



# Portrait of the Community of Lac-Mégantic's Youth

## BACKGROUND

In the spring of 2016, during a day of discussions gathering citizens' committees, as well as public, community and private organizations, the Table des partenaires of MRC du Granit emphasized that there was little information available on the reality of young people living in this territory. Following this observation, UQAC's *Chaire de recherche sur les événements traumatiques, la santé mentale et la résilience* (Research Chair on Traumatic Events, Mental Health and Resilience), in collaboration with the Department of Public Health of Estrie, conducted a study in the winter of 2017 with the young people of this community. This study provides an overall picture of the school, family and social life of those aged 10 to 25 and identifies the consequences of the train derailment on their psychological health.

## WHAT IS KNOWN

Exposure to severe fires seems to be associated with signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, poor school performance, dropping out of school (Broberg, Dyregrov, & Lilled, 2005) and the presence of psychological problems, musculoskeletal problems and stress reactions (Dirkzwager, Kerrens, & Yzermans, 2006). Links were found between the distress experienced by parents and the presence of post-traumatic stress disorder in children (Vila, Witkowski, Tondini, Perez-Diaz, Mouren-Simeoni, & Jouvent, 2001) in young people aged between 8 and 13. Several studies have shown maintained, high-level psychological distress symptoms up to two years after a disaster. However, the chronicity of symptoms would rarely exceed 30% in young people (Bonanno, Brewin, Kaniasty, & La Greca, 2010). Some believe that acute mental health symptoms persist four years after a tragedy (Kalantari, & Vostanis, 2010, Olteanu and al., 2011).

Children and adolescents exposed to disasters may also experience other psychological problems such as depression, anxiety and stress, suicidal thoughts, behavioural problems, and substance abuse (Bonanno, Brewin, Kaniasty, & La Greca, 2010). They may also experience severe emotional disturbances and behavioural problems following a catastrophe (Olteanu and al., 2011). Events such as absenteeism, withdrawal, reduced concentration, and decreased school performance have also been reported in children and adolescents affected by a disaster (Ward, Shelley, Kaase, & Pane, 2008; Piyasil and al., 2007). Significant youth withdrawals (Swenson and al., 1996), as well as social adjustment problems with their friends (Asarnow and al., 1999) were also raised.

Being exposed to a disaster can also have a positive impact on various aspects of the lives of children, adolescents and young adults. For example, about half of the respondents in the study conducted by Yu and al. (2010) identified at least one positive experience related to an earthquake, including that of having decreased suicidal ideation. Parents' self-reported post-traumatic growth would be a predictor of post-traumatic growth in their children (Hafstad, Gil-Rivas, Kilmer, & Raeder, 2010), as would social and family support (Cryder, Kilmer, Tedeschi, & Calhoun, 2006, Hafstad, Gil-Rivas, Kilmer, & Raeder, 2010). In addition, Yu and al. (2010) show that exposure to touching news and encouraging information reports are associated with post-traumatic growth in adolescents.

## METHODOLOGY

The data were collected through:

- Self-administered questionnaires:
  - 143 students in grades 5 and 6 of 4 elementary schools serving the municipalities of Lac-Mégantic, Frontenac, Nantes, Sainte-Cécile-de-Whitton and Marston (68 girls, 75 boys).
  - 689 students attending Polyvalente Montignac (329 girls, 360 boys).
  - 146 young adults from the Centre d'études collégiales (cégep), the Adult Education Centre (CEA) and the Vocational Training Centre (PSC). (79 young women and 67 young men).
- Focus groups:
  - 66 elementary school students (8 focus groups: 37 girls, 29 boys).
  - 66 high school and post-secondary students (high school, cégep, CEA and PSC) (9 focus groups: 33 boys, 33 girls).

