

Mental Health and Substance Use During COVID-19

SUMMARY REPORT 3: Spotlight On Income, Employment, Access

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



Mental Health
Commission
of Canada



Canadian Centre
on Substance Use
and Addiction

Evidence. Engagement. Impact.

Leger

October 13 – November 2, 2020 (Time 1)
November 19 – December 11, 2020 (Time 2)
January 15 – January 25, 2021 (Time 3)
March 1 – March 14, 2021 (Time 4)
May 17 – May 28, 2021 (Time 5)

KEY FINDINGS

- The level of mental health and substance use concerns in the population remains high, over a year into the COVID-19 pandemic.
- COVID-19 has had a disproportionate negative impact on people with low income and those who are unemployed/laid-off. From January to May 2021:
 - **1 in 3** of people with low income or who are unemployed/laid-off reported moderately severe/severe depression symptoms.
 - Suicidal ideation among people who are unemployed/laid-off is almost double that of the general population.
- People with low income or who are unemployed/laid-off are also more likely to report substance use concerns. From January to May 2021:
 - Among people who use alcohol and/or cannabis, about **1 in 3** people with low income or who were unemployed reported problematic alcohol use and about **1 in 2** reported problematic cannabis use.
- **1 in 4** people with low income or who are unemployed/laid-off report **finances** as a top pandemic stress, compared to 1 in 7 in the general population.
- Since March 2020, more people report accessing mental health and substance use treatment **virtually** than in-person, but access lags behind need.
 - Only about **1 in 5** of people with mental health symptoms have accessed virtual services and about **1 in 10** with problematic substance use.
- People with low income or who are unemployed/laid-off face more barriers to accessing mental health and substance use treatment services.
 - Most common barriers include **financial constraints, help is not readily available, not knowing how and where to get help, and long waitlists.**
- Together, these findings highlight the importance of continued public education surrounding available (online and in-person) mental health and substance use services, and the need to address financial and system-level barriers to access, especially among at-risk and underserved populations.

CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES

Context

It has now been over one year since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past year, concerns about catching the virus, feelings of isolation and hopelessness, financial concerns, job insecurity, the trauma of losing a loved one, or a combination of these and other stressors have affected us all. However, not everyone has been impacted equally.

Since October 2020, the MHCC and CCSA have been tracking the relationship between mental health and substance use over time and across several priority populations (see slides 5 & 17). Each time period builds on the results from the first survey and will add to our knowledge about how mental health and substance use might be changing over time. The current document includes cross-sectional findings collected over five time periods between **October 2020 and May 2021**.

Objectives

The objectives of this project are to:

- Track the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on mental health and substance use across several priority populations
- Highlight the intersection between mental health and substance use during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Inform public health policy and the development of resources related to mental health and substance use

METHODS

Study Population

- People living in Canada, aged 16 and older, who signed up to complete an online survey via Leger's online panel, LEO (see final slides for sample details).

Data Collection

- Survey data was collected at four time periods, between:
 - T1: October 13 and November 2, 2020 (n=2502)
 - T2: November 19 and December 11, 2020 (n=1507)
 - T3: January 15 and January 25, 2021 (n=1502)
 - T4: March 1 and March 14, 2021 (n=1524)
 - T5: May 17 and May 28, 2021 (n=1519)

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, T3, T4, T5 would be Canada (n= ~ 1500) $\pm 2.5\%$, 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

	T3 (Jan 2021)	T4 (March 2021)	T5 (May 2021)	Pooled T4- T5 (March - May 2021)	Pooled T3- T5 (Jan- May 2021)
Weighted n=	1502	1524	1519	3043	4545
Current Problematic Alcohol and Cannabis Use [Problematic SU] <i>Respondents reporting problematic (risky) alcohol use (AUDIT score 8+) and/or cannabis use (CUDIT-R score 8+).</i>	18% (n=264)	16% (n=248)	17% (n=264)	17% (n=512)	17% (n=776)
Current Mental Health Symptoms [MH Symptoms] <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>	60% (n=898)	59% (n=900)	58% (n=874)	58% (n=1774)	59% (n=2672)
Households At or Under Low-Income Cut-Off Threshold [Low Income]* <i>Respondents reporting pre-tax household income equal to or lower than a low-income cut-off based on household size and size of population centre.</i>	10% (n=147)	9% (n=131)	6% (n=90)	7% (n=221)	6% (n=368)
Unemployed/Laid-Off <i>Respondents reporting employment status as unemployed before COVID-19, unemployed or laid-off during COVID-19, or unable to work, excluding students and retirees.</i>	13% (n=201)	14% (n=217)	11% (n=173)	13% (n=390)	13% (n=591)

*For example, the low-income cut-off threshold for a 4-person household is \$26,000 in a small population centre (<30,000) and \$37,000 in a large population centre (>100,000).



