



DrinkSmart 2025

Campus Pulse Survey



More Than a Survey

This work is about listening to students and using their insights to drive real change on campus.

The DrinkSmart Campus Pulse Survey was created to give voice to the lived experiences of post-secondary students across Ontario. In a time marked by uncertainty, rising costs, and evolving social norms, understanding the real challenges students face is more important than ever.

This survey goes beyond basic data. It captures a snapshot of student life, exploring mental health, substance use, academic pressures, and economic stress through a lens of honesty and harm reduction. **Our goal is clear:** to use this information to guide smarter, more impactful wellness and alcohol education programming across campuses.

As a student-led initiative operated by **Smart Serve® Ontario**, a registered charity, DrinkSmart is committed to supporting safer, healthier student communities. This report is a tool not just for campuses, but for anyone invested in the well-being of Ontario's next generation of leaders. Through these insights, we aim to drive meaningful change and ensure students feel seen, heard, and supported.

This is just the beginning. Our intention is for this survey to become an annual pulse-check that continues to surface timely and relevant insights about the student experience, helping shape the supports they need most.



Ramp Communications

This survey was brought to life in partnership with Ramp Communications, a Toronto-based social profit agency and Certified B Corporation® that helps purpose-driven organizations drive impact through strategy, storytelling, and design. Ramp supported the development of the survey, led the data analysis, and created the insights report. With deep experience in advocacy, education, and public health, Ramp helps organizations turn complex issues into clear, actionable insights and builds the tools to share them in ways that resonate.

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Methodology and Sample Profile

The DrinkSmart Campus Pulse Survey was conducted in spring 2025 to explore student well-being, mental health, substance use, gambling, and future outlooks.

- Survey Fielded: Late April to early June 2025
- Responses Collected: 4,443 students started the survey; 3,172 complete responses analyzed
- Institutions Represented: Colleges and universities across Ontario
- Sample Includes:
 - A range of self-identified gender identities, including women, men, trans, non-binary, Two-Spirit, gender queer, and other identities
 - A range of self-identified racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Indigenous, Black, South Asian, East Asian, and many others
 - Students living both on-campus and off-campus, across all years of study

Analysis focused on overall trends and key differences across identities and living situations.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the Pressures Shaping Student Life Today

Students participating in the 2025 DrinkSmart Campus Pulse Survey reported navigating a range of pressures alongside their academic responsibilities. When asked about sources of stress outside of school, students most commonly identified cost of living, employment, housing, and mental health concerns. Many also reported concern about broader social and global issues, including politics, climate change, and global events.

While the survey indicates that many students manage these pressures independently, it also highlights patterns in how students engage with available supports. A notable share of respondents reported not using on-campus mental health services. Among those students, the most commonly cited reasons included lack of time, uncertainty about available services, and a preference for self-management.

The findings reflect multiple reported stressors and varied approaches to support-seeking. Rather than reflecting a single narrative, the data illustrates differences in how students perceive stressors and how they choose to respond to them.

Forces Shaping the Student Experience

Financial and social pressures

Students most frequently cited cost of living, employment, housing, and mental health as primary sources of stress outside of their academic workload. Concerns about broader social and global issues were also commonly reported..

Awareness and use of supports

While support services exist on many campuses, not all students report using them. Among those who did not seek on-campus mental health support, common reasons include lack of time, uncertainty about services, and a preference for self-management.

MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Many students report lower self-rated mental health and varied approaches to coping and support

Stress & Global Issues: Reported Sources of Stress

Before examining mental health, finances, or future plans, the survey asked students to identify sources of stress outside of academics. Responses indicate that students experience stress related to both immediate, practical challenges and broader social and global issues.

- **Financial strain:** 72.7% of students cite money as a source of stress
- **Academic workload:** 57.4% identify school demands as a stressor
- **Global and geopolitical issues:** 32.8% report wars, human rights, or international tensions as sources of stress
- **Climate change:** 26.7% identify environmental concerns as a source of stress
- **Discrimination or cultural stress:** 18.9% report discrimination contributes to their stress

Base: Students answering stress question (n=3,229)

Self-Rated Mental Health

Students were asked to rate their mental health over the past few months. Responses show a wide distribution, with many students placing themselves in the lower or middle range.

- **55.9%** of students rate their mental health below the "Good" range, with "Fair" as the most common response (**37.2%**)
- **9.9%** rate their mental health as high
- **21.1%** report feeling anxious or stressed "always"
- **14.9%** report having thoughts of self-harm or suicide in the past six months

Base: Students rating their mental health (n=4,123)

"Finding a job and meeting people's expectations of me."