## RESULTS

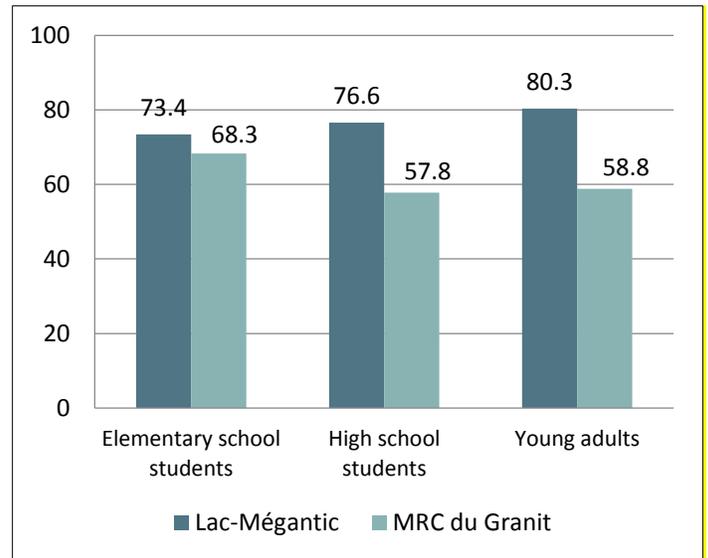
### *Main Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Just over one in two respondents lived with both parents in percentages ranging from 51.7% to 59.4%. Elementary students (55.3%) lived mainly in the Lac-Mégantic municipality, while the other two types of students (secondary and young adults) came mainly from another municipality located in the MRC du Granit. More than 70% of young adults and high school students were working 15 hours or less per week.

### *Respondents and Derailment*

The majority of elementary (70.6%) and high school students (63.6%) and young adults (67.1%) were exposed to the derailment, whether it was because they feared for their own life or that of a loved one, whether they have been without news of a person who was dear to them, that they were temporarily or permanently evacuated from their homes, or because they suffered material losses. Whether or not they were exposed to the derailment varies according to the place of residence of the respondent (Figure 1).

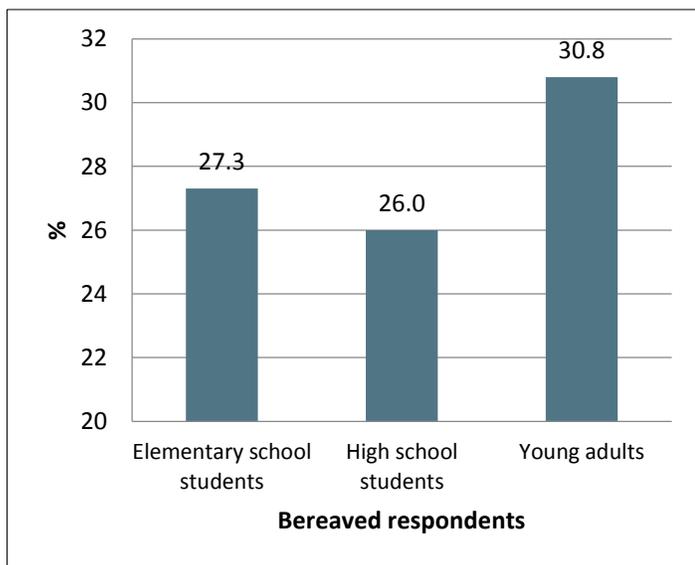
**Figure 1**  
Percentage of respondents exposed to the derailment, according to their place of residence



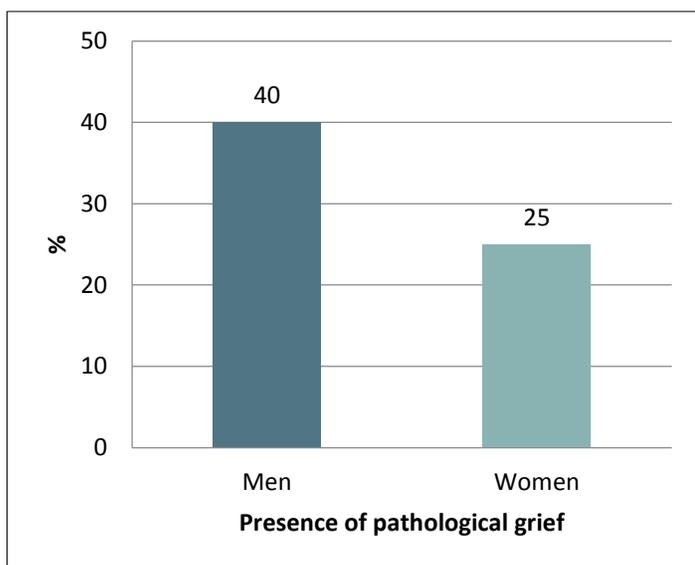
Of the respondents, 27.3% of elementary and 26% of high school students have lost a relative or friend and 30.8% of young adults are in the same situation (Figure 2). Of the 45 bereaved young adults, one quarter of young women and 40% of young men experience pathological bereavement characterized by intense and prolonged reactions of feelings of grief that cause social functioning problems (Figure 3). In comparison, among the 800 adults in the MRC du Granit who completed a telephone survey in the fall of 2016<sup>a</sup>, a quarter of the bereaved were experiencing pathological grief.