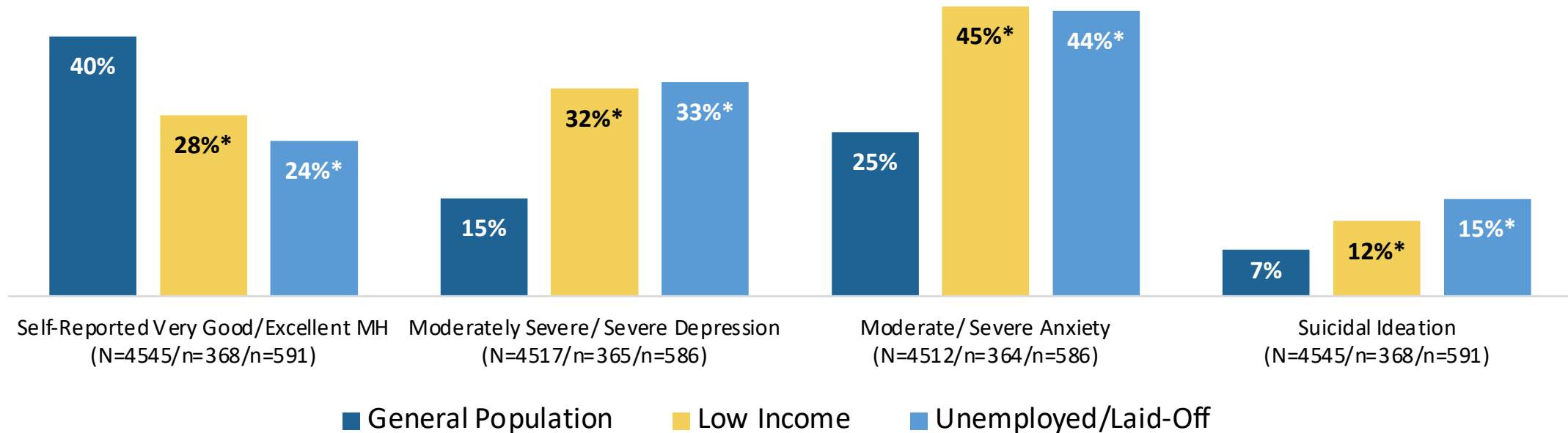
Detailed Results

Spotlight 1: Low Income and Unemployment

Respondents with low income or who are unemployed are more likely to report symptoms of depression and anxiety

Higher rates of suicidal ideation among people who are unemployed or laid-off

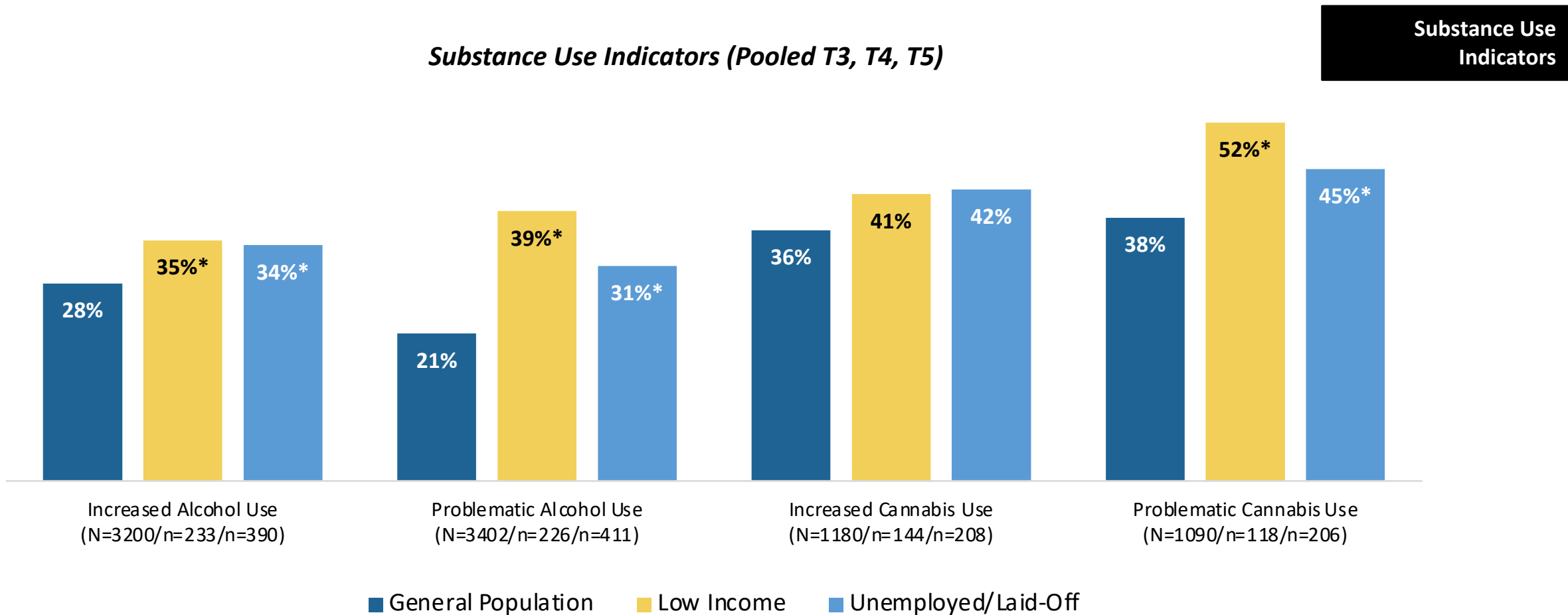
Mental Health Indicators (Pooled T3, T4, T5)



According to [Statistics Canada](#), in 2019 **58%** of Canadians in the bottom fifth of household incomes reported excellent or very good mental health compared to **73%** of Canadians in the top fifth of household income.

Among people who use alcohol or cannabis, respondents with low income are more likely to indicate problematic use

Respondents who are unemployed also report higher rates than in the general population



AUDIT scale/ CUDIT-R scale/ Q22r14, 15: Drinking alcohol (beverages/drinks)/ Consuming cannabis - During the past month, have you engaged in more or less of the following activities?

