

# Mental Health and Substance Use During COVID-19

## Summary Report

Conducted by **Leger** for the  
**Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction**  
and the **Mental Health Commission of Canada**



**October 13 – November 2, 2020 (Time 1)**  
**November 19 – December 2, 2020 (Time 2)**

## Key Findings

- The mental health and substance use impacts of the pandemic have been greater for people living with, or at risk of, mental health and substance use disorders.
  - Only 2 in 5 respondents report strong (very good/excellent) mental health.
  - 14% of respondents report moderately severe/severe current symptoms of depression, 24% report moderate/severe symptoms of anxiety, and 5–6% have seriously contemplated suicide since March 2020.
  - 1 in 3 respondents who use alcohol report increased use and 1 in 5 report problematic use; 2 out of 5 who use cannabis report increased use AND problematic use.
- The pandemic is amplifying the close relationship between mental health and substance use.
  - Respondents with past and current substance use concerns report more mental health symptoms. Nearly 1 out of 2 respondents with past substance use disorders report moderately severe to severe depression symptoms since March 2020.
  - Respondents with past and current mental health concerns report greater increases in substance use. Almost 1 out of 2 respondents with current mental health symptoms who consume cannabis report increased consumption.
- Access to services is not keeping up with increasing need.
  - Only 22% of respondents with current mental health symptoms and 24% with current problematic substance use report access to treatment since March; about 1 in 5 of respondents who have received care report finding access difficult.

# Context and Objectives

## Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased stress across the population on many fronts. Mental health impacts are increasingly clear, including symptoms of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation. Alcohol and cannabis use have also gone up. It is well-known that mental health and substance use are intimately connected. Yet, this intersection has not received a great deal of attention during the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) and the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) have collaborated in an on-going polling initiative.

This report, which is the first in a series, presents data collected during two timepoints:

- Time 1 (T1): October 13 to November 2, 2020
- Time 2 (T2): November 19 to December 2, 2020

## Objectives

The objectives of this project are to:

- Monitor the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and substance use
- Inform the development of resources to address the mental health and substance use needs of Canadians
- Inform decisions and policies to facilitate greater availability of, and accessibility to, mental health and substance use services during a public health crisis



**Lightbulbs** are used throughout to provide context for the findings presented in this report. They are not meant to be used as a direct comparison between surveys given differences in methodology. This includes differences in sample characteristics, date of survey, and measurement of mental health and substance use.

# Methodology

## Study Population

- Residents of Canada, aged 16 and older.

## Data Collection

- Survey data was collected at two time periods: between October 13 and November 2, 2020 (Time 1: T1), and between November 19 and December 2, 2020 (Time 2: T2).
- A total of n=2502 (T1) and n=1507 (T2) online surveys were conducted via Leger's online panel (see final slides for sample details).
- This report includes findings for the following priority populations: people reporting any lifetime mental health diagnosis, people reporting any lifetime substance use diagnosis, people reporting current mental health symptoms, and people reporting current problematic alcohol or cannabis use (see next slide details).

## Statistical Analysis

- As a non-random online survey, a margin of error is technically not reported.
- If the data were collected through a random sample, the margin of error for T1 would be Canada (n=2502)  $\pm 2.0\%$ , 19 times out of 20, and for T2 would be Canada (n=1507)  $\pm 2.5\%$ , 19 times out of 20.
- While the sample has been weighted according to age, gender and region using data from the 2016 census, it is not fully representative of the Canadian population and caution should be exercised when comparing results with other surveys.
- The numbers presented have been rounded to the nearest whole number. However, raw values were used to calculate the sums presented and therefore may not correspond to the manual addition of these numbers.

## PRIORITY POPULATION PROFILE

	T1 (Oct/Nov)	T2 (Nov/Dec)
<b>n =</b>	<b>2502</b>	<b>1507</b>
<b>Lifetime Mental Health Diagnosis [Lifetime MHD]</b> <i>Has a medical or psychological professional ever diagnosed you with a mental health disorder (e.g., depression, anxiety, PTSD, etc.)? YES</i>	30% (n=747)	28% (n=428)
<b>Lifetime Substance Use Diagnosis [Lifetime SUD]</b> <i>Has a medical or psychological professional ever diagnosed you with substance use disorder (e.g., alcohol use disorder, cannabis use disorder, etc.)? YES</i>	6% (n=138)	5% (n=77)
<b>Current Mental Health Symptoms [Current MH]</b> <i>Respondents reporting mild to severe symptoms of depression (PHQ-9 score 5+) and/or anxiety (GAD-7 score 5+), and/or recently contemplating suicide.</i>	59% (n=1482)	59% (n=883)
<b>Current Problematic Substance Use [Current SU]</b> <i>Respondents reporting symptoms of problematic alcohol use (AUDIT score 8+) and/or cannabis use (CUDIT-R score 8+).</i>	19% (n=465)	18% (n=265)



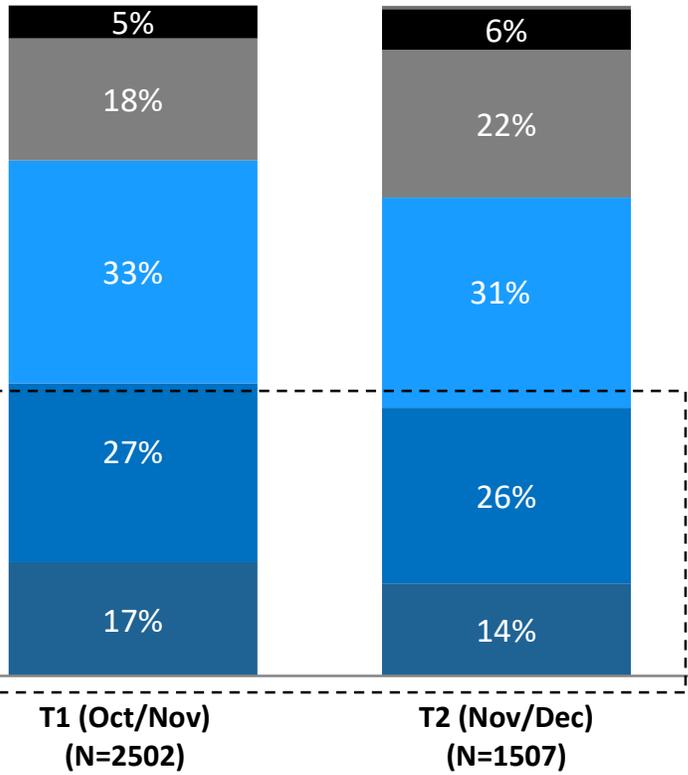
# Detailed Results

## State of Mental Health

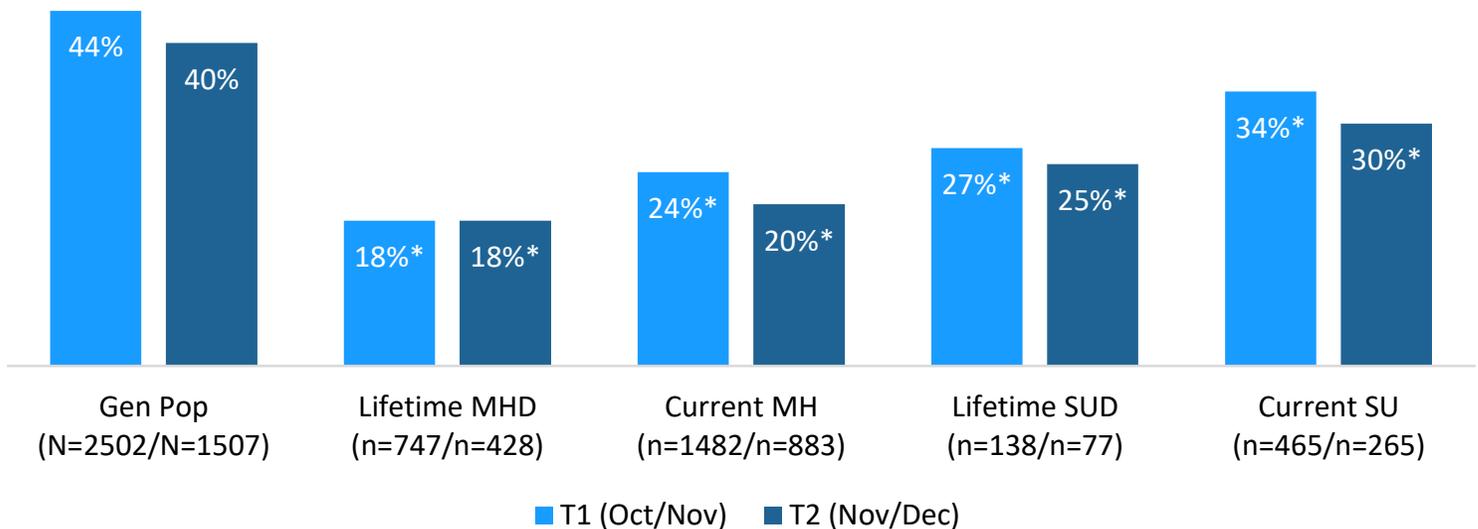
# About 40% of respondents report strong mental health

