



Canadian Centre
on Substance Abuse
Centre canadien de lutte
contre les toxicomanies

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

New CCSA Report Reveals Canadian Youth Perceptions on Marijuana

Ottawa, January 30, 2017 — The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) today released *Canadian Youth Perceptions on Cannabis*, a new study that offers a detailed look at the youth perspective on marijuana.

Against the backdrop of changes to the legal framework for marijuana, Canadian rates for marijuana use by young people remain among the highest in the world. To contribute to a better understanding of the issue, CCSA held focus groups with Canadians between the ages of 14 and 19.

Building on our [2013 report](#) on the same subject, we developed *Canadian Youth Perceptions on Cannabis* to gain a more intimate understanding of the kinds of conversations that are taking place about marijuana every day in schools, at home and in the community. Youth views on marijuana, where they get their information and how they understand that information were all key questions that drove the research and laid the foundation for the key findings of this report.

The primary purpose for gathering these insights is to inform education, health promotion and prevention initiatives. Combining CCSA's previous research on youth perceptions and the current study, we are providing a clearer picture of what Canadian young people think about marijuana, what common misconceptions they hold, where there are gaps in the evidence and how best to move forward with prevention and education efforts, especially in light of anticipated changes to marijuana legislation.

Among the key findings from *Canadian Youth Perceptions on Cannabis* is that young people think marijuana is neither addictive nor harmful, and that it affects individuals differently. Some youth "self-prescribe" marijuana for stress and mental health management, such as for anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder or depression, as well as for relaxation purposes. And, while they have a preference for messaging about marijuana that is based on the evidence, the Internet, media, enforcement practices and government's intention to legalize it are important influences on the views of young people about marijuana.

Other key findings of the study include:

- Participants identified peers, family, the availability of marijuana and the belief that marijuana is acceptable as influencing their decision to use it.
- Some participants were also influenced by their beliefs in the medical, physical and mental health benefits of marijuana.
- Participants thought that the effects of marijuana are based on the person and his or her attitudes, rather than the drug itself, a rationale that provides youth an opportunity to selectively decide when it is safe or harmful to use marijuana.
- Most youth felt that long-term, frequent marijuana users were subject to negative health effects, whereas recreational users were not.
- Many young people believe marijuana is less impairing than alcohol when it comes to driving, but recognize that using it before driving can slow reaction time and affect other skills needed to safely operate a vehicle.



- Although many youth want facts about marijuana, the study found that they have difficulty navigating through conflicting messages, resulting in confusion, false beliefs and the likelihood that youth will rely on friends, drug dealers or personal experiences to form their opinions.

Next Steps

Canadian Youth Perceptions on Cannabis illustrates the complexity around the issue of youth marijuana use and confirms the importance of providing evidence-informed messaging to young people about the science around the effects of the substance.

By integrating findings from this report into future education and prevention efforts, those who work in health promotion and with youth can better address the misconceptions of young people while also promoting a dialogue that can lead to a greater understanding of why youth start using the drug. The study reveals that clear messaging about the legality of marijuana, the role of police, the health risks and risks related to marijuana-impaired driving, and the definition of marijuana impairment might help to increase awareness of its overall harms. A desire for low-risk cannabis use guidelines – a harm reduction approach – was also suggested by youth.

Quotes

“Over the years, CCSA has produced research reports and policy briefs, and mobilized knowledge about marijuana aimed at increasing awareness of the evidence on this topic and informing policy and practice. To that end, we hope that the findings from our second *Canadian Youth Perceptions on Cannabis* report will help support the federal and provincial governments’ work in establishing a framework for legalization, with a particular focus on keeping the substance out of the hands of youth and establishing public education efforts that reflect what we know from the evidence.”

Rita Notarandrea, CEO, Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse

“It is essential that we have a balanced, evidence-informed picture of youths’ perceptions of cannabis in order to move forward in providing a comprehensive body of evidence to parents and others who support youth and, of course, youth themselves. This report addresses that need.”

Joanne Brown, Executive Director, Parent Action on Drugs

“This study connects us to the latest evidence which, in turn, helps us inform our own communication with youth and youth-centred organizations and schools in communities across Canada. This is particularly important at a time when we are preparing for legalized marijuana, with an expressed purpose in keeping the substance out of the hands of youth. We need more of this on the ground research for the future.”

Mario Harel, President, Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police

“Legalization and regulation is an important, positive step towards a public health approach to cannabis and we know there is a higher proportion of cannabis users among youth aged 15–25 in Canada than in other developed countries. This report by CCSA sheds light on youth perceptions and provides some of the much-needed information for the public health community to craft evidence-informed health promotion messages and educational materials.”

Ian Culbert, Executive Director, Canadian Public Health Association

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CCSA was created by Parliament to provide national leadership to address substance use in Canada. A trusted council, we provide national guidance to decision makers by harnessing the power of research, curating knowledge and bringing together diverse perspectives.

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