



# A Case for Investing in Youth Substance Abuse Prevention

Investing in evidence-informed substance abuse prevention not only reduces the harm associated with substance abuse experienced by individuals, their families and communities, but it can also greatly reduce the cost of substance abuse to society.

A growing body of evidence over the last 20 years demonstrates that prevention can have significant cost-benefit savings. Analysis of numerous prevention programs shows that they have reported savings of \$15–18 on every dollar spent on drug abuse prevention.<sup>1,2</sup> Indeed, one youth substance abuse prevention initiative alone has shown a cost-benefit ratio as high as 37:1.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the social and economic returns, investments in substance abuse prevention continue to be limited. An informal audit of Canada's 2007 *National Anti-Drug Strategy* found that funding towards prevention-focused initiatives accounted for only four per cent of spending under the strategy.<sup>4</sup>

This document emphasizes the importance of investing in youth, provides an overview of the significant costs associated with substance abuse and argues that the cost of **not** undertaking prevention is simply too high.

## Why Focus on Youth?

A substantial amount of change and growth—including significant brain growth and development—takes place during youth. Parts of the brain associated with reward, motivation and impulsivity typically mature early, while the areas of the brain that moderate risk mature later. This lag means that young people can be more prone to risk-taking behaviour. They are also disproportionately more likely to use substances, engage in risky patterns of use and experience harm from that use.<sup>5</sup> In fact, youth 15 to 24 years old are approximately five times more likely than adults aged 25 years and older to report harm because of drug use.<sup>6</sup>

A quick look at some numbers:

- **57** – the percentage of youth between the ages of 15 and 24 in Canada who have used drugs sometime in their life<sup>6</sup>
- **12.8** – the average age at which students in grades 7 to 12 consumed their first alcoholic beverage<sup>7</sup>
- **13.7** – the average age at which students in grades 7 to 12 first used cannabis<sup>7</sup>
- **49** – the percentage of students in grades 10 to 12 that reported binge drinking in the past 12 months<sup>8</sup>

Evidence-informed approaches to drug prevention can have a significant impact on reducing youth substance abuse and contribute to the improved overall health and well-being of young people.



## Why Focus on Substance Use?

Substance use has a significant economic impact on Canadians, with the overall social cost of substance abuse in Canada estimated at \$39.8 billion in 2002.<sup>9</sup> According to *The Costs of Substance Abuse in Canada 2002*, this amount includes \$8.8 billion in direct healthcare costs, such as visits to a family doctor, specialized inpatient and outpatient treatment and acute care hospital days. Alcohol-attributed illness alone accounted for 1,587,054 days of acute care in hospitals.

Direct costs associated with law enforcement include those associated with policing, the courts and corrections. In terms of public policing costs (\$6,142.2 million), the report estimates that 30% of all recorded criminal offences were attributable to alcohol and 22% of such offences to illegal drugs.

Court associated cost for processing criminal offences (e.g. court staff, legal aid service and prosecutors) related to alcohol and drugs were estimated at approximately \$513 million and \$330.6 million respectively. Of all criminal charges, an estimated 36% were attributable to alcohol and 23% to illegal drugs. Of those, 30% associated with alcohol were violent crimes. For corrections related costs, an estimated \$660 million was spent on persons sentenced for alcohol-attributable offences and \$573 million for drug-attributable offences.

In addition to these direct costs, in-direct costs amount to more than \$24 billion and relate specifically to lost productivity in the workplace or home. The productivity costs include the expense of short- and long-term disability (e.g., days in bed, days with reduced activity) and premature mortality.

Here are some of the main figures in *The Costs of Substance Abuse in Canada 2002*:<sup>10</sup>

- **\$8.8 billion** – direct health care costs
- **\$5.4 billion** – direct law enforcement costs
- **\$148 million** – direct costs for prevention and research
- **\$14.6 billion** – direct and in-direct costs attributed to alcohol
- **\$8.2 billion** – direct and in-direct costs attributed to illicit drugs

Substance abuse is a complex social issue that cuts across multiple sectors. Through increased collaboration and evidence-informed prevention initiatives, the economic impact of substance abuse in Canada could be greatly reduced.

## Why Now? A Closer Look at Healthcare Spending and Implications

Canada's public healthcare system is a high priority for Canadians<sup>11</sup> and is undergoing scrutiny on multiple levels. As various health reviews and federal working groups have made clear, Canada's current healthcare system may not be sustainable.

According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information, total spending on healthcare in Canada was projected to reach over \$200 billion in 2011. This spending encompasses both private and public sector costs, of which approximately 70 per cent is accounted for by the public sector, with most of this money flowing through provincial health ministries.<sup>12</sup> An assessment of the proposed changes to the Canada Health Transfer was undertaken by the Council of the Federation. The analysis estimated that funding for healthcare will be reduced by nearly \$36 billion over the coming 10-year period (2014–2024), including a \$7 billion reduction that will occur during the first five years.<sup>13</sup>



Considering that the single largest direct care costs associated with substance use in 2002 were for health care (\$8.8 billion), we can no longer ignore the fact that evidence-informed youth substance abuse prevention works and can provide significant cost savings over the long-term.

## Supporting Evidence-informed Youth Drug Prevention

By applying what we already know, showcasing successes through continued evaluation and cost-benefit analysis, the power of prevention to meet the needs of a community can be realized. Effective prevention does not mean working more—it means refocusing resources to what has been shown to work. It means working collaboratively across sectors and settings, recognizing that positive youth outcomes are most likely when prevention efforts are integrated and sustained.

The evidence is there. Now we need to start applying it. The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) has developed a series of tools to assist decision makers in selecting the most appropriate youth substance abuse prevention initiatives for their communities. Whether evaluating existing initiatives or starting fresh, the *Canadian Standards for Youth Substance Abuse Prevention* provide the guidance required to align your activities with the latest evidence of what works.

The Standards consist of three sets of guidebooks:

- *Building on Our Strengths: Canadian Standards for School-based Youth Substance Abuse Prevention*
- *Stronger Together: Canadian Standards for Community-based Youth Substance Abuse Prevention*
- *Strengthening Our Skills: Canadian Guidelines for Youth Substance Abuse Prevention Family Skills Programs*

Access these and [other tools](#) today at [www.ccsa.ca](http://www.ccsa.ca) or contact us to learn more at (613) 235-4048 or via email to [Youth-Jeunes@ccsa.ca](mailto:Youth-Jeunes@ccsa.ca).

The Standards are part of *A Drug Prevention Strategy for Canada's Youth*, which aims to reduce illicit drug use by Canadian youth between the ages of 10 and 24. To find out more about the Strategy or the Standards initiative, please visit [www.ccsa.ca](http://www.ccsa.ca).



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The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse changes lives by bringing people and knowledge together to reduce the harm of alcohol and other drugs on society. We partner with public, private and non-governmental organizations to improve the health and safety of Canadians.

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