*Lower % among those with mental health and substance use concerns*

## Perceived Mental Health



### Excellent or Very Good mental health



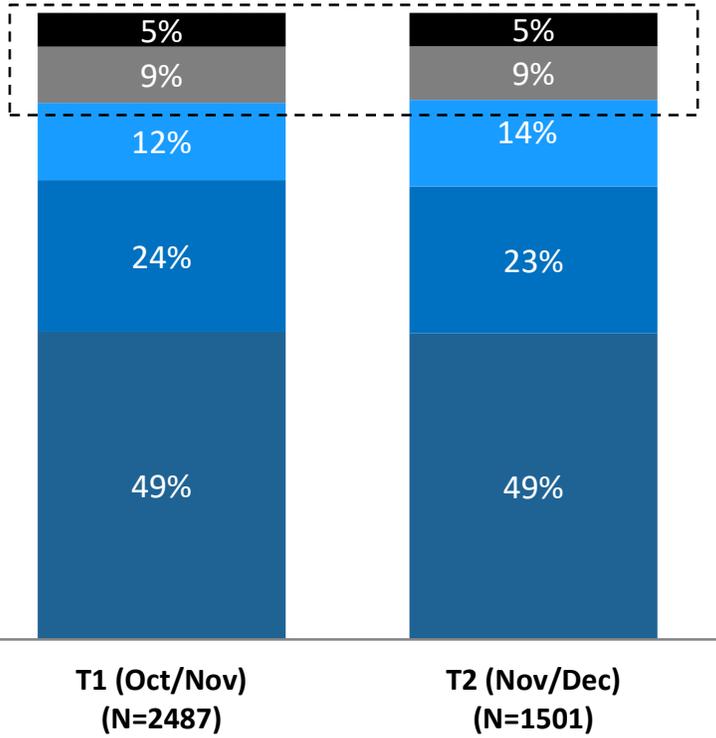
According to [Statistics Canada](#), 67% of Canadians reported excellent or very good perceived mental health in 2019 prior to the pandemic.

Q7: In general, how would you describe your mental health? [same for T1 and T2]  
 \*Statistically significant difference than rest of sample at 95% confidence interval.

# 14% of respondents report severe depression symptoms

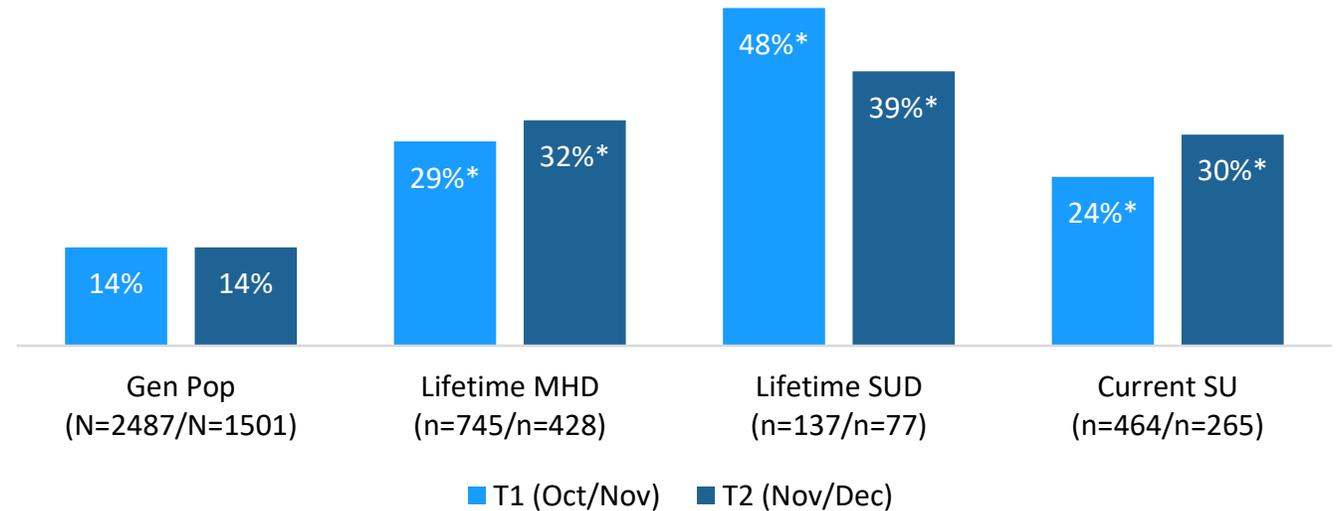
*Higher % among those with substance use concerns, past mental health diagnosis*

**Depression Symptoms (PHQ-9)**



- 20-27: Severe
- 15-19: Moderately severe
- 10-14: Moderate
- 5-9: Mild
- 0-4: None-minimal

## Moderately Severe, Severe depression symptoms



According to the Canadian Community Health Survey (retrieved from ODESI), **2%** of Canadians reported moderately severe/severe symptoms of depression in 2015-16.

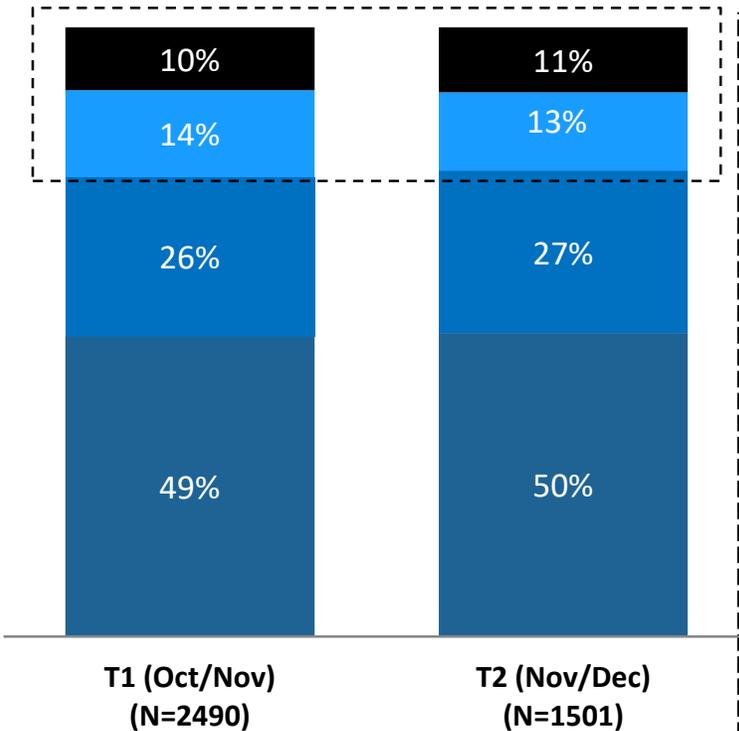
Q9: DEPRESSION SCORE (PHQ-9) [same for T1 and T2]

\*Statistically significant difference than rest of sample at 95% confidence interval.

# 24% of respondents report moderate to severe anxiety symptoms

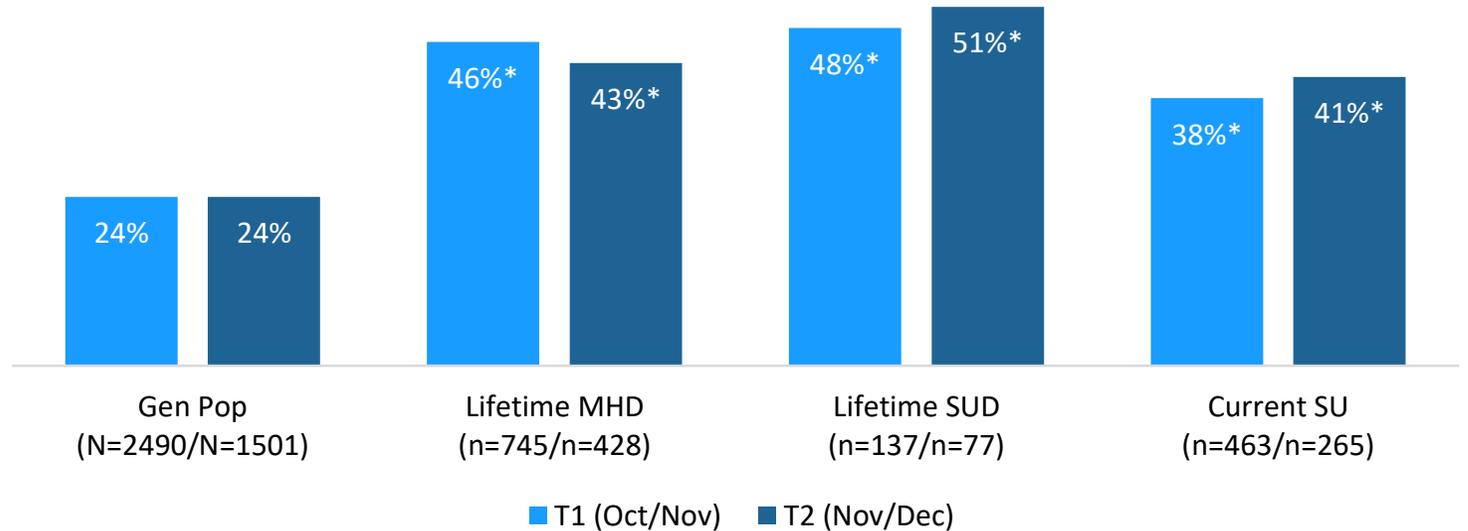
*Higher % among those with substance use concerns, past mental health diagnosis*

Anxiety Symptoms  
(GAD-7)



- 0-4: None-minimal
- 5-9: Mild
- 10-14: Moderate
- 15-21: Severe

## Moderate, Severe anxiety symptoms



According to [Statistics Canada](#), 20% of Canadians reported moderate/severe symptoms of anxiety in May 2020.