<sup>a</sup> Maltais, Généreux, Roy, Pouliot, Bergeron-Leclerc, Cherblanc, Labra, & Lachance (2015-2020). Research Project entitled: *Consequences of the Lac-Mégantic tragedy: the resilience process of adults within the MRC du Granit*. Study conducted under the direction of UQAC with the collaboration of the CIUSSS l'Estrie – CHUS Public Health Department during the fall of 2016 with 387 adults living in Lac-Mégantic and 413 living elsewhere in the MRC du Granit.

**Figure 2**  
Respondents who are grieving as a result of the derailment (%)



**Figure 3**  
Pathological grief in young adults, according to genders (%)



## Respondents and their Academic Progress

In percentages ranging from 75% up to 90%, regardless of age and gender, respondents like, are fond of, and are proud to attend school and feel safe. They feel positive about their teachers and feel respected by them. Most respondents also feel that their parents are involved in different ways in their schooling. However, among high school students and young adults, a significant number of respondents (over 40%) believe that fatigue has negative repercussions in many aspects of their

school life (e.g.: classroom concentration, completion of school work, desire to go to class).

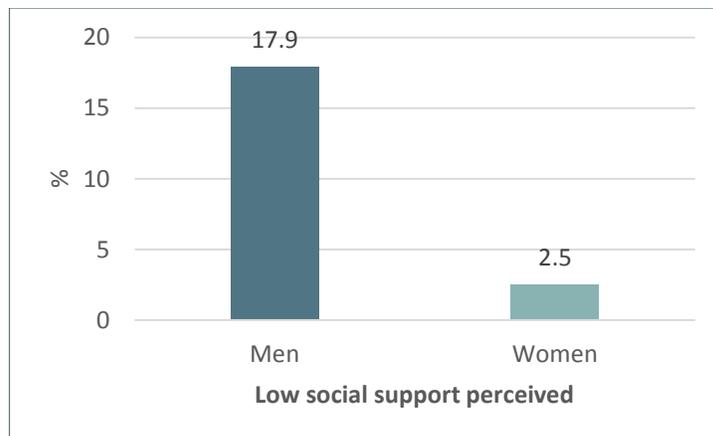
## Respondents and their Parents

Most respondents feel close to both parents and these good relationships are realized in different ways: parents who listen to the ideas and opinions of their children, who solve problems when they happen, say they appreciate them, spend time with them and know where they are. Rules of conduct are also in place in the majority of families with respect to outings and days when respondents may attend activities outside their home.

## Respondents and their Peers

Most friends of high school students and young adults feel that earning a degree is important and do not think about dropping out of school. Young men are seven times more likely than young women to have access to a weak social support network (Figure 4).

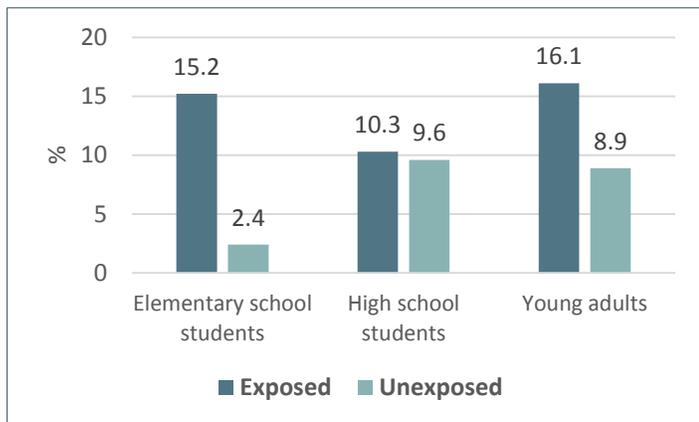
**Figure 4**  
Low social support perceived in young adults, according to genders (%)



## Respondents and their Municipality

Six times as many elementary school youths exposed to the derailment do not feel safe compared to those unexposed, and one quarter of exposed young adults feel the same way. Among high school students and young adults, there is no significant difference between exposed and unexposed respondents with respect to their sense of security (Figure 5).