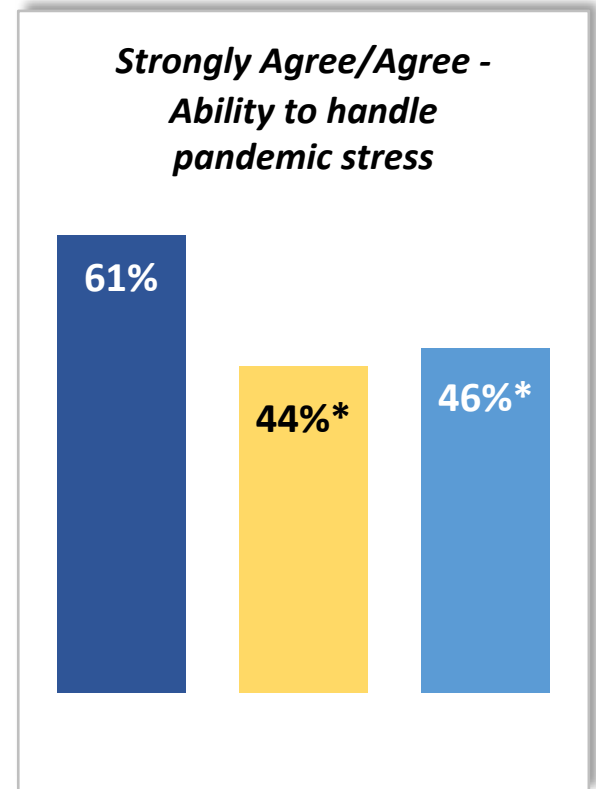
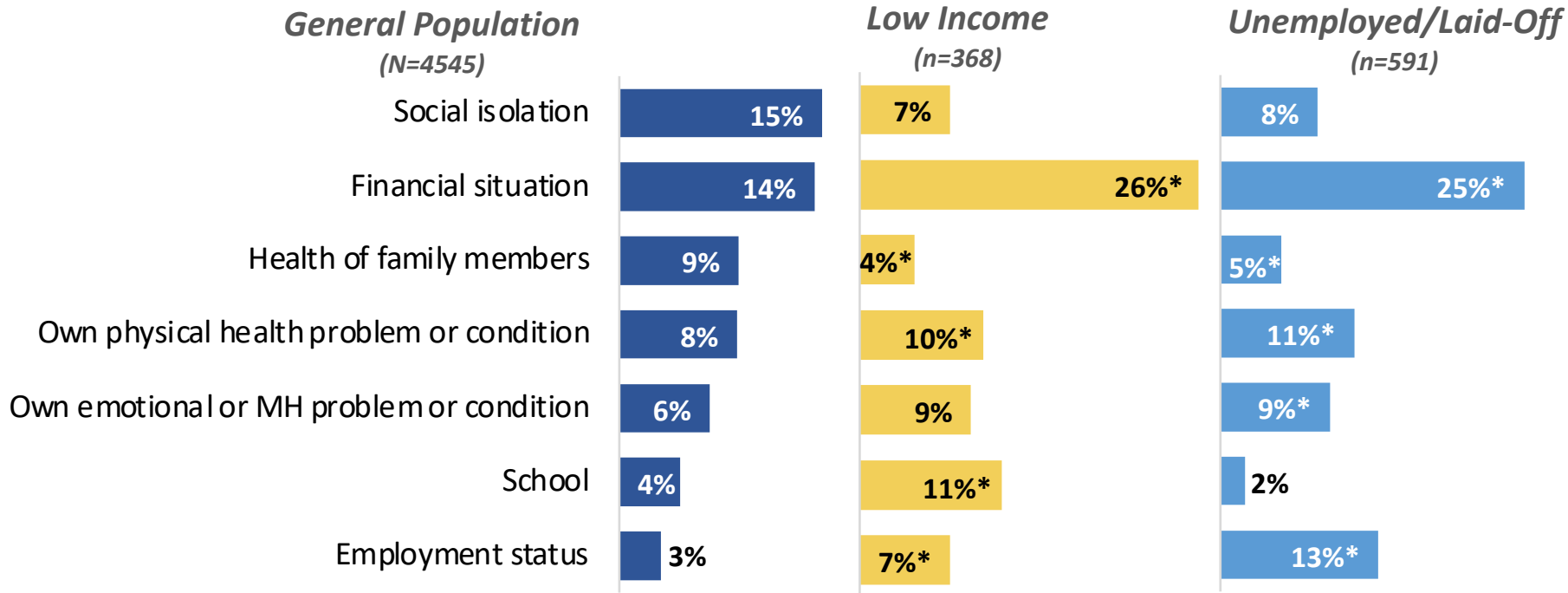
*Statistically significant difference than rest of the sample at 95% confidence interval

Respondents with low income or who are unemployed are far more likely to report financial situation as a major pandemic stressor

Also far less likely to say they can cope with pandemic stress

Major Stressors

Top Pandemic Stressors (Pooled T3, T4, T5)



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 (Top 6 Stressors)? (T3,4,5)

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

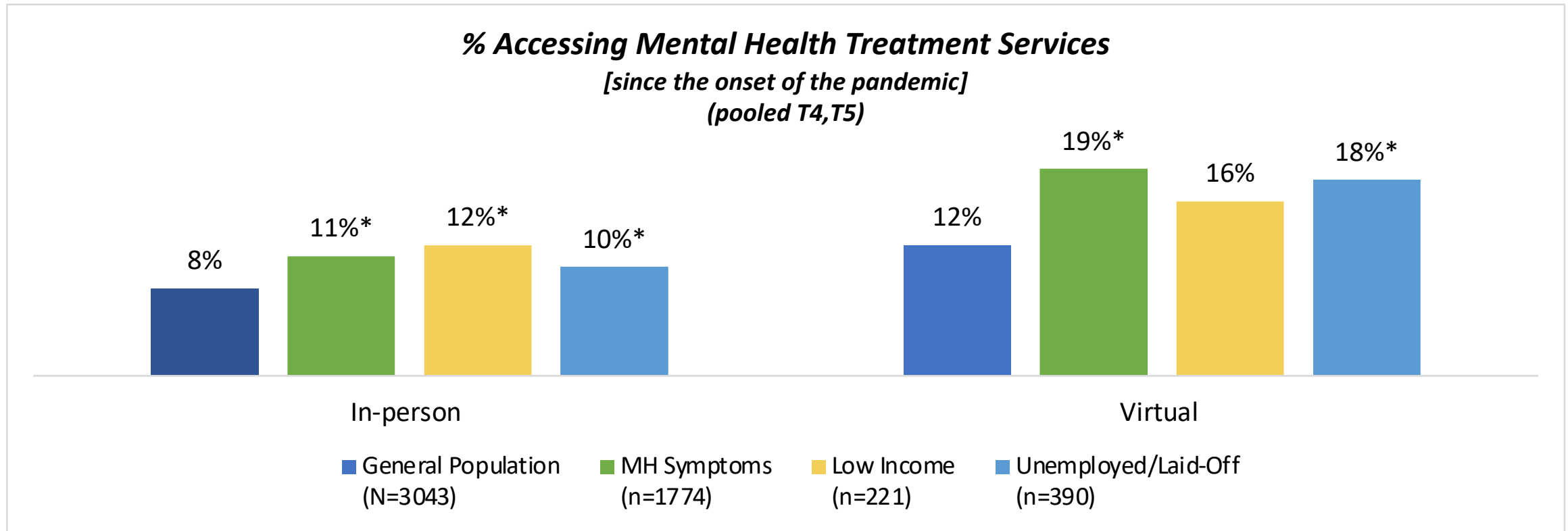


Detailed Results

Spotlight 2: Access to Treatment

Even with a strong shift to virtual delivery and growing need, access to mental health services has been limited since March 2020