Q8: ANXIETY SCORE (GAD-7) [same for T1 and T2]

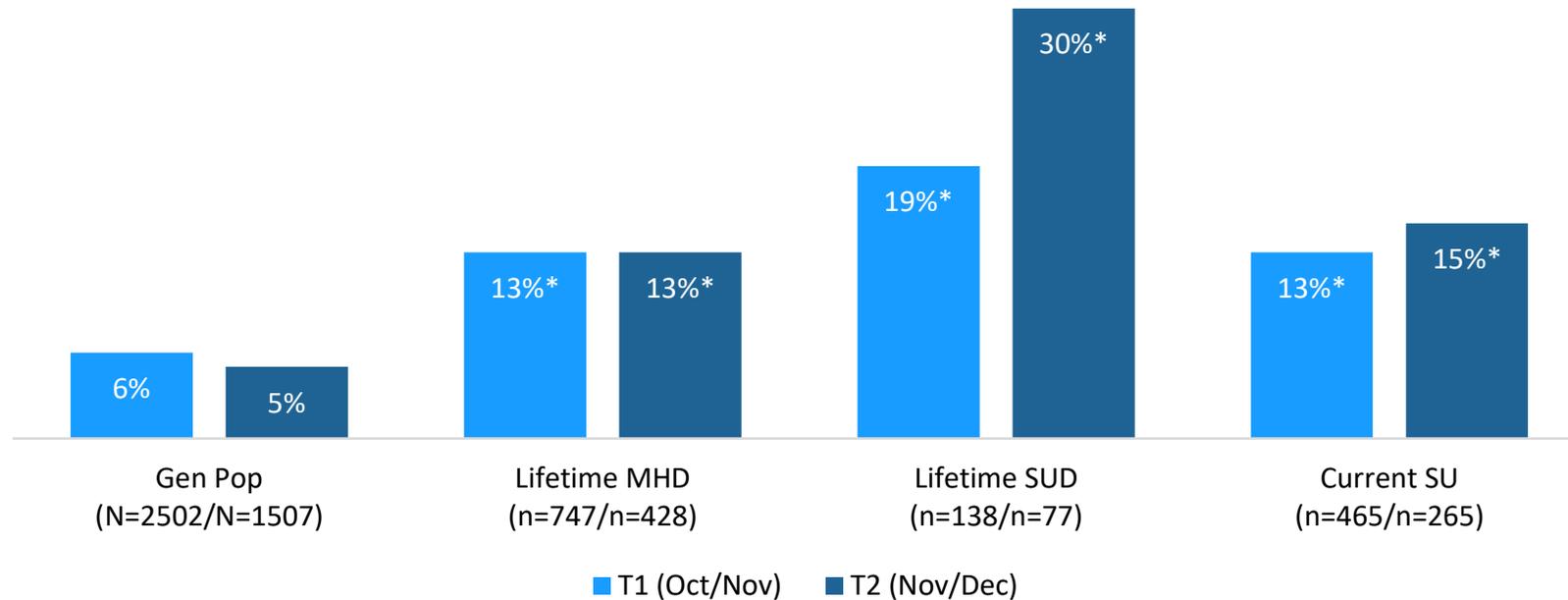
\*Statistically significant difference than rest of sample at 95% confidence interval.

# About 5% of respondents have seriously contemplated suicide since March

*Higher % among those with substance use concerns, past mental health diagnosis*

Suicidal Ideation

*Seriously contemplating suicide since March 2020*



According to [Statistics Canada](#), **3%** of Canadians in 2019 reported seriously contemplating suicide in the past 12 months.

Q11: Have you seriously contemplated suicide since the COVID-19 pandemic began? [same for T1 and T2]

\*Statistically significant difference than rest of sample at 95% confidence interval.



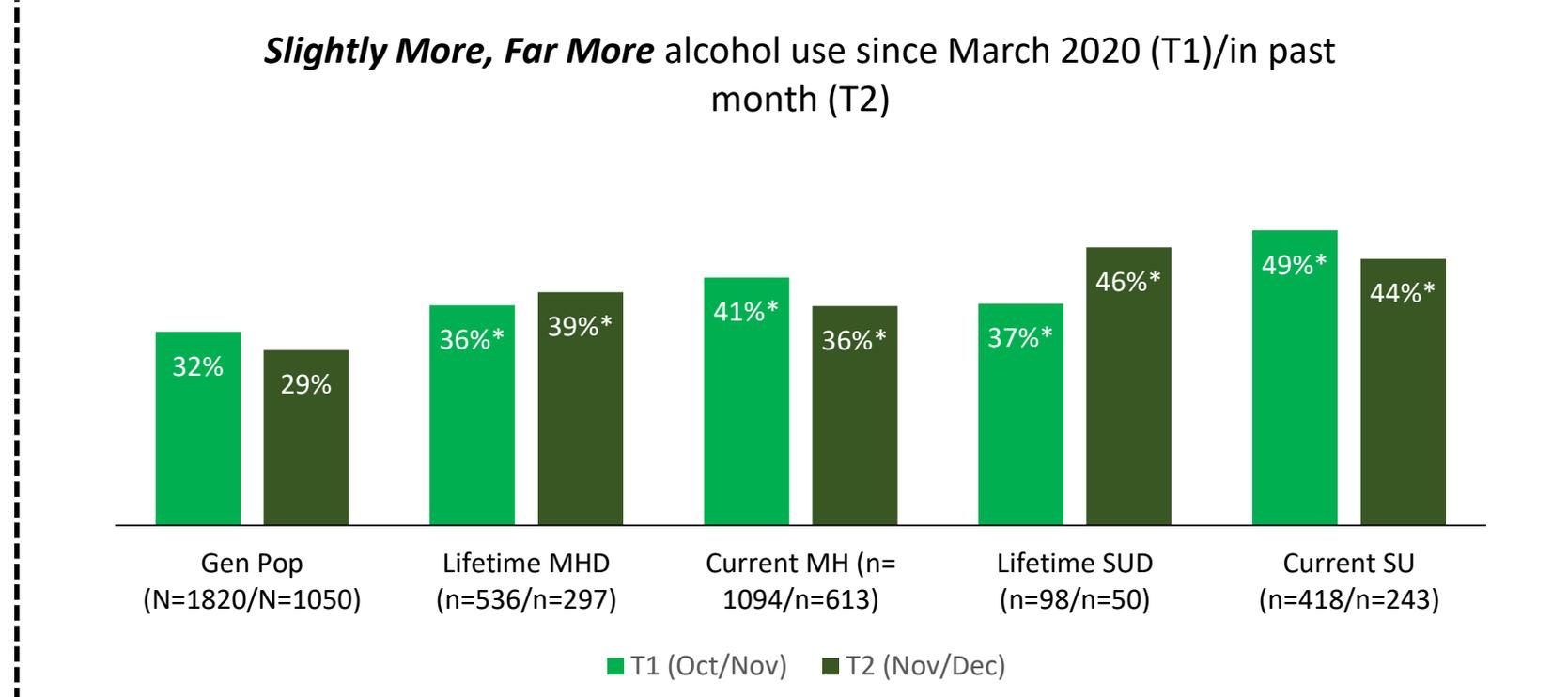
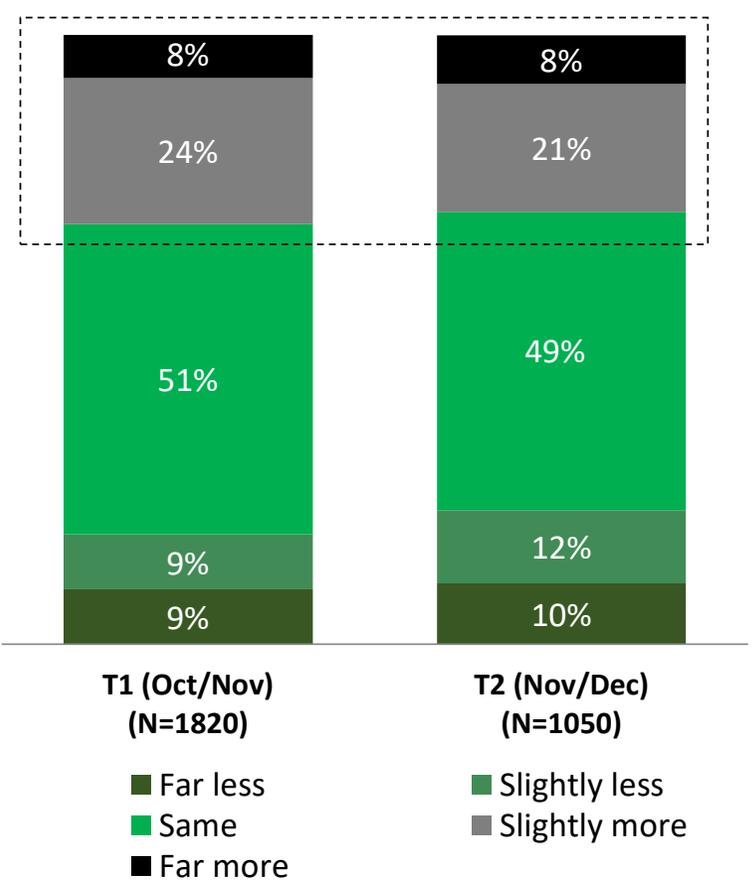
# Detailed Results