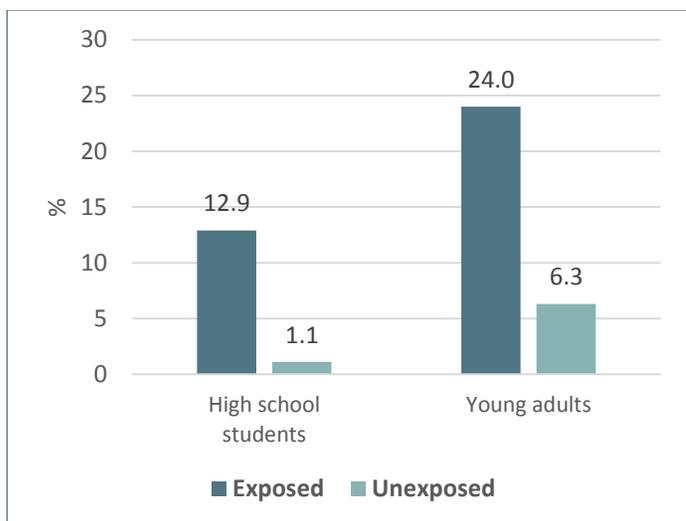
**Figure 5**  
Feelings of insecurity in the municipality, according to exposure levels (%)



Gender and place of residence do not make a difference for elementary students in terms of their level of satisfaction with their municipality, but adolescents living in Lac-Mégantic are significantly more likely to be satisfied with their place of residence (85.7%) than those from other municipalities in the MRC du Granit (75.8%). Among young adults, those living outside Lac-Mégantic are more likely to be satisfied with their municipality (MRC = 78.3%, Lac-Mégantic = 63.8%). No significant difference was found among exposed and unexposed respondents as to their level of satisfaction with their municipality.

Adolescents and young adults exposed to the derailment are more likely to believe that since this event, the quality of life in their living environment has deteriorated (Figure 6).

**Figure 6**  
Deterioration of quality of life perceived in the municipality, according to exposure levels (%)



The majority of high school students and young adults, regardless of gender, place of residence, or whether or not they were exposed to the train derailment, has a strong sense of belonging to their home environment. However, the majority of adolescents and young adults living in Lac-Mégantic suppose that they will leave this municipality in the next three years (high school= 55.4%, young adults = 80.5%).

## Psychological Health of Respondents

Information is provided for all respondents on the following: self-esteem, levels of resilience and protective factors, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal and self-harm thoughts and health professionals and social services consultation. Information on the level of psychological distress of young adults completes this picture.

### Self-esteem

In elementary school, boys are significantly more likely (45.9%) to have higher self-esteem (25.4%) than girls and almost one third of boys (27%) and girls (32.8%) have low or very low self-esteem. Nearly twice as many exposed young people, compared to those unexposed to the tragedy, have low self-esteem (exposed = 34.7%, unexposed = 17.1%). In high school, almost all respondents (95%), regardless of gender, have high self-esteem. The situation among young adults is different; as 64.2% of young men have low self-esteem, while 39.2% of young women find themselves in this situation. Being exposed or not to the train tragedy has no influence on the level of self-esteem of adolescents and young adults.

### Resilience

In elementary and high school students, the scores for each of the five sub-scales of the Resilience Scale for Adolescent (READ)<sup>b</sup> are low compared to a study in Ireland of 6,085 youth aged 12 to 18 (Kelly, Fitzgerald, & Dooley, 2016). In addition, girls generally score a little lower than boys. For both girls and boys in elementary school, the lowest scores are found in social skills (e.g.: social skills, ability to start a conversation) and organization style (e.g.: planning daily routines). Among adolescents, the lowest scores relate to personal skills (e.g.: self-esteem, self-acceptance, sense of self-efficacy) and organization style. In adolescents, the lowest scores refer to organization style and social skills.

<sup>b</sup> Hjelmadal, 2007; Hjelmadal, Friborg, Stiles, Martinussen, & Rosenvinge, 2006