Only 19% of people with mental health symptoms have accessed virtual services



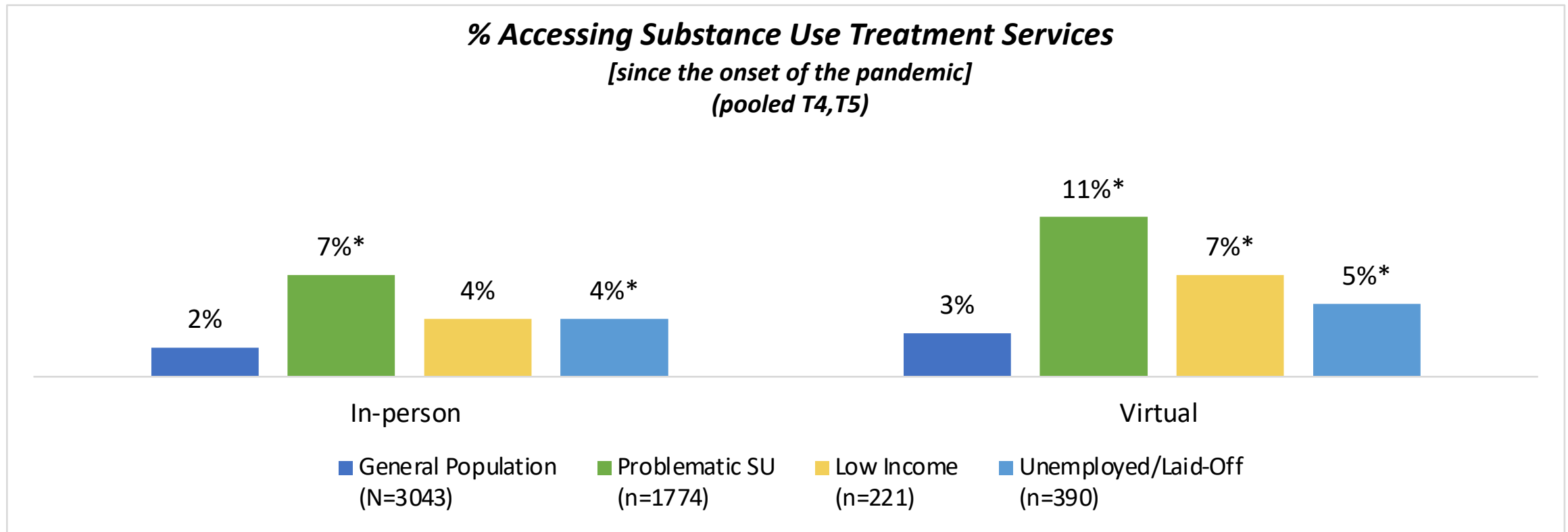
Q54A/Q56A: Since the onset of COVID-19 (March 2020), did you access in-person/virtual (e.g., online or via telephone) mental health services?

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

Access to substance use treatment lags further behind, despite a similar shift to virtual delivery since March 2020

Only 11% of people with problematic alcohol or cannabis use have accessed virtual

Substance Use –
Access to Treatment



Q46A/Q48A: Since the onset of COVID-19 (March 2020), did you access in-person/virtual (e.g., online or via telephone) treatment services substance use or substance use disorder?

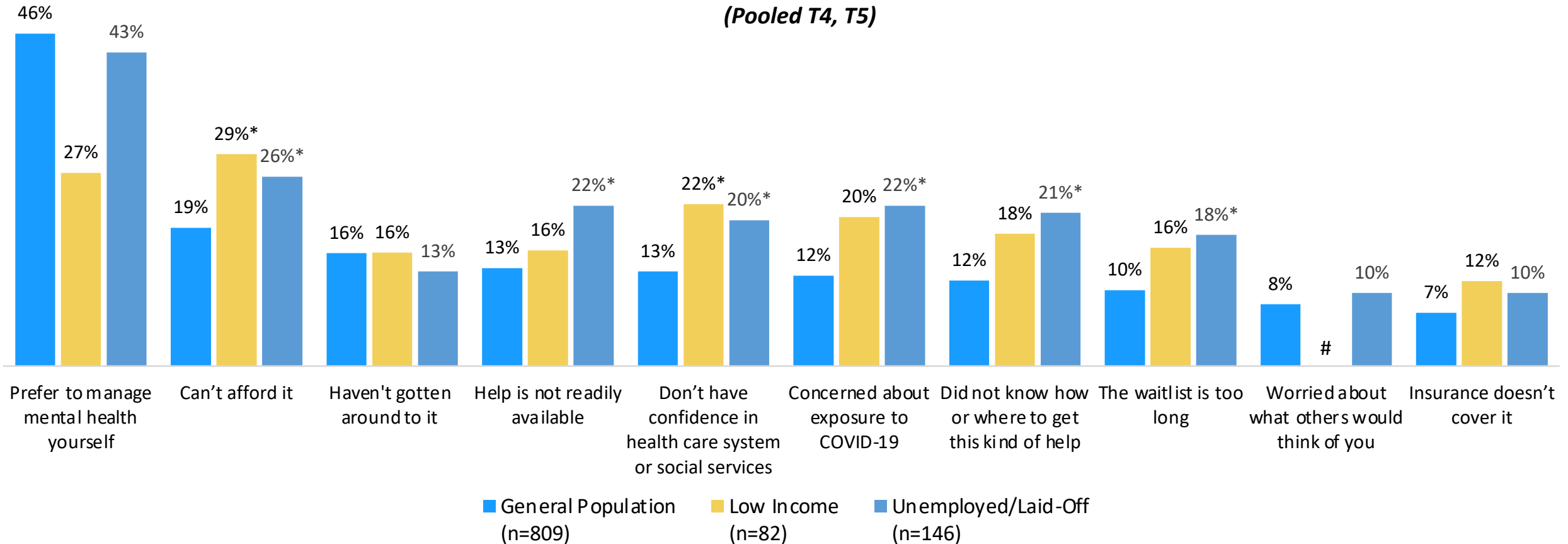
*Statistically significant difference than rest of sample at 95% confidence interval.