## Alcohol and Cannabis Use

# About 30% of respondents who use alcohol report using more during pandemic

*Higher % among those with mental health and substance use concerns*

Change in Alcohol Use



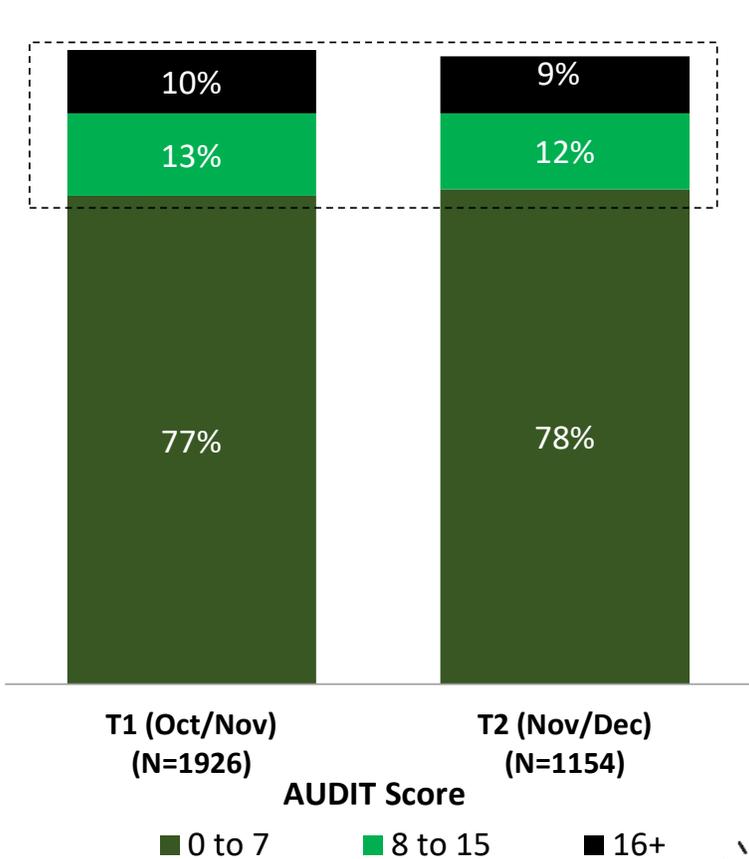
In late April 2020, [Mental Health Research Canada](#) reported that **28%** of those who use alcohol increased their use during the pandemic.

Q22r14: Drinking alcohol (beverages/drinks) - Have you engaged in the following activities more or less since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (since March 2020)? [T1] During the past month, have you engaged in more or less of the following activities? [T2].  
 \*Statistically significant difference than rest of sample at 95% confidence interval.

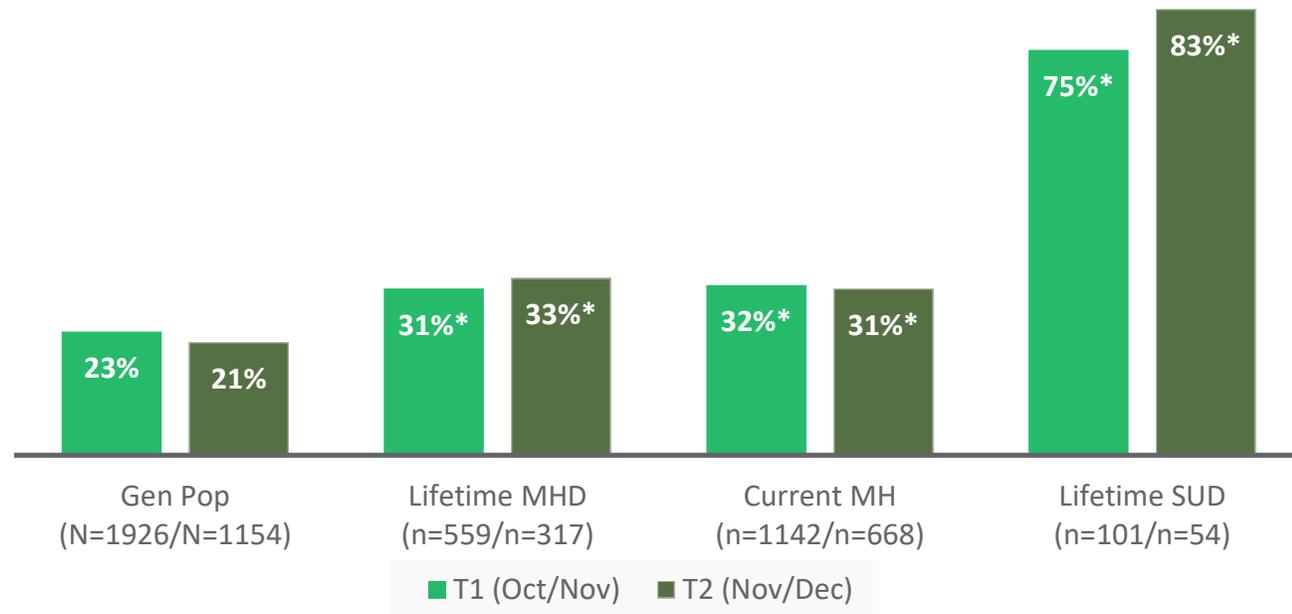
# More than 20% of respondents who use alcohol report problematic use

*Higher % among those with mental health concerns and a history of substance use disorders*

**Problematic Alcohol Use (AUDIT)**



*Problematic alcohol use (AUDIT 8+)*



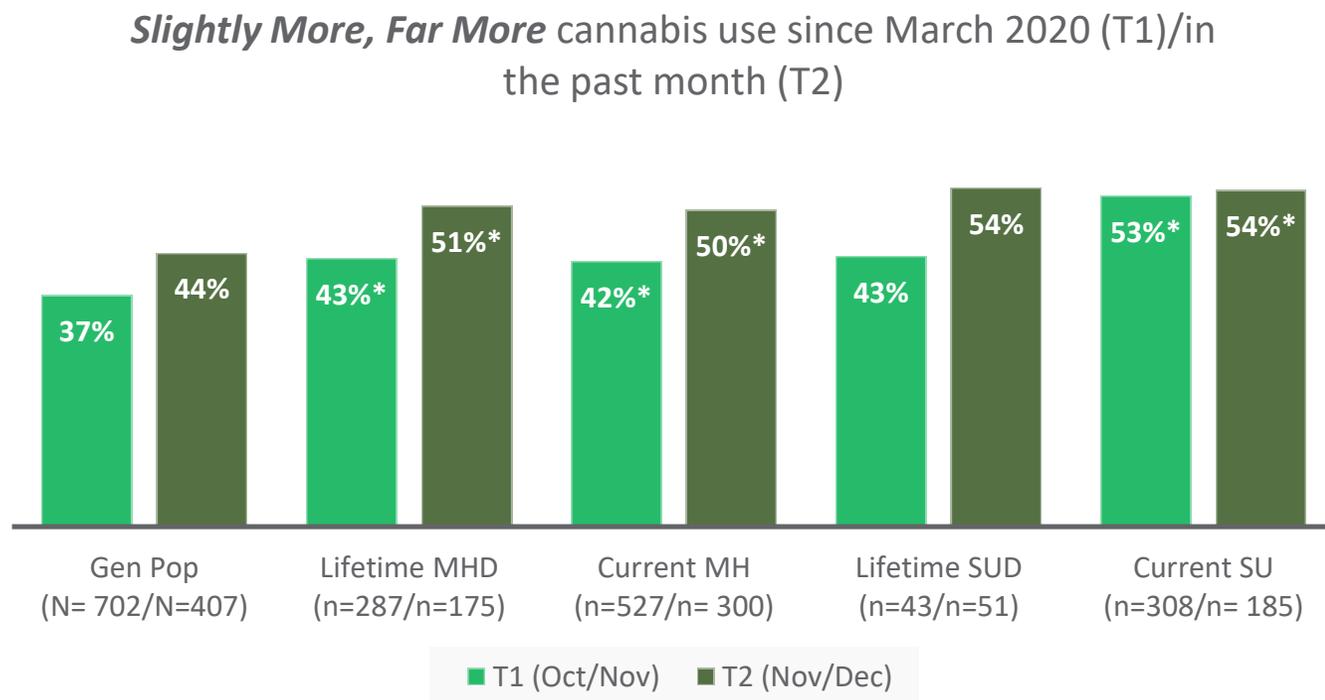
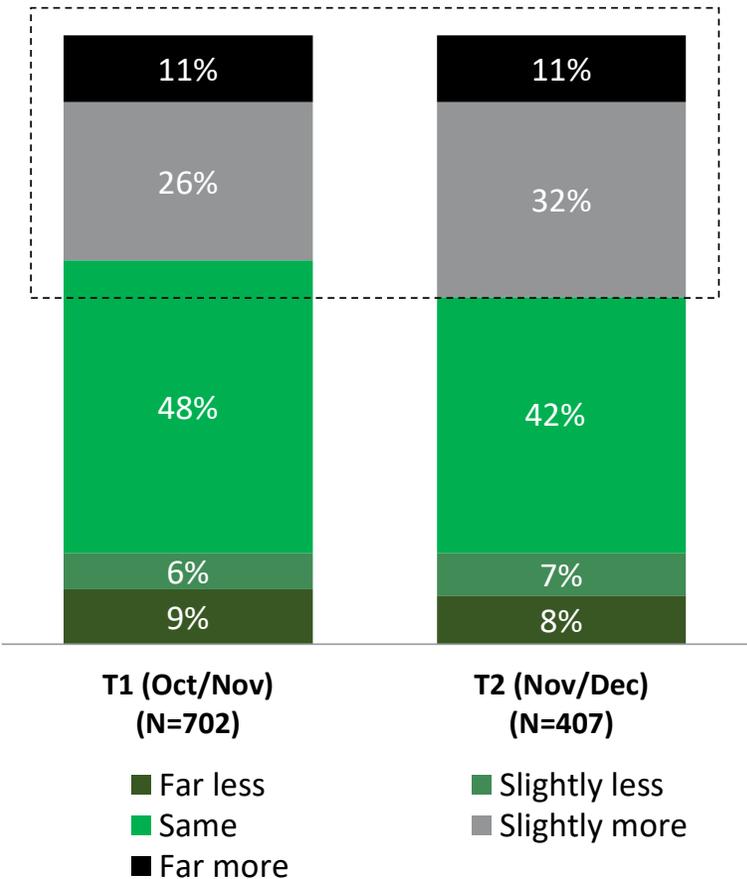
As indicated by the [2017 Canadian Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey](#), **21%** of people who used alcohol exceeded the [Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines](#) for chronic health effects and **15%** exceeded the guidelines for acute effects.

