



The Role of Sport in Youth Substance Abuse Prevention: Part of the Solution or Part of the Problem?

Results from a pan Canadian gathering of sport and youth substance abuse sector stakeholders, future directions and how to get involved.

Many Canadians view sport and physical activity as promising ways to foster positive youth development and to prevent substance use. Campaigns aimed at drug prevention among youth often feature famous athletes in public service announcements, posters, contests and events warning youth about the dangers of substance use.

But key questions remain:

- Does youth involvement in sport actually prevent, delay or reduce substance use?
- What research has been done to test the assumption of the positive value of sport?
- Is there value in sport and substance abuse prevention advocates working together?

Connecting the Dots: Sports and Substance Abuse Prevention

To address these questions, the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) engaged a research team led by Dr. John Cairney of McMaster University to review existing literature concerning the impact of non-professional sport on substance abuse prevention among youth ages 10 to 24. The review provided some evidence that participation in sport might prevent illicit drug use; however, participation in sports was also found to be associated with increased alcohol use. The research team found a lack of Canadian studies, randomized control studies and research on contextual factors that could have an impact on this relationship.

The findings were presented at a pan-Canadian workshop