

Climate Concern and Eco-anxiety in BC Youth: Findings from the Youth Development Instrument

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Keywords: eco-anxiety, climate anxiety, youth

A growing number of reports are describing increased worry about environmental degradation. Terms such as eco-anxiety have emerged within the literature to describe experiences of heightened anxiety and fear related to the climate crisis and other environmental issues.¹⁻³ As the global environmental crisis grows in urgency, eco-anxiety could precipitate new psychological conditions and exacerbate existing mental illnesses.^{4,5} This is of particular concern among youth who disproportionately experience the impacts of the global environmental crisis. For instance, children and adolescents are more likely to experience repeated stressors related to the climate crisis during their lifetime in comparison to previous generations.⁶ Moreover, this age group is in a developmental period that is highly sensitive to stressors.⁴ Recent efforts have attempted to measure eco-anxiety within the population; however, few studies have attempted to look at risk and resiliency factors related to eco-anxiety.

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, we aimed to assess levels of climate concern and eco-anxiety within a Canadian sample of adolescents using the Youth Development Instrument (YDI), a youth well-being survey. The YDI aims to identify resources, opportunities, and practices that contribute to positive youth development. The survey is administered electronically within schools across the province of British Columbia (BC) for students aged 15-18. Secondly, we conducted a logistic regression analysis using findings from the YDI survey to identify demographic factors associated with significant and frequent experiences of ecoanxiety. Demographic factors included gender identity, race, LGBTQIA2S+ identity, rural or urban residence, being born in Canada, level of financial pressure (i.e., low, medium, high), highest level of parental/legal guardian education, and mental health condition(s).

A total of 14,596 respondents (46% girls; 6% gender minority) were included. The majority of adolescents (72.3%) reported feeling worried about climate change and 74.1% thought the threat should be taken more seriously. A smaller proportion reported experiences of ecoanxiety, with 45.0% feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge due to the environment in the past two weeks of the YDI survey. Additionally, 40.7% of respondents reported feeling anxiety in the last two weeks that their personal behaviours would do little to help fix the problem. A total of 13.5% (n = 1516) of students were identified to have significant and frequent experiences of ecoanxiety. Adjusting for other demographic factors, these respondents were at increased odds of identifying as LGBTQIA2S+ (OR: 1.26 [1.07, 1.48]), and experiencing medium (OR: 2.07 [1.67, 2.42]) or high (OR: 2.61 [2.22, 3.07]) levels of financial pressure. Additionally, this group were also at increased odds of screening positive for generalized anxiety (OR: 2.40 [2.02, 2.85]) and depression (OR: 2.53 [2.13, 3.01]) on the YDI, as measured by the Generalized Anxiety Disorder – 2 (GAD-2) and Patient Health Questionnaire – 8 (PHQ-8).

Our findings indicate some BC youth are psychologically impacted by environmental issues, and identifies several demographic groups related to eco-anxiety. These findings may help with resource and funding prioritization and allocation for the development and distribution of resources and supports dedicated to addressing eco-anxiety in youth.

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