Q30: AUDIT (Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test) Score [same for T1 and T2]  
 \*Statistically significant difference than rest of sample at 95% confidence interval.

# About 40% of respondents who use cannabis report using more during pandemic

*Higher % among those with mental health and substance use concerns*

Change in Cannabis Use



In late April 2020, [Mental Health Research Canada](#) reported that **29%** of those who use cannabis increased their use during the pandemic.

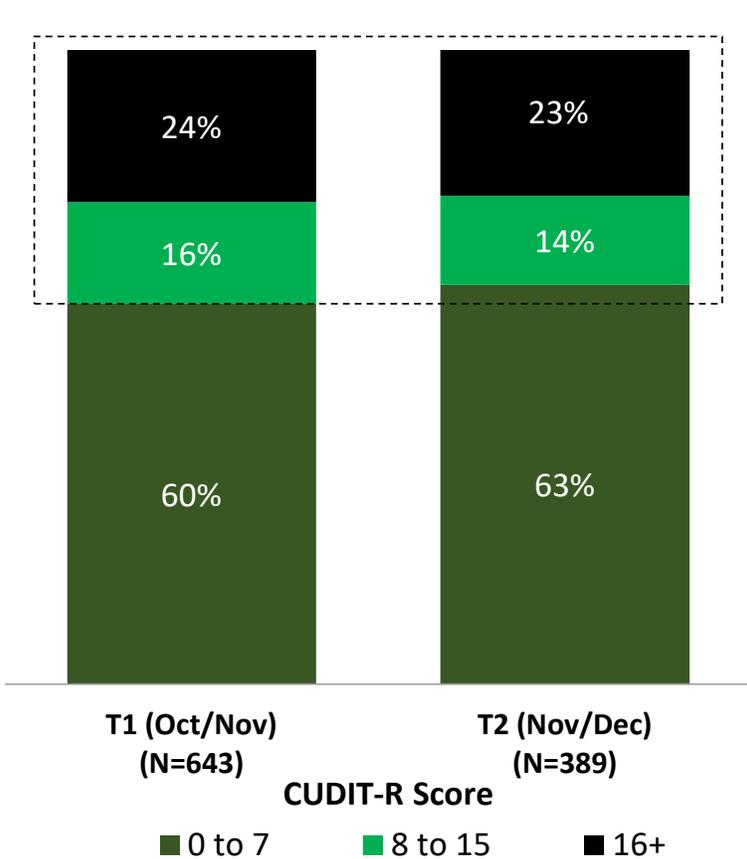
Q22r15: Consuming cannabis - Have you engaged in the following activities more or less since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (since March 2020)? [T1] During the past month, have you engaged in more or less of the following activities? [T2]

\*Statistically significant difference than rest of sample at 95% confidence interval

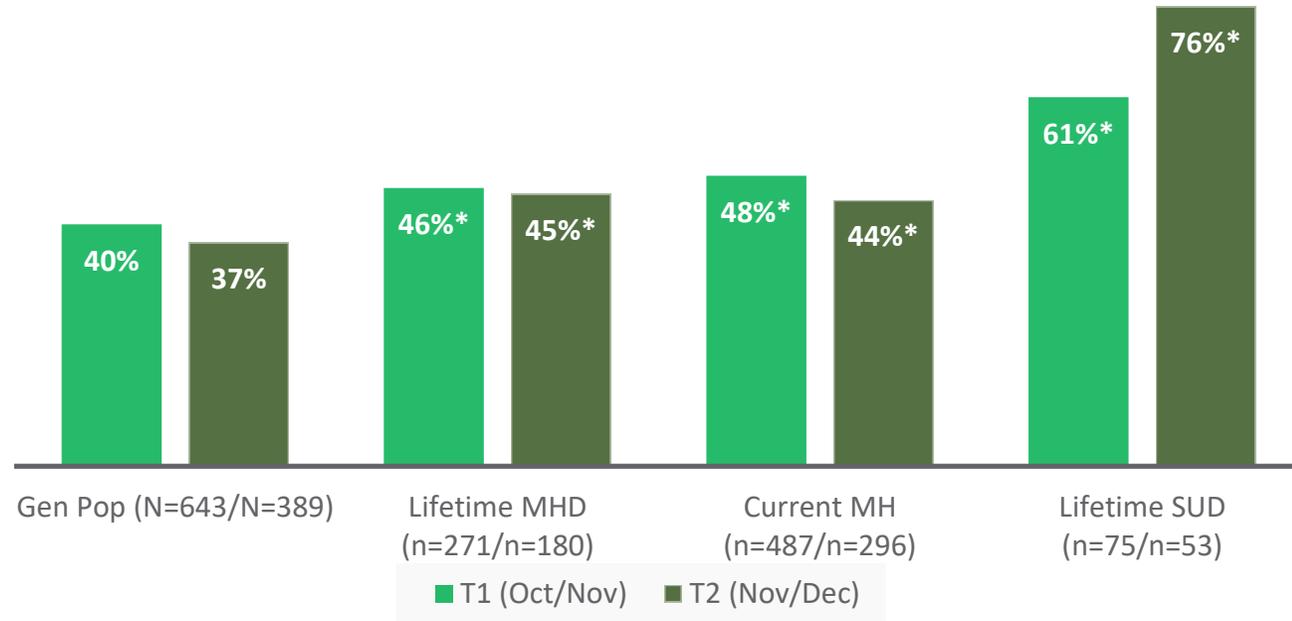
# About 40% of respondents who use cannabis report problematic use

*Higher % among those with mental health concerns and a history of substance use disorders*

**Problematic Cannabis Use (CUDIT-R)**



*Problematic cannabis use (CUDIT-R 8+)*



According to [Health Canada](#), it is estimated that **1 in 11** who use cannabis will develop an addiction to it. If a person smokes cannabis daily, the risk of addiction is **25% to 50%**.

Q38: CUDIT-R (Cannabis Use Disorder Identification Test-Revised) Score [same for T1 and T2]

\*Statistically significant difference than rest of sample at 95% confidence interval