Respondents with low income or who are unemployed face more barriers to mental health treatment

Overall, many respondents prefer to manage their mental health themselves

Mental Health - Barriers

Top Reasons for Not Accessing Mental Health Treatment
(Pooled T4, T5)



Q53A: Which of the following are reasons for why you did not access formal treatment services for mental health? (TOTAL MENTIONS) (Excluded: ACCESSED FORMAL TREATMENT; or DID NOT ACCESS but DO NOT NEED FORMAL TREATMENT)

*Statistically significant difference than rest of sample at 95% confidence interval. #Mentions <5% or <10 respondents not shown.

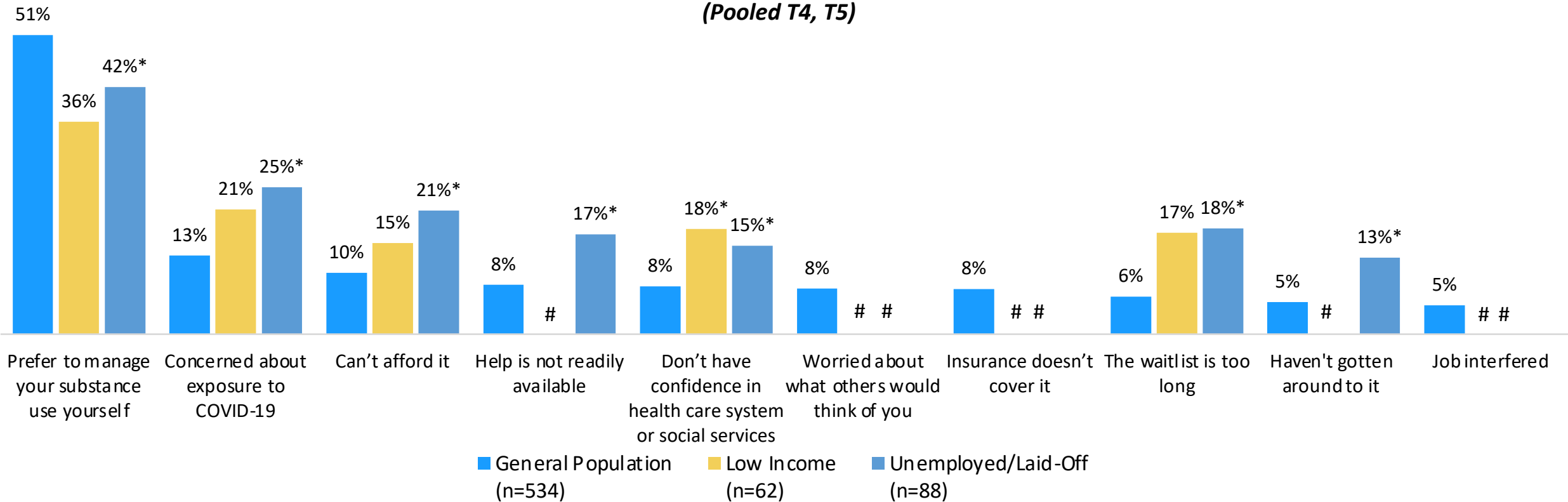
Respondents with low income or who are unemployed also face more barriers to substance use treatment

Affordability, lack of availability and confidence in services, and long waitlists cited as barriers

Substance Use - Barriers

Top Reasons for Not Accessing Substance Use Treatment

(Pooled T4, T5)



Q53A: Which of the following are reasons for why you did not access formal treatment services for substance use? (TOTAL MENTIONS) (Excluded: ACCESSED FORMAL TREATMENT; or DID NOT ACCESS but DO NOT NEED FORMAL TREATMENT)

*Statistically significant difference than rest of sample at 95% confidence interval. #Mentions <5% or <10 respondents not shown