— Post-graduate university student

Coping and Accessing Support

Students were asked how they cope with stress and whether they accessed on-campus mental health services.

Common coping approaches include:

- **63.4%** talk to friends or family
- **49.8%** exercise
- **42.4%** report "doomscrolling"
- **19%** report meditation
- **7.1%** report using substances to cope

**"The wait times are
insanely long and I
am lucky enough to
get good insurance
coverage for a
private counsellor"**

— 3rd-year university student

In the past year, **17.8%** report seeking on-campus mental health support.

Among those who accessed support, **67%** say they went once or occasionally.

On a 0–5 comfort scale (0 = Not Comfortable, 5 = Very Comfortable), **29%** rate themselves as comfortable (4–5) seeking help, while **35%** rate themselves as uncomfortable (0–2).

Among students who did not seek on-campus mental health support:

- **45.9%** say they prefer handling things on their own
- **29.0%** say they feel shy or nervous reaching out
- Additional reasons cited include time constraints and uncertainty about whether services would help

Base: Students answering coping question (n=4,437)

**"Cost and wait times are always a barrier because people gather up the
courage and motivation to take action for their health — and that is easily
diminished when faced with long waits or adding to the stress with
finances."**

— 2nd-year university student

Supporting Friends and Seeking Help

Students were asked whether they supported a friend with mental health challenges and how comfortable they feel seeking help themselves.

- **68.8%** supported a friend with mental health challenges this year
 - **40.6%** helped occasionally
 - **34.3%** helped weekly

73.5% say they have suggested to a friend that they seek professional help.

Among students who sought professional help:

- **80.6%** choose counselling services
- **28.2%** use online resources
- **11.4%** joined peer support groups

Base: Students answering comfort question (n=4,437)



FINANCIAL LIFE

Financial strain is widespread, and many students report limited social activity and hesitation to seek help.

Financial Snapshot - Money Matters on Campus

Students were asked to describe their current financial situation.

- **27.2%** say they are struggling financially
- **43.4%** say they are managing with difficulty
- **19.9%** say they feel financially comfortable

Nearly three-quarters (**74.8%**) of students report going out socially once a month or less, and almost one in five (**18.7%**) say they never go out at all.

Frequency	Percentage
Never	18.7%
Once a month	56.1%
1–2 times a week	23.6%
3+ times a week	1.7%

Students most commonly cite **tuition and fees (76.3%), groceries (63.2%), and rent (56%)** as areas where their expenses go.

Base: Students answering financial situation question (n=4,437)

Financial Help-Seeking

Students were asked how likely they would be to seek financial help if they were struggling.

- **30.6%** say they would be **very likely** to seek financial help if they were struggling.
- **69.4%** indicate they would be **somewhat likely**, unsure, unlikely, or very unlikely.

Base: Students answering financial help scenario (n=4,437)

FUTURE HOPES & CONCERNS

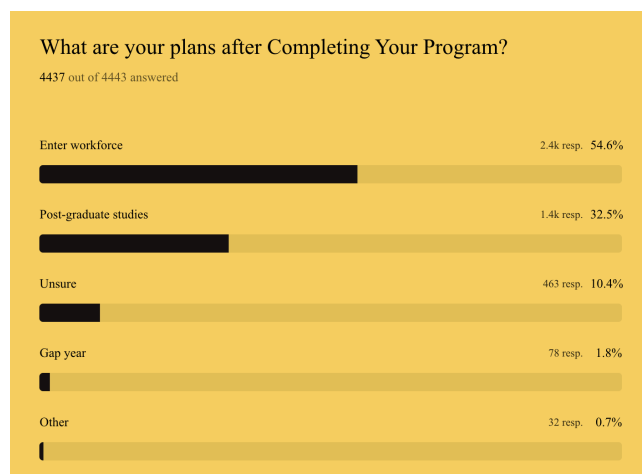
Career Plans and Financial Outlook

Plans After Graduation

Students look to the future with hope for stable careers, financial security, and meaningful lives. But many carry real worries about finding work, keeping up with costs, and building a life that feels fulfilling. Even those who feel optimistic often mention fears about uncertainty and the barriers that could stand in their way.

- **54.6%** plan to work full-time after graduation
- **32.5%** plan to pursue further education
- **10.4%** are unsure

Base: Students answering plans after completing program (n=4,405)



"The biggest concern is not being able to find a job and then not being able to pay off OSAP, bank fees, etc. I hope to get a nice job after graduating and be able to afford a place to live."