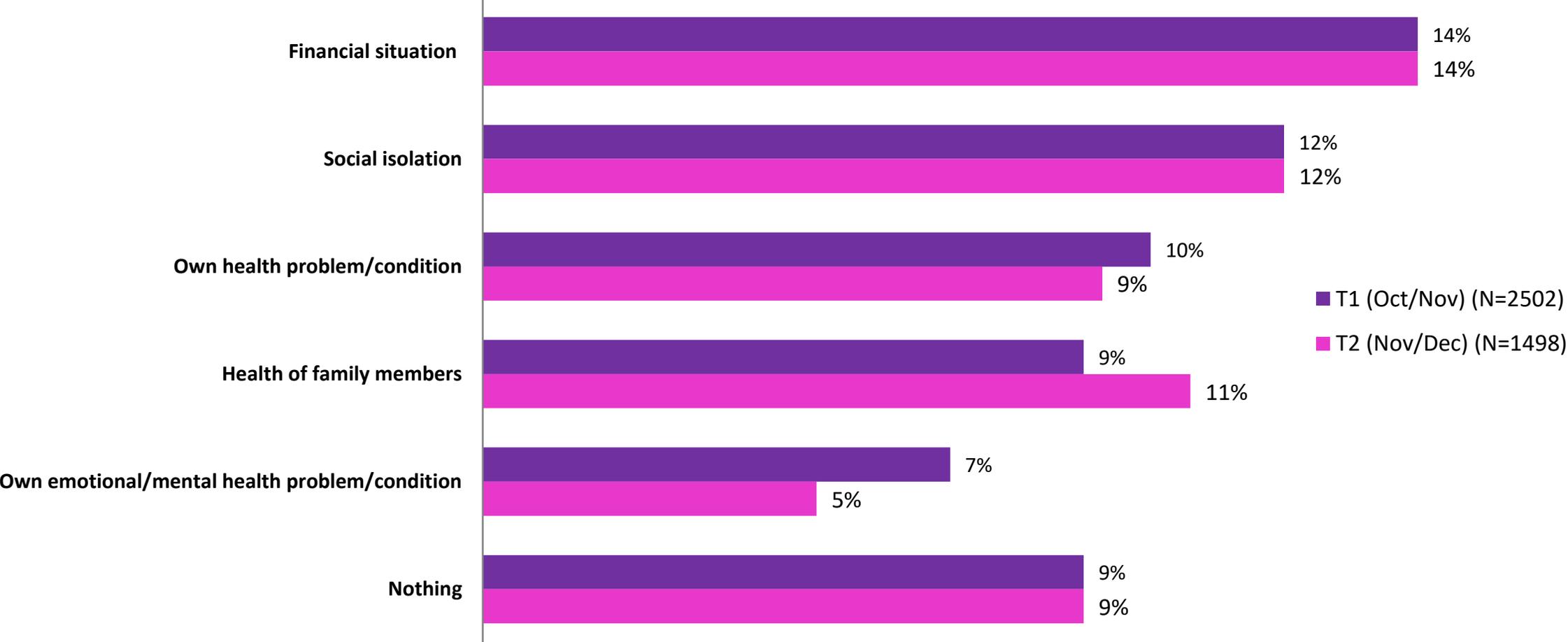


# Detailed Results

## Stress and Coping

# Financial situation, social isolation and health top stressors during pandemic

## Major Stressors

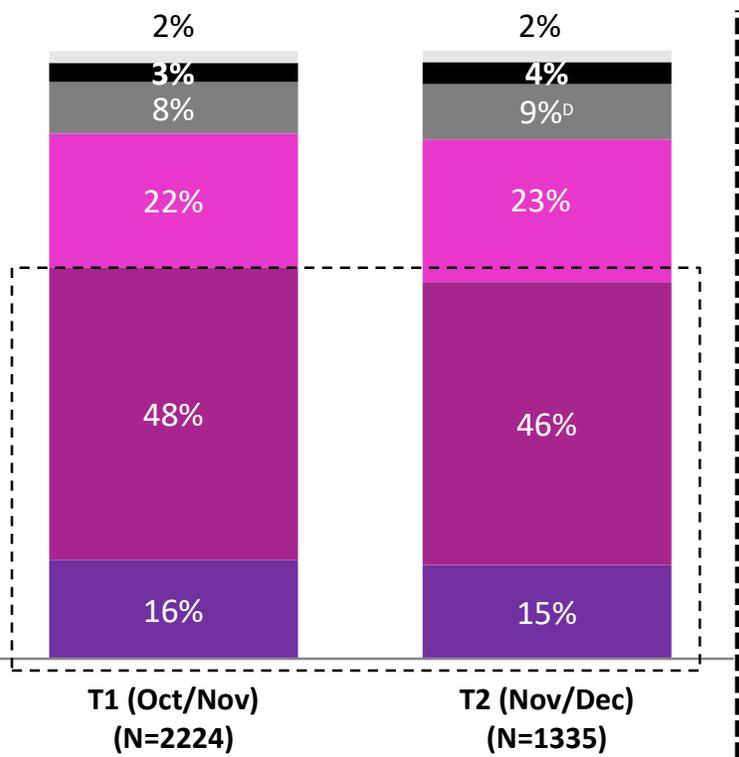


Q18: Thinking about your day-to-day life during the pandemic, what would you say is your biggest source of COVID-19 related stress right now? [ same for T1 and T2]

# More than 60% of respondents report that they can deal with COVID-19 stress

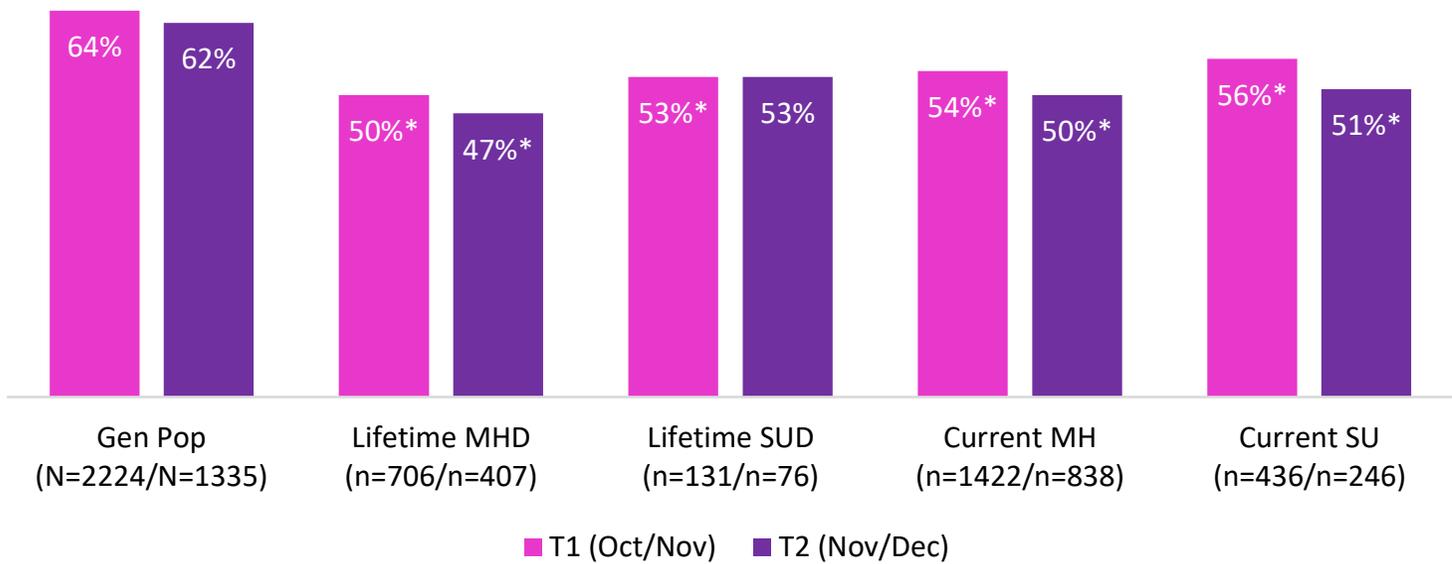
*Lower % of those with mental health and substance use concerns say the same*

Dealing with Stress



- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

## Strongly Agree, Agree: Can deal with COVID-19 stress



💡 According to [Statistics Canada](#), **83%** of Canadians in 2019 reported their ability to handle unexpected and difficult problems as good or excellent.

Q21: When faced with COVID-19 related stress regarding [Q18], you have the personal ability to deal with the situation. Do you...? [same for T1 and T2]

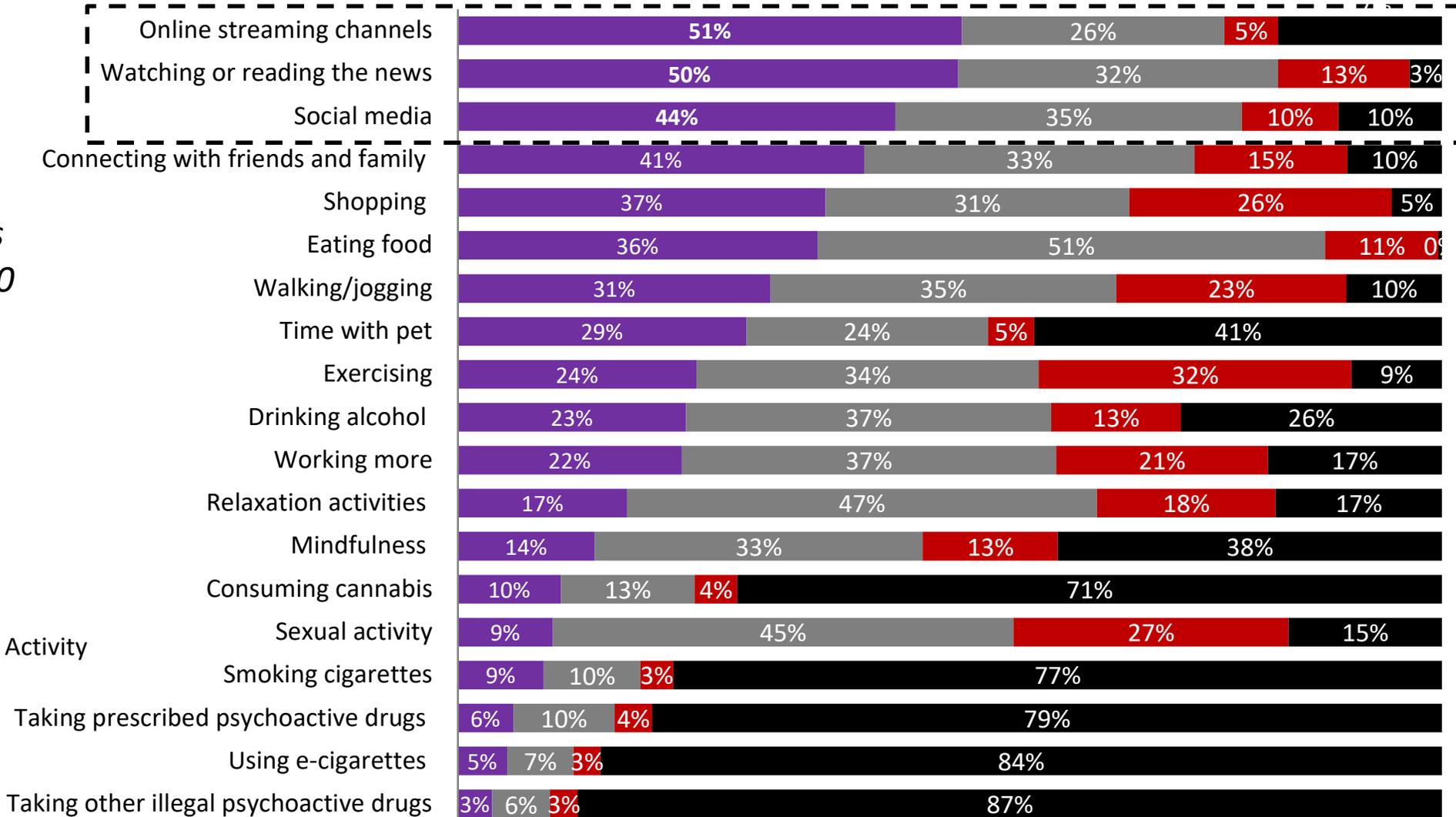
\*Statistically significant difference than T1 at 95% confidence interval. #Statistically significant difference than rest of sample at 95% confidence interval.