PART II

Tracking survey indicators over time

Trends

PRIORITY POPULATION PROFILE – PART II

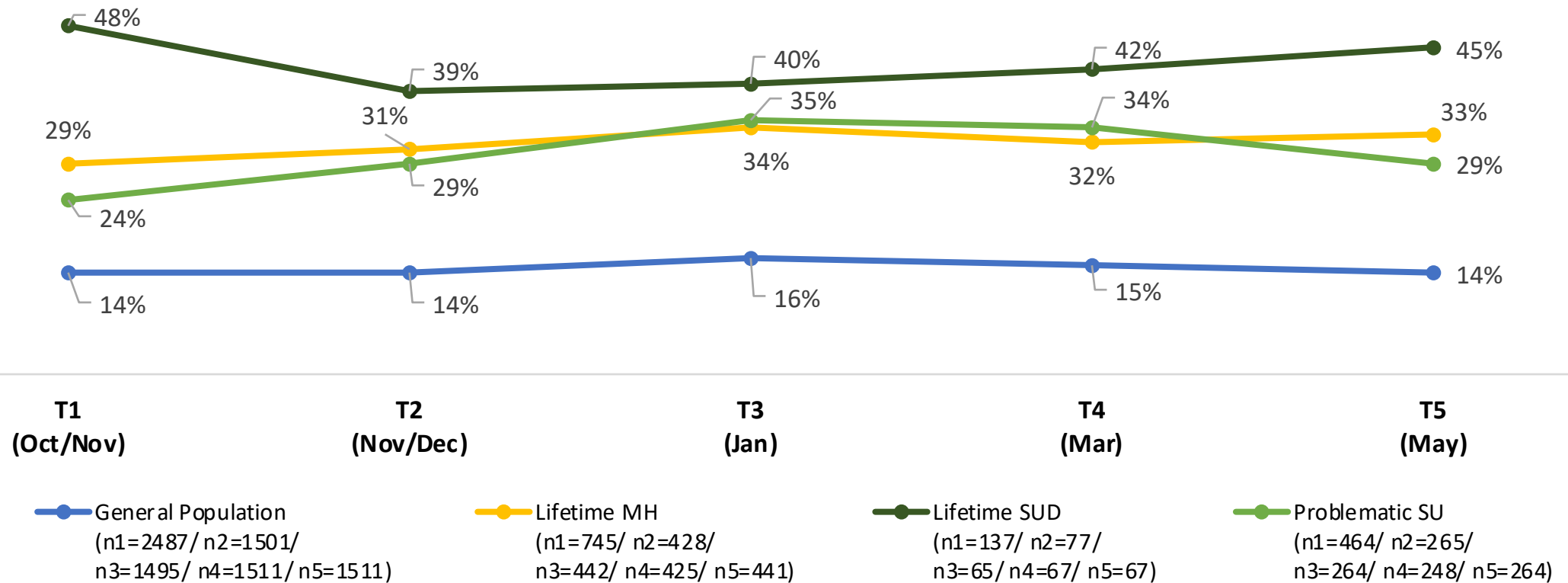
	T1 (Oct/Nov 2020)	T2 (Nov/Dec 2020)	T3 (Jan 2021)	T4 (March 2021)	T5 (May 2021)
Weighted N=	2502	1507	1502	1524	1519
Lifetime Mental Health Diagnosis [Lifetime MHD] <i>Has a medical or psychological professional ever diagnosed you with a mental health disorder (e.g., depression, anxiety, PTSD, etc.)? YES</i>	30% (n=747)	28% (n=428)	30% (n=445)	28% (n=430)	29% (n=444)
Lifetime Substance Use Diagnosis [Lifetime SUD] <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)	4% (n=65)	4% (n=67)	4% (n=67)
Current Problematic Alcohol and/or Cannabis Use [Problematic SU] <i>Respondents reporting problematic (risky) alcohol use (AUDIT score 8+) and/or cannabis use (CUDIT-R score 8+).</i>	19% (n=465)	18% (n=265)	18% (n=264)	16% (n=248)	17% (n=264)
Current Mental Health Symptoms [MH Symptoms] <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)	60% (n=898)	59% (n=900)	58% (n=874)

Depression symptoms continue to be more common among people with a history of substance use disorders

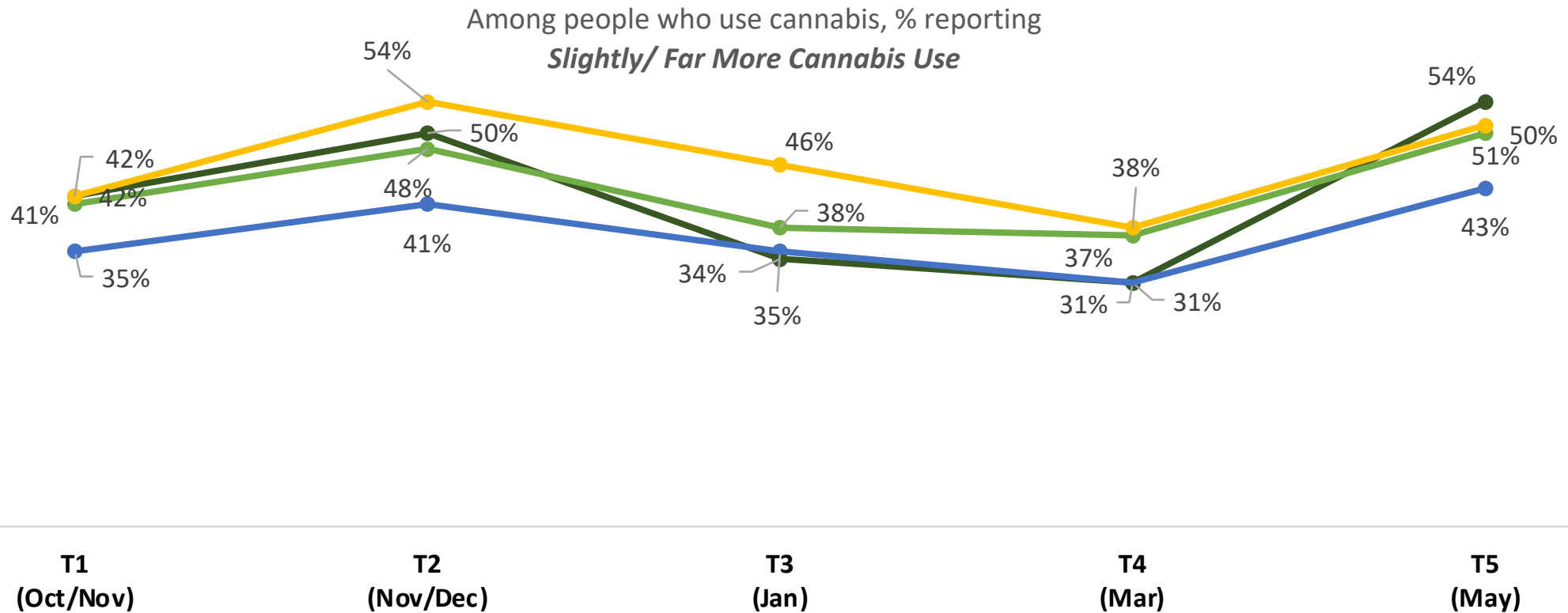
Overall, self-reported severe depression symptoms have stayed very high since October 2020