– 2nd-year university student

"My concerns are not making enough to make ends meet"

– Post-graduate college student

Top Hopes and Fears

Students were invited to describe their biggest hopes or concerns about life after school. Responses most frequently reference:

- Finding stable employment
- Achieving financial security
- Managing debt and cost of living
- Building a meaningful career

Base: Students answering hopes or concerns open-end (n=4,050)

SUBSTANCE USE & RISK

Alcohol Consumption on Campus

- **53.5%** report that they never drink alcohol
- **36.8%** report drinking monthly
- **13.2%** report drinking weekly
- **1.2%** report drinking daily

Alcohol Consumption by Age Group

- Students aged 18–20 report the highest rate of never drinking (59%).
- Monthly and weekly consumption increases among students aged 21–25.
- Daily drinking remains low across all age groups (1.2% or lower).

Ages 18–20

- **59%** never drink
- **32.9%** drink monthly

Ages 21–25

- **43.9%** never drink
- **41.4%** drink monthly

Ages 26+

- **48.9%** never drink
- **36.8%** drink monthly

Base: Students answering alcohol consumption question (n=4,437)

Cannabis, Psychedelics, and Campus Life

Cannabis and psychedelic use were measured among students in the past six months.

- **22.5%** of students report using cannabis in the past six months.
- **2.8%** report using mushrooms in the past six months.
- **0.2%** report using LSD.
- **0.1%** report using DMT.

Among students who report cannabis use, primary reasons include:

- **50.4%** recreational
- **39.2%** stress relief
- **6.6%** medical
- **3.9%** peer influence

Among students who report psychedelic use, motivations include:

- **33.3%** curiosity
- **30.4%** therapeutic reasons
- **28.9%** spiritual exploration
- **1.5%** peer influence
- **5.9%** other

Base: Students answering cannabis and psychedelic use questions (n=4,437). Psychedelic motivations based on students reporting psychedelic use (n=139).

Behind the Wheel: Substance Risks on the Road

Students were asked whether they had ever driven after consuming alcohol or cannabis, and whether they had ever been a passenger with a driver who had consumed these substances.

- **6.7%** have driven after drinking alcohol
- **14.9%** have ridden with a driver who had been drinking alcohol
- **8.0%** have driven after using cannabis
- **13.5%** have ridden with a driver who had used cannabis

Regarding psychedelics:

- **1.4%** have driven after using psychedelics
- **1.0%** have ridden with someone under the influence of psychedelics

Base: Students answering driving or riding after psychedelics question (n=4,437)

Have you ever driven a vehicle after consuming alcohol?

2022 out of 4443 answered



Have you ever been a passenger with an impaired driver (alcohol)?

4175 out of 4443 answered



GAMBLING & PEER DYNAMICS

Most students avoid gambling, yet gaps remain between helping friends and seeking help for themselves

Gambling Participation

Students were asked whether they personally participate in various forms of gambling.

- **75.6%** report that they do not gamble
- **18.2%** report participating in lottery
- **7.0%** report online betting (e.g., sports, esports, apps)
- **6.2%** report gambling at casinos (in-person)
- **2.4%** report playing card games for money

(Base: n=4,437)

Among students who reported gambling, frequency varied:

- **68.5%** report gambling rarely
- **17.3%** report gambling monthly
- **12.3%** report gambling weekly
- **1.9%** report gambling daily

(Base: Students answering gambling frequency question, n=1,063)

When asked whether they are concerned about their own gambling behaviour:

- **5.2%** report concern
- **94.8%** report no concern

(Base: Students answering gambling concern question, n=1,084)

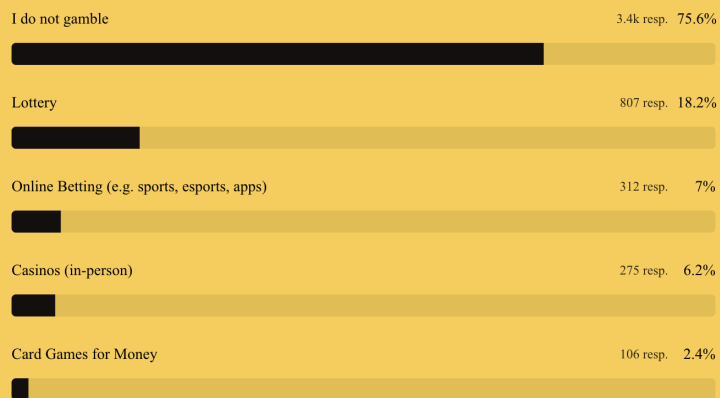
Helping a Friend

Students were asked how likely they would be to talk to or intervene if concerned about a close friend or roommate's drinking, drug use, or gambling.