# Around 50% of respondents report more online streaming, watching/reading the news and social media since March 2020

Changes in Activities  
(Since March 2020)

Activity changes  
since March 2020  
T1 (Oct/Nov)  
(N=2502)

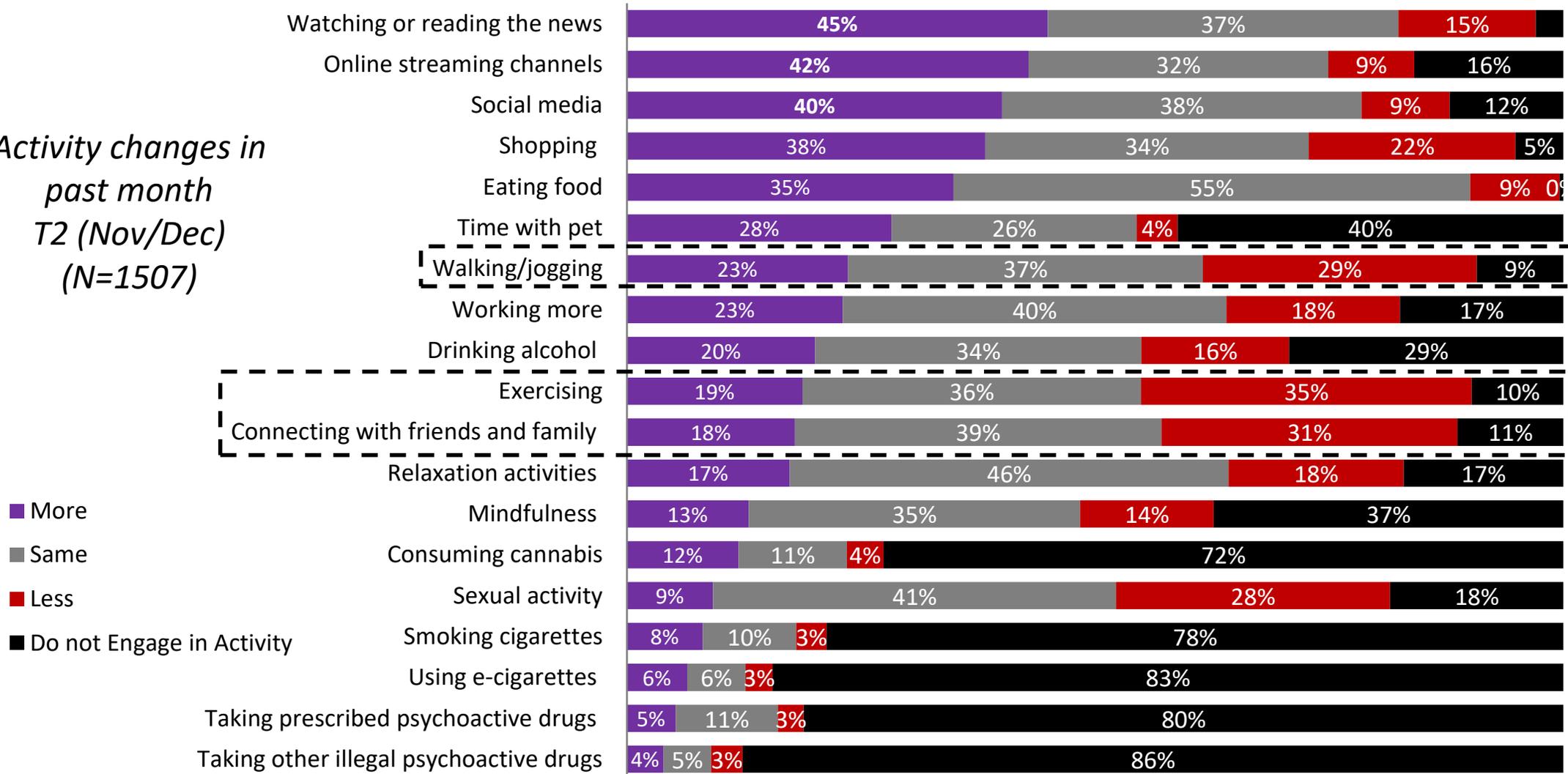
- More
- Same
- Less
- Do not Engage in Activity



# About 30% of respondents report less exercise and social interaction in late November/early December 2020

Changes in Activities (Past month)

Activity changes in past month T2 (Nov/Dec) (N=1507)



Q22: During the past month, have you engaged in more or less of the following activities?



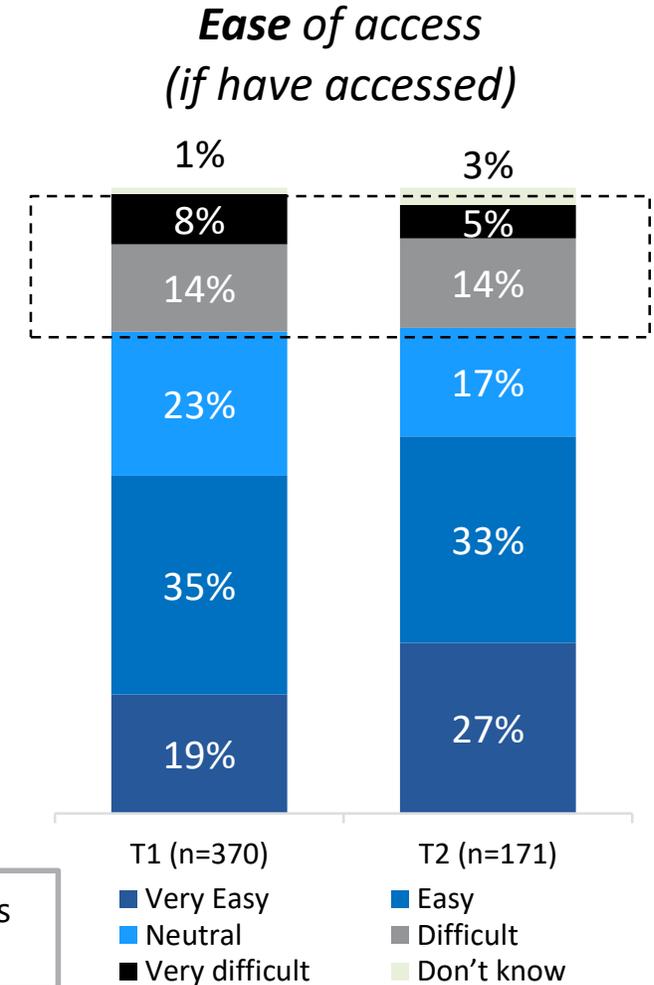
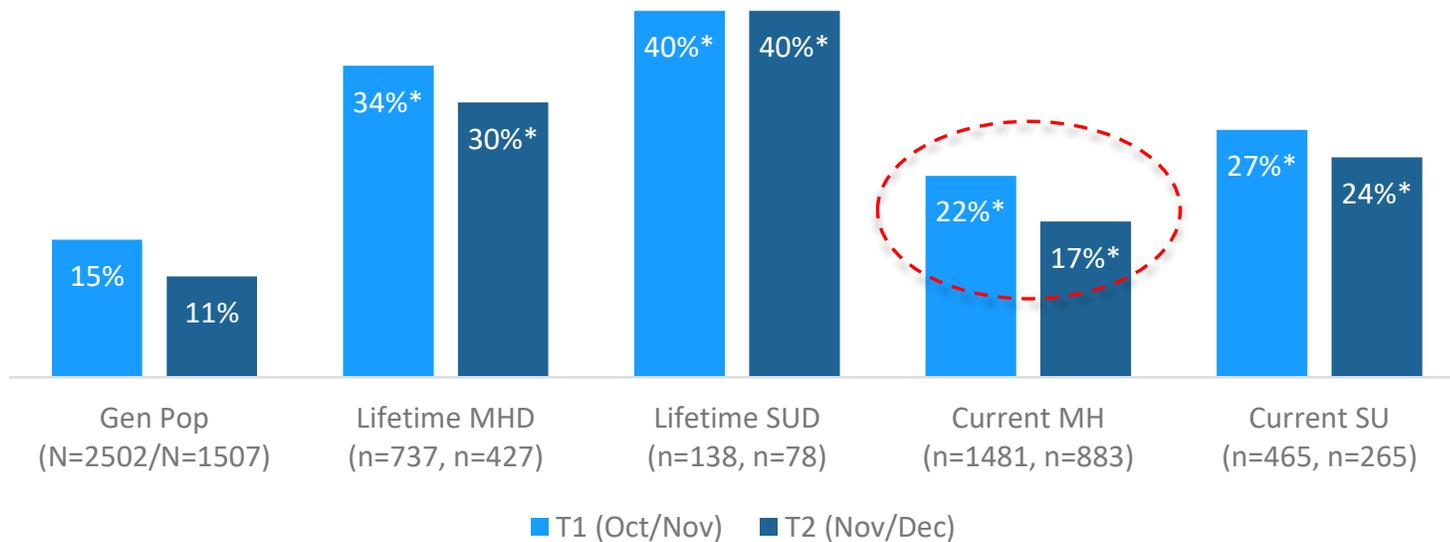
# Detailed Results