Depression (PHQ9)
- Trends

Moderately Severe, Severe depression symptoms



Among people who use cannabis, the percentage reporting increased use rose in May 2021



● General Population
(n1=643/ n2=389/
n3=383/ n4=348/ n5=358)

● Lifetime MHD
(n1=270/ n2=179/
n3=160/ n4=141/ n5=162)

● MH Symptoms
(n1=488/ n2=296/
n3=301/ n4=266/ n5=276)

● Lifetime SUD
(n1=75/ n2=53/
n3=37/ n4=28/ n5=47)

Depression and anxiety symptoms remain elevated among people with a history of mental health disorders

Mental Health Indicators	General Population					Lifetime MHD					MH Symptoms				
	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5
<i>n=</i>	2502	1507	1502	1524	1519	747	428	445	430	444	1482	883	898	900	874
Strong Mental Health	44%	40%	40%	40%	40%	<u>18%</u>	<u>18%</u>	<u>18%</u>	<u>15%</u>	<u>17%</u>	<u>24%</u>	<u>20%</u>	<u>20%</u>	<u>17%</u>	<u>18%</u>
Moderately Severe/Severe Depression	14%	14%	16%	15%	14%	<u>29%</u>	<u>31%</u>	<u>34%</u>	<u>32%</u>	<u>33%</u>	24%	24%	27%	26%	24%
Moderate/Severe Anxiety	25%	24%	26%	25%	24%	<u>46%</u>	<u>43%</u>	<u>45%</u>	<u>46%</u>	<u>48%</u>	<u>41%</u>	40%	44%	43%	42%
Suicide Ideation	6%	5%	7%	7%	8%	<u>13%</u>	<u>13%</u>	<u>15%</u>	<u>16%</u>	<u>18%</u>	10%	9%	12%	11%	14%
Access (past month)	15%	11%	12%	12%	13%	<u>34%</u>	<u>30%</u>	<u>28%</u>	<u>30%</u>	<u>31%</u>	<u>22%</u>	<u>17%</u>	<u>19%</u>	<u>18%</u>	<u>19%</u>

PHQ9 scale/ GAD7 scale/ Q7: In general, how would you describe your mental health? / Q11: Have you seriously contemplated suicide since the COVID-19 pandemic began? / [same for T1, T2-T5] / Q44: Since March 2020 (T1)/over the past month (T2-T5), have you accessed formal treatment services to help manage your emotions or mental health? Underlined proportions indicate statistically significant difference than rest of sample within time interval at 95% confidence interval. Sample T1: ~2500; T2, T3, T4, T5: ~1500

Mental health continues to be worse among individuals with past or current substance use concerns

Mental Health Indicators	General Population					Lifetime SUD					Problematic SU				
	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5
	<i>n=</i> 2502	1507	1502	1524	1519	138	77	65	67	67	465	265	264	248	264
Strong Mental Health	44%	40%	40%	40%	40%	<u>27%</u>	<u>25%</u>	27%	24%	26%	<u>34%</u>	<u>30%</u>	<u>31%</u>	<u>26%</u>	<u>26%</u>
Moderately Severe/Severe Depression	14%	14%	16%	15%	14%	<u>48%</u>	<u>39%</u>	40%	42%	45%	<u>24%</u>	<u>29%</u>	<u>35%</u>	<u>34%</u>	<u>29%</u>
Moderate/Severe Anxiety	25%	24%	26%	25%	24%	<u>48%</u>	<u>51%</u>	47%	55%	49%	<u>38%</u>	41%	<u>44%</u>	<u>44%</u>	<u>42%</u>
Suicide Ideation	6%	5%	7%	7%	8%	<u>19%</u>	<u>30%</u>	26%	25%	40%	<u>13%</u>	<u>15%</u>	<u>15%</u>	<u>12%</u>	<u>18%</u>
Access (past month)	15%	11%	12%	12%	13%	<u>39%</u>	<u>39%</u>	29%	39%	39%	<u>27%</u>	<u>24%</u>	<u>22%</u>	<u>22%</u>	<u>23%</u>

PHQ9 scale/ GAD7 scale/ Q7: In general, how would you describe your mental health? / Q11: Have you seriously contemplated suicide since the COVID-19 pandemic began? / [same for T1, T2-T5] / Q44: Since March 2020 (T1)/over the past month (T2-T5), have you accessed formal treatment services to help manage your emotions or mental health? Underlined proportions indicate statistically significant difference than rest of sample within time interval at 95% confidence interval. Sample T1: ~2500; T2, T3, T4, T5: ~1500

Problematic alcohol and cannabis use continues to be common among individuals with past or current mental health concerns

Substance Use Indicators	General Population					Lifetime MHD					MH Symptoms				
	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5
	<i>n=</i> 2502	1507	1502	1524	1519	747	428	445	430	444	1482	883	898	900	874
Slightly/ Far More Alcohol use	31%	28%	30%	29%	26%	<u>36%</u>	<u>38%</u>	33%	33%	<u>34%</u>	<u>40%</u>	<u>36%</u>	<u>36%</u>	<u>36%</u>	<u>33%</u>
AUDIT 8+	23%	22%	22%	21%	20%	<u>31%</u>	<u>33%</u>	<u>32%</u>	<u>29%</u>	<u>28%</u>	<u>32%</u>	<u>31%</u>	<u>30%</u>	<u>29%</u>	<u>28%</u>
Slightly/ Far More Cannabis Use	35%	41%	35%	31%	43%	<u>42%</u>	<u>50%</u>	34%	31%	<u>54%</u>	<u>41%</u>	<u>48%</u>	<u>38%</u>	<u>37%</u>	<u>50%</u>
CUDIT 8+	40%	37%	38%	36%	39%	<u>46%</u>	<u>45%</u>	44%	39%	<u>49%</u>	<u>48%</u>	<u>44%</u>	<u>44%</u>	<u>40%</u>	<u>46%</u>
Access (past month)	8%	7%	7%	6%	5%	<u>15%</u>	<u>17%</u>	<u>11%</u>	<u>11%</u>	<u>10%</u>	<u>13%</u>	<u>11%</u>	<u>11%</u>	<u>10%</u>	<u>8%</u>

AUDIT scale/CUDIT-R scale/ Q22r14, 15: Drinking alcohol (beverages/drinks)/ 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 [T2-T5]? / Q42r1,2,3,4: Since March 2020 (T1) / over the past month (T2-T5), have you accessed formal treatment services to help manage your use of [alcohol], [cannabis], [prescription psychoactive drugs], [Other illegal psychoactive drugs]?

