in 2007. Because the 2007 survey was the first cycle in which the field work commenced in November, students who participated in November and December were excluded from the analyses to ensure that the trend results were based on the same time period (i.e., January-June). Thus, the 2007 findings presented here are based on a sample of 2,394 students. The breakdown by grade is: grade 7 n=275; grade 8 n=274; grade 9 n=459; grade 10 n=443; grade 11 n=486; grade 12 n=457.

Note that beginning in 1999, students in grades 7 through to 12 were surveyed, whereas only grades 7, 9, and 11 were surveyed in the cycles prior to 1999. All survey estimates were weighted, and variance and statistical tests were corrected for the sampling design.

Terminology:

- **Tobacco Education** was measured with the question "Since September, how many classes or lectures did you have that talked about cigarette smoking?"
- **Alcohol Education** was measured with the question "Since September, how many classes or lectures did you have that talked about alcohol?"
- **Cannabis Education** was measured with the question "Since September, how many classes or lectures did you have that talked about cannabis?"
- **Other Drug Education** was measured with the question "Since September, how many classes or lectures did you have that talked about drugs other than alcohol, tobacco or cannabis?"
- **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.

Source:

Results are from unpublished data analyses. For drug use results from the 2007 *OSDUHS*, please see:

Adlaf, E.M. & Paglia-Boak, A. (2007). *Drug Use Among Ontario Students, 1977-2007: Detailed OSDUHS Findings*. CAMH Research Document Series, No. 20. Toronto: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. (The report is available in PDF format at <http://www.camh.net/research/osdus.html>.)

References:

1. Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. *Health and Physical Education Curriculum*. Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. Available at: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum> (Accessed January 2008).

For CAMH Curriculum Resources see:

Educating Students about Drug Use and Mental Health: Ready-to-Use Lesson Plans for Your Classroom (Grades 1-12). Available at: <http://www.camh.net/curriculum>.

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