- **42.2%** report being very likely
- **38.5%** report being somewhat likely
- **12.2%** report neutral / not sure
- **3.6%** report somewhat unlikely
- **3.5%** report very unlikely

Do you personally participate in any of the following types of Gambling?

4437 out of 4443 answered



What is your frequency of Gambling?

1063 out of 4443 answered



DIFFERENCES BY INSTITUTION TYPE

Variation in Substance Use, Finances, and Well-Being

Students were grouped by institution type (college and university) based on self-reported institution. The survey explored differences in substance use, financial experience, stress, and coping patterns across these groups.

Base: Students identifying a college or university institution (n=4,437). University (n=3,172); College (n=1,265). Six responses did not specify institution type and were excluded from institution-type comparisons.

Cannabis Use and Motivations

Among students who reported cannabis use:

- **Stress relief** was selected by a higher proportion of college students (**47%**) compared to university students (**36%**).
- **Medical reasons** were selected by **12%** of college students compared to **4%** of university students.
- **Recreational use** was selected by **35%** of college students and **57%** of university students.

Reason	College	University
Recreational	35%	57%
Stress relief	47%	36%
Medical	12%	4%
Peer influence	5%	3%

In terms of form of use:

- **Smoking** was reported by **53%** of college cannabis users compared to **46%** of university users.
- **Edibles** were reported by **27%** of college cannabis users compared to **39%** of university users.

Response	College	University
Yes	24%	21%
No	76%	79%

Social Activities

Social activity patterns vary somewhat by institution type, with university students reporting slightly higher rates of going out socially than college students.

Frequency	College	University
Never	25.9%	15.8%
Monthly	56.1%	56.0%
Weekly	16.4%	26.5%

Alcohol Consumption Patterns

Alcohol abstention rates differ slightly by institution type. A higher proportion of university students reported not consuming alcohol compared to college students (based on segmentation tables).

Among those who consume alcohol, socializing was the most commonly selected motivation across both institution types.

We asked students about their frequency of alcohol consumption.

Frequency	College	University
Never	52%	55%
Monthly	36%	35%
Weekly	11%	10%
Daily	1%	0%

A slightly higher proportion of university students reported abstaining from alcohol compared to college students.

Coping and Stress Responses

Coping patterns also differ by institution type:

- **Exercise** was selected by **45%** of college students compared to **52%** of university students.

- **Doomscrolling** was selected by **34%** of college students compared to **46%** of university students.

Both groups identified financial strain and academic workload as leading stressors outside academics.

Self-Rated Mental Health

We asked students:

"Thinking about your general mental health and well-being over the past few months, how would you rate yourself?" (0 = Poor, 4 = Excellent)

Rating	College	University
0 – Poor	6%	5%
1	15%	13%
2 – Fair	38%	37%
3	31%	35%
4 – Excellent	10%	10%

Responses show a similar distribution across institution types, with a modestly higher proportion of university students selecting "3."

"I definitely think more online services would help a lot. People are fearful of talking to someone and sometimes it feels better to be at home and behind a screen."

- 2nd-year university student

Reported Sources of Stress

We asked students to select their primary sources of stress outside of school.

- **Cost of living** was selected by 75% of college students and 71% of university students.
- **Job or part-time work** was selected by 61% of college students and 57% of university students.

Stressor	College	University
Cost of living	75%	71%
Job / PT work	61%	57%

Housing	40%	38%
Family	51%	49%
Social	45%	43%
Physical health	33%	32%
Mental health	50%	51%
Local politics	27%	29%
Global issues	31%	33%
Discrimination	19%	19%
Climate	26%	27%

Financial Experience

We asked students about their current financial situation.

- **37%** of college students report struggling financially, and **44%** report managing with difficulty.
- **23%** of university students report struggling financially, while **43%** report managing with difficulty.

Financial Situation	College	University
Comfortable	11%	23%
Managing but with difficulty	44%	43%
Struggling	37%	23%
Prefer not to say	8%	10%

We also asked whether students have faced financial challenges related to education.

- **71%** of college students and **67%** of university students report experiencing education-related financial challenges

"More financial support, so you can work less. Although it's cliché, working to just pay bills while trying to study, it's very stressful. My main cause of mental health issues—MONEY 😊"

- 2nd-year college student

DIFFERENCES BY REGION

Regional Variation Across Ontario

Institutions were grouped into six Ontario regions based on primary institutional location. Regional comparisons below reflect Ontario institutions only.

Alcohol Consumption

A higher proportion of students in the GTA report never drinking compared to other regions. Northern Ontario reports the lowest proportion selecting "Never."