Underlined proportions indicate statistically significant difference than rest of sample within time interval at 95% confidence interval. Sample T1: ~2500; T2, T3, T4, T5: ~1500

More than 1 in 4 people who use alcohol report increasing their use during the pandemic

Substance Use Indicators	General Population					Lifetime SUD					Problematic SU				
	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5
	<i>n=</i> 2502	1507	1502	1524	1519	138	77	65	67	67	465	265	264	248	264
Slightly/ Far More Alcohol use	31%	28%	30%	29%	26%	35%	45%	42%	51%	41%	<u>48%</u>	<u>43%</u>	<u>48%</u>	<u>48%</u>	<u>47%</u>
AUDIT 8+	23%	22%	22%	21%	20%	<u>75%</u>	83%	76%	73%	69%	<u>83%</u>	<u>82%</u>	<u>82%</u>	<u>84%</u>	<u>83%</u>
Slightly/ Far More Cannabis Use	35%	41%	35%	31%	43%	42%	54%	46%	38%	51%	<u>52%</u>	<u>53%</u>	<u>46%</u>	<u>45%</u>	<u>60%</u>
CUDIT 8+	40%	37%	38%	36%	39%	<u>61%</u>	<u>76%</u>	53%	<u>60%</u>	<u>75%</u>	79%	79%	82%	73%	73%
Access (past month)	8%	7%	7%	6%	5%	<u>37%</u>	<u>46%</u>	29%	21%	37%	<u>26%</u>	<u>25%</u>	<u>25%</u>	<u>20%</u>	<u>18%</u>

AUDIT scale/CUDIT-R scale/ Q22r14, 15: Drinking alcohol (beverages/drinks)/ 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 [T2-T5]? / Q42r1,2,3,4: Since March 2020 (T1) / over the past month (T2-T5), have you accessed formal treatment services to help manage your use of [alcohol], [cannabis], [prescription psychoactive drugs], [Other illegal psychoactive drugs]?

Underlined proportions indicate statistically significant difference than rest of sample within time interval at 95% confidence interval. Sample T1: ~2500; T2, T3, T4, T5: ~1500



Respondent profile

RESPONDENT PROFILE – (1/2)

	T1 (Oct/ Nov'20)	T2 (Nov/ Dec'20)	T3 (Jan'21)	T4 (Mar'21)	T5 (May'21)
n =	2502	1507	1502	1524	1519
Gender	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Female	51	51	51	51	51
Male	48	47	48	48	47
Other		1	1	1	2
Age					
16 to 24	13	13	13	13	13
25 to 39	25	24	24	24	25
40 to 64	42	42	42	42	41
65 +	21	21	21	21	21
2SLGBTQ+					
Yes	11	10	11	11	11
No	88	89	88	88	88

	T1 (Oct/ Nov'20)	T2 (Nov/ Dec'20)	T3 (Jan'21)	T4 (Mar'21)	T5 (May'21)
n =	2502	1507	1502	1524	1519
Region	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
British Columbia	13	13	13	13	13
Alberta	12	12	12	12	12
Saskatchewan	3	3	3	3	3
Manitoba	4	4	4	4	4
Ontario	39	39	39	39	39
Quebec	23	23	23	23	23
Atlantic	7	7	7	7	7
Canadian Status					
Canadian citizens by birth / non-immigrants	79	79	77	79	80
Canadian by naturalization	13	13	15	12	12
Permanent resident	6	6	6	8	6
No status	1	1	1	1	1

RESPONDENT PROFILE – (2/2)

	T1 (Oct/ Nov'20)	T2 (Nov/ Dec'20)	T3 (Jan'21)	T4 (Mar'21)	T5 (May'21)
n =	2502	1507	1502	1524	1519
Ethnicity	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
White	77	76	78	77	77
East/Southeast Asian	8	8	7	8	10
Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Inuk, Inuit, Métis)	5	5	5	5	5
South Asian	5	5	4	5	4
Black	2	4	2	2	2
Middle Eastern	2	2	2	2	2
Latino	1	2	2	1	2
Canadian / French Canadian (Non-specified)	1	<1	<1	1	<1
Income					
Less than \$35K	21	19	-	-	-
\$35K to \$75K	30	31	-	-	-
\$75K to \$100K	16	16	-	-	-
\$100K and over	24	23	-	-	-

	T1 (Oct/ Nov'20)	T2 (Nov/ Dec'20)	T3 (Jan'21)	T4 (Mar'21)	T5 (May'21)
n =	2502	1507	1502	1524	1519
Education	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Less than a high school diploma	3	3	3	5	3
High school degree or equivalent	18	21	19	21	19
Some college, no degree	31	29	30	28	27
Bachelor's degree	31	31	32	30	32
Master's degree	8	7	8	9	10
Professional degree	6	6	7	6	6
Doctorate	1	2	1	1	2
Employment					
Employed	46	45	46	45	48
Unemployed prior to COVID	5	4	4	5	3
Unemployed since COVID	5	5	6	5	5
Student	10	10	9	9	8
Retired	24	26	25	24	24
Self-employed	5	6	6	6	6
Unable to work	4	4	4	4	4