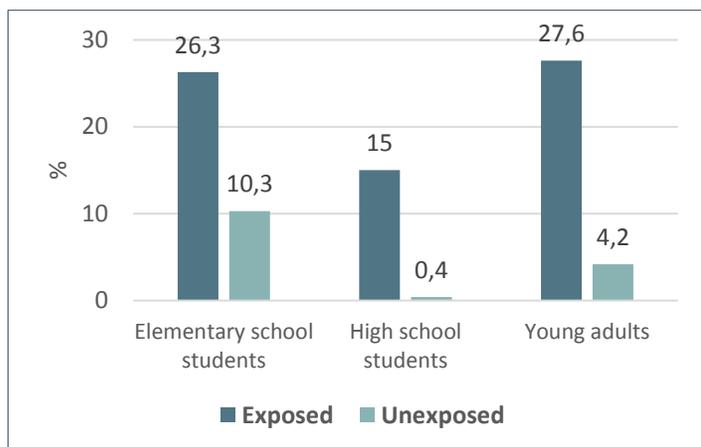
The level of resilience in young adults was measured by the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Connor, & Davidson, 2003). The results show that two out of ten young adults (19.2%) have a low level of resilience (score 0 to 20), a percentage higher than the 400 adults in Lac-Mégantic who completed a telephone survey in the fall of 2016 (13, 1%). However, it should be pointed out that 16% of exposed young adults have a low level of resilience and the proportion is at 25% for those unexposed.

### Signs of Post-Traumatic Stress

High school students showed the lowest percentage of respondents with moderate or severe post-traumatic stress disorder (10.1%), while two out of ten elementary school students (21.9%) and the same proportion of young adults (19.9%) find themselves in this situation. At the elementary level, one third of young people living in a municipality near Lac-Mégantic (31.7%) show moderate or severe signs of post-traumatic stress, while this number reaches 13.2% for those living in Lac-Mégantic. Among high school students, living in Lac-Mégantic is linked to the presence of post-traumatic stress disorder (Lac-Mégantic = 13.8%, MRC = 7.8%), whereas this situation has no influence in young adults (Lac-Mégantic = 21.3%, MRC = 18.8%).

The number of exposed respondents suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder is significantly higher than those unexposed (Figure 7). It is the highest percentage of young adults exposed to train derailment (27.6%), while the percentage is 26.3% for exposed elementary students and 15% for exposed secondary students. These percentages are lower than what was found among adults who completed the telephone survey in the fall of 2016, when 49.3% of people living in Lac-Mégantic had moderate or severe post-traumatic stress symptoms. This percentage was 30.7% for adults living in another municipality of the MRC du Granit.

**Figure 7**  
Presence of post-traumatic stress signs, according to exposure levels (%)

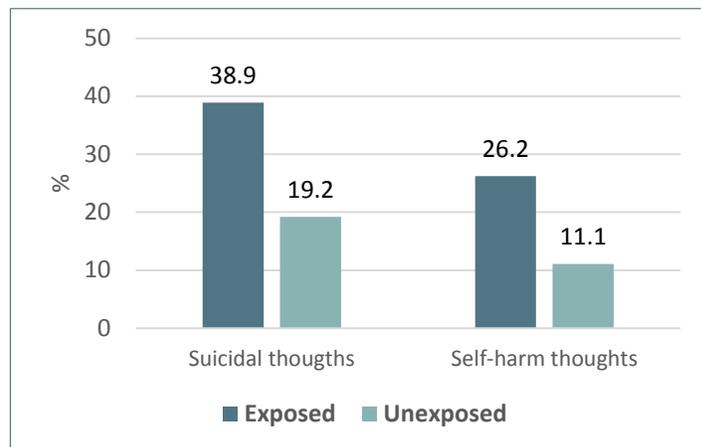


### Suicidal and Self-Harm Thoughts in the Past 12 Months

In the twelve months preceding the survey, 15% of elementary school students, 32% of high school students and 36% of young adults had at least one suicidal thought<sup>c</sup>. Significantly more girls in high school (37.2%) than students at the same level (26.6%) found themselves in this situation. In addition, high school students exposed to the train derailment were significantly more likely to have suicidal thoughts (38.9%) than those unexposed (19.2%) (Figure 8). There is, however, no significant difference between exposed and unexposed respondents for elementary school students and young adults in terms of suicidal thoughts in the last 12 months. In this regard, it is important to note that the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development (QLSCD) reports that the percentages of 13, 15 and 17 year-olds who have had suicidal thoughts, in the last 12 years months before data was collected, are respectively 14.5% (13 years old), 23% (15 years old) and 22.8% (17 years old).

In terms of having seriously thought about harming oneself during the same period, the percentages are 17.7% for elementary students, 21% for high school students and 20% for young adults<sup>d</sup>. Significantly more girls in high school (29.3%) than boys (12.5%) had such thoughts in the last 12 months before the survey. High school students exposed to the derailment were significantly more likely (26.2%) to have had such thoughts than those unexposed (11.1%). There is no significant difference between exposed and unexposed respondents for elementary school students and young adults.