Region	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Daily
GTA	59%	32%	8%	0%
Central	51%	38%	10%	1%
Hamilton + Niagara	58%	32%	10%	0%
Northern	48%	41%	11%	1%
Eastern	50%	37%	12%	1%
Southwestern	50%	36%	14%	0%

Primary Sources of Stress

Across all regions, cost of living is the most frequently selected stressor. Northern institutions show slightly higher selection rates on some stress indicators.

Region	Cost of Living	Job / PT Work	Housing	Family	Social	Physical Health	Mental Health	Local Politics	Global Issues	Discrimination	Climate
GTA	73%	58%	39%	51%	45%	33%	50%	29%	34%	19%	27%

Central	73%	58%	38%	47%	43%	31%	49%	27%	31%	18%	26%
Hamilton + Niagara	74%	60%	40%	50%	44%	33%	52%	30%	32%	19%	27%
Northern	74%	61%	41%	53%	46%	35%	55%	28%	30%	19%	24%
Eastern	71%	57%	38%	48%	44%	31%	48%	30%	34%	19%	28%
Southwest ern	73%	59%	40%	48%	44%	32%	50%	27%	33%	18%	25%

Self-Rated Mental Health

We asked students:

"Thinking about your general mental health and well-being over the past few months, how would you rate yourself?" (0 = Poor, 4 = Excellent)

Results were broadly similar across regions, with Northern institutions reporting a slightly higher proportion selecting 0–1.

Region	0 – Poor	1	2 – Fair	3	4 – Excellent
GTA	5%	13%	37%	35%	10%
Central	6%	14%	37%	33%	10%
Hamilton + Niagara	6%	14%	38%	32%	10%
Northern	7%	15%	36%	31%	10%
Eastern	4%	12%	39%	35%	10%
Southwestern	4%	12%	37%	37%	10%

Financial Situation

Financial strain is consistent across regions. Between **74%** and **76%** of students in every Ontario region report managing with difficulty or struggling financially.

Region	Comfortable	Managing with Difficulty	Struggling
GTA	24%	52%	23%

Central	25%	51%	23%
Hamilton + Niagara	24%	52%	24%
Northern	22%	51%	24%
Eastern	26%	52%	21%
Southwestern	26%	50%	24%

We also asked whether students have faced financial challenges related to education.

Region	Yes	No
GTA	70%	28%
Central	69%	29%
Hamilton + Niagara	69%	29%
Northern	69%	29%
Eastern	70%	28%
Southwestern	66%	32%

Base: Ontario post-secondary institutions only (n=3,848). GTA (1,965), Eastern (645), Southwestern (442), Hamilton + Niagara (412), Northern (384). Out-of-province, international, and unspecified institutions were excluded from regional comparisons.

CONCLUSION

What the Data Shows

The 2025 DrinkSmart Campus Pulse Survey provides a snapshot of student life across Ontario institutions.

Across 4,443 student responses, several consistent patterns emerge:

- **Alcohol abstinence is common**, with 53.5% reporting they do not drink.
- **Cannabis use remains moderate**, with 22.5% reporting use in the past six months.
- **Financial strain is widespread**, with 70.6% reporting either struggling financially or managing with difficulty.
- **Stress is multi-layered**, with cost of living (72.7%) and academic workload (57.4%) most frequently cited.
- **Mental health ratings cluster in the middle range**, with 55.9% rating their mental health below "Good."
- **Students are more likely to support a friend than seek help themselves**, with 73.5% encouraging a friend to seek help, compared to 17.8% accessing on-campus mental health services.

Regional and institution-type comparisons show variation in certain behaviours, but overall trends remain broadly consistent across Ontario.

This survey represents a baseline snapshot of current student experiences and reported behaviours in 2025.

APPENDIX

Institutional Classification

Institution Type Classification

Respondents were asked to identify their post-secondary institution. Each institution was classified as either:

- **University**
- **College**

Classification was based on the reported institution name.

Total responses: **4,443**

- University: 3,172
- College: 1,265
- Unspecified: 6 (excluded from institution-type comparisons)

Institution-type comparisons are based on respondents who identified either a college or university.

Regional Classification (Ontario Only)

Regional Classification and Base Details

Regional comparisons include respondents who identified an Ontario post-secondary institution (n=3,848).

Institutions were manually normalized from open-text responses and grouped into five Ontario regions based on primary campus location:

- GTA (n=1,965)
- Eastern (n=645)
- Southwestern (n=442)
- Hamilton + Niagara (n=412)
- Northern (n=384)

Out-of-province, international, and unspecified institutions were excluded from regional analyses.