## Access to Treatment

# 15% of all respondents and 22% with current mental health symptoms report accessing mental health treatment since March; 1 in 5 found access difficult

## Access to Treatment: Mental Health

Access to mental health treatment since March 2020 (T1)/in past month (T2)



According to the Canadian Community Health Survey 2017-18 (source: ODESI), **14%** of Canadians had consulted a professional for emotional or mental health problems in the past 12 months.

Q44: Since March 2020 (T1)/over the past month (T2), have you accessed formal treatment services to help manage your emotions or mental health?

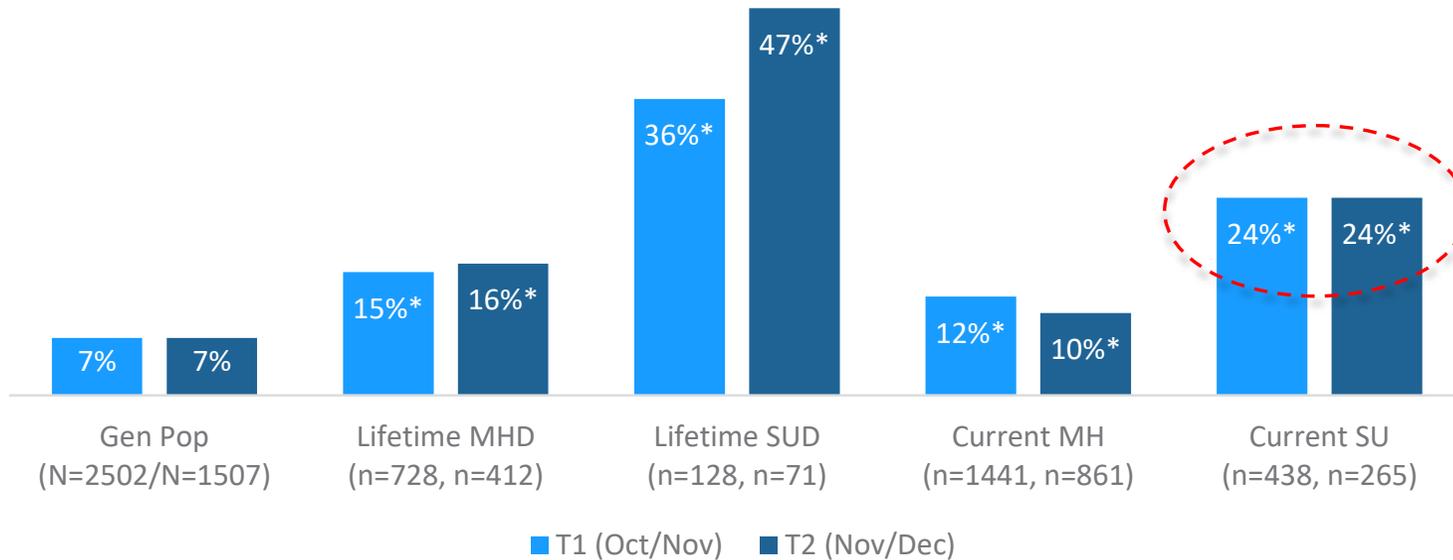
Q45: How easy or difficult has it been to access treatment services for mental health? [same for T1 and T2]

\*Statistically significant difference than rest of sample at 95% confidence interval.

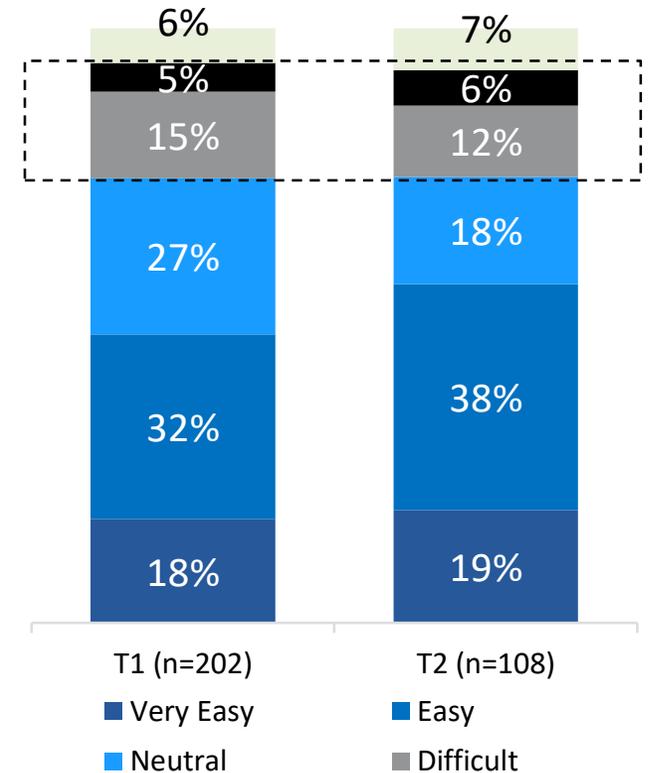
# 7% of all respondents and 24% with current problematic substance use report accessing substance use treatment since March; 1 in 5 found access difficult

## Access to Treatment: Substance Use

*Access to substance use treatment since March 2020 (T1)/in past month (T2)*



*Ease of access (if have accessed)*



As reported by [CCSA](#), between 2016 and 2018, **at least 1 in 200** Canadians accessed publicly funded, community-based substance use treatment services.

Q42r1,2,3,4: Since March 2020 (T1)/over the past month (T2), have you accessed formal treatment services to help manage your use of [alcohol], [cannabis], [prescription psychoactive drugs], [other illegal psychoactive drugs]? Q45: How easy or difficult has it been to access formal treatment services for substance use? [same for T1 and T2]

\*Statistically significant difference than rest of sample at 95% confidence interval.



# Respondent Profile

# RESPONDENT PROFILE – (1/2)

	T1 (Oct/Nov)	T2 (Nov/Dec)
<b>n =</b>	<b>2502</b>	<b>1507</b>
<b>Gender</b>	(%)	(%)
Male	51	51
Female	48	47
Other		1
<b>Age</b>		
16 to 24	13	13
25 to 39	25	24
40 to 64	42	42
65 years of age or older	21	21
<b>2SLGBTQ+</b>		
Yes	11	10
No	88	89

	T1 (Oct/Nov)	T2 (Nov/Dec)
<b>n =</b>	<b>2502</b>	<b>1507</b>
<b>Region</b>	(%)	(%)
British Columbia	13	13
Alberta	12	12
Saskatchewan	3	3
Manitoba	4	4
Ontario	39	39
Quebec	23	23
Atlantic	7	7
<b>Canadian Status</b>		
Canadian citizens by birth / non-immigrants	79	79
Canadian by naturalization	13	13
Permanent resident	6	6
No status	1	1

## RESPONDENT PROFILE – (2/2)

	T1 (Oct/Nov)	T2 (Nov/Dec)
n =	2502	1507
<b>Ethnicity</b>	(%)	(%)
White	77	76
East/Southeast Asian	8	8
Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Inuk, Inuit, Métis)	5	5
South Asian	5	5
Black	2	4
Middle Eastern	2	2
Latino	1	2
Canadian / French Canadian (Non-specified)	1	<1
<b>Income</b>		
Less than \$35K	21	19
\$35K to \$75K	30	31
\$75K to \$100K	16	16
\$100K and over	24	23

	T1 (Oct/Nov)	T2 (Nov/Dec)
n =	2502	1507
<b>Education</b>	(%)	(%)
Less than a high school diploma	3	3
High school degree or equivalent	8	21
Some college, no degree	31	29
Bachelor's degree	31	31
Master's degree	8	7
Professional degree	6	6
Doctorate	1	2
<b>Employment</b>		
Employed	46	45
Unemployed prior to COVID	5	4
Laid off or unemployed since COVID	5	5
Student	10	10
Retired	24	26
Self-employed	5	6
Unable to work	4	4