**Figure 8**  
Suicidal and self-harm thoughts in high school students, according to exposure levels (%)



<sup>c</sup> This result represents the percentage of respondents who ticked the answers rarely, quite often and very often to the following question: During the last twelve months, did you ever think of suicide?

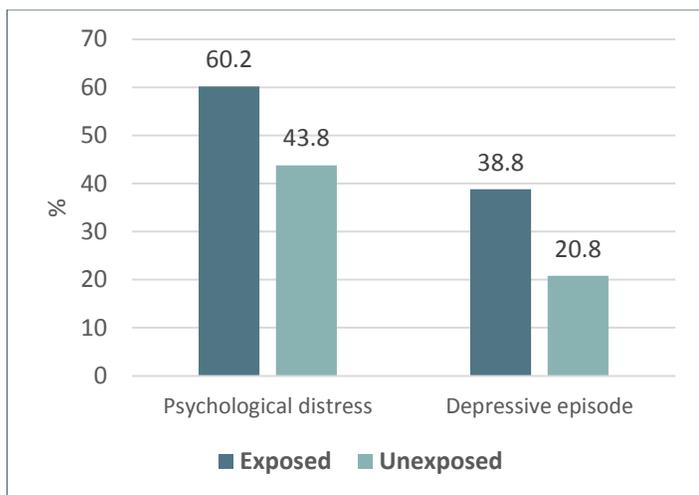
<sup>d</sup> This percentage represents respondents who answered yes to the following question: In the last twelve months, did you seriously consider harming yourself?

### Psychological Distress in Young Adults

More than half of the young adults who participated in the study, regardless of their gender (females = 54.4%, males = 55.2%) or their place of residence (Lac-Mégantic = 54.1%, MRC = 57.5%), show psychological distress (score of 7 or more at Kessler scale)<sup>e</sup>. Young adults exposed to the derailment are more likely to be in this situation than those unexposed (Figure 9). By comparison, this percentage was 29.4% for adults living in Lac-Mégantic and 24% for those living in another municipality located in MRC du Granit who completed the telephone survey during the fall 2016.

In addition, one third of young adults (32.9%) experienced a depressive episode in the past 12 months, with 45.9% of those living in Lac-Mégantic and 23.8% of those from another municipality located in MRC du Granit. Exposure to the train tragedy is linked to the presence of a depressive episode (Figure 9).

**Figure 9**  
Presence of psychological distress and depressive episodes in the last 12 months in young adults, according to exposure levels (%)



### Consultation of Health Professionals and Social Services

In elementary school, slightly more boys than girls consulted a doctor, social worker, psychologist or other health professional in the 12 months preceding the survey. This situation is reversed for high school students and young adults. The fact of having been exposed or not to the train tragedy has no impact on having consulted these professionals for elementary school students and young adults, but it does for the high school students. For example, high school students exposed to train

derailment and who consulted a psychologist or social worker outnumbered those who were not exposed (exposed = 32.3%, unexposed = 19.8%).

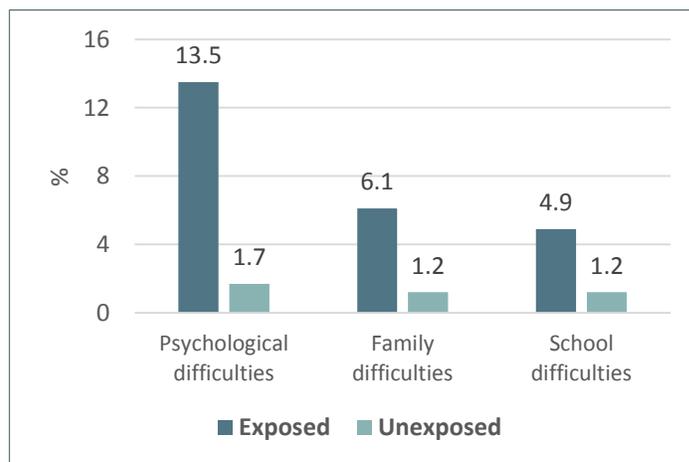
### Consumption Patterns and Associated Consequences

In the last 12 months preceding this study, 21.2% of young men and 10% of young women aged 18 and over abused alcohol on a single occasion at least once a week. More young women (13.6%) than young men (1.7%) believe that their weekly alcohol consumption is above average. No significant differences were found between exposed and unexposed young adults in the last 12 months before the survey regarding abuse of alcohol, sedatives, tranquilizers or antidepressants prescribed by a physician, as is the increase or not in the consumption of non-prescription drugs. However, almost five times as many young adults exposed (10.6%) as those unexposed (2.6%) reported taking antidepressants during that same period. This proportion is of 15% for exposed adults who completed the fall 2016 telephone survey.

For their part, because of their alcohol and drug use in the year prior to data collection, high school students exposed to the train tragedy had more psychological, family, and school problems than those unexposed (Figure 10).

They were also more likely to think that the same amounts of alcohol or drugs had less effect on them, compared to those unexposed to the tragedy (exposed = 14.2%, unexposed = 6.3%).

**Figure 10**  
Presence of difficulties linked to alcohol consumption in high school students, according to exposure levels (%)



<sup>e</sup> Kessler, R.C., Andrews, G., Colpe, L.J., and al., 2002. Short screening scales to monitor population prevalences and trends in non-specific psychological distress, *Psychological Medicine*, 32(6), 959-976. doi:10.1017/S0033291702006074.

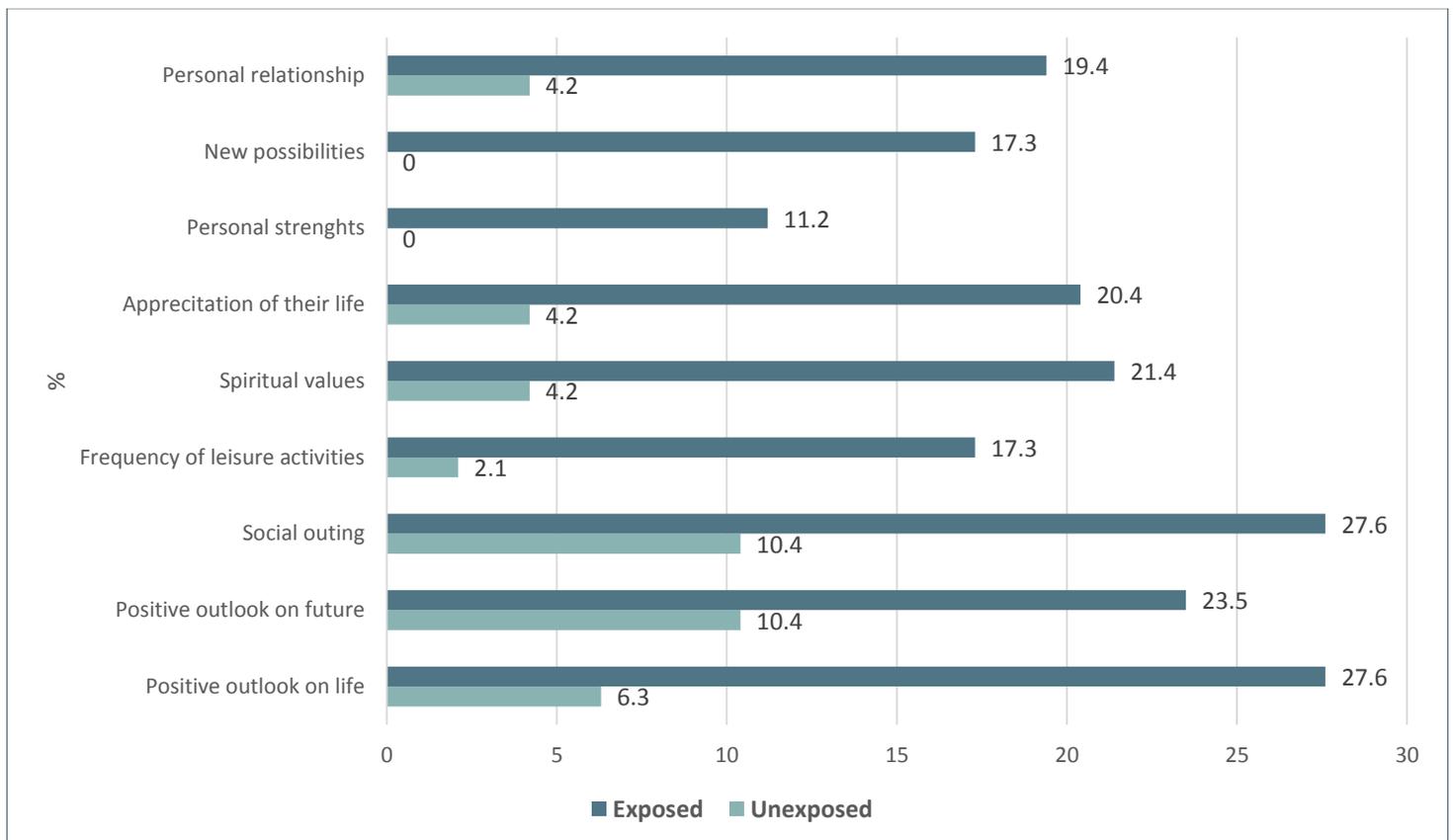
## Post-Traumatic Growth and Changes in Young Adults Following the Derailment

Young adults exposed to the train tragedy are significantly more likely than the unexposed:

- a) To have noticed positive changes in their relationships with members of their entourage.
- b) To open up to new possibilities such as new interests and new opportunities or to make changes where necessary.
- c) To have noticed the presence of personal strengths such as a greater sense of autonomy, greater ability to solve problems or to accept the turn of events.
- d) To better appreciate their own lives and the value of each day.
- e) To have noticed changes in their spiritual values (Figure 11).

In addition, exposed young adults are significantly more likely than the unexposed to notice improvements in various other aspects of their personal and family life (e.g.: increased frequency of leisure activities, more positive perspective of the future and in the face of life in general, increased motivation and performance in school, improved relationships with members of one’s family and those around him, etc.).

**Figure 11**  
Positive changes perceived among young adults following the derailment, according to exposure levels (%)



## HIGHLIGHTS OF FOCUS GROUPS

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Both elementary school students and high school students, those in cégep, CEA and CFP believe that the train derailment is no longer a topic of conversation in their families and with their peers. Parents are tired of talking about it or want to protect their children from the harmful effects it could have on them. Other families avoid talking about it because it causes feelings of pain, anger or tensions and discord between adults.

Respondents experience a variety of emotions related to the tragedy: sadness, worry, fear, anger, frustration and weariness. Several young people reported being anxious when they hear the train, some are stressed, anxious, have reminiscences, experience panic attacks or feel insecure, as they fear another train tragedy might occur again. Respondents have lost faith in the federal authorities in terms of railway safety and hope for harmony to return to Lac-Mégantic. Older students (cégep, CEA, CFP and high school), however, believe that this event has had a positive impact on their personal lives: they have matured, they are more aware of the importance of their loved ones and feel that they are more able to share their feelings. They also noted a renewal of mutual aid among citizens, but do not appreciate that some citizens are systematically opposed to the proposals made to revive the old downtown area. Young people of all ages have also noticed distress in their parents because of the loss of life or property and the destruction of the downtown area. Respondents believe that the media and tourists are too intrusive and want the municipality of Lac-Mégantic to be recognized for its splendours and attractions rather than for the train tragedy.

## WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE WANT

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The young people expressed their desires. Among other things, they recommend setting up an advisory committee made up of young people to gather their views on the orientations and decisions to be made regarding the future of Lac-Mégantic. They also want to be better informed about the activities taking place in the MRC du Granit. They also consider it necessary to make available to young people more places where they could discuss and democratize the use of spaces intended for the practice of sports activities. Many youths also feel that their school would require renovations and repairs. With regard to psychosocial workers, young people would like them to get in touch with them more often, to organize individual or focus groups to share their experiences and feelings, and they feel it is necessary to better inform them about aid resources and how to get in touch with resources available.

## CONCLUSION

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This study shows that young people aged 25 and under living in the Lac-Mégantic community are, for the most part, satisfied with their various environments, be it their school, their family environment or their municipality. However, despite their fairly high level of attachment to Lac-Mégantic, the majority of the high school students and the young adults attending cégep, CEA and PSC living in this municipality plan to leave this community in the next three years to pursue higher education or to start their professional life. Being exposed to the train tragedy appears to have had a negative impact on many aspects of respondents' psychological health, regardless of their age and place of residence, and many of them have different feelings about this event that disrupts their psychological health, quality of life and tranquility. However, a significant number of young adults feel that this event has had a positive impact on their personal, family and social lives. A post-traumatic growth phenomenon is taking place in some aspects of these respondents' life. This study reveals the importance of paying special attention to children, adolescents, and young adults during and after disaster exposure, as it is important to consider their views and suggestions in the community of Lac-Mégantic's recovery process. The results of this study were presented to various school actors who discussed the modalities to be implemented within their institution and in the community in terms of the highlights of this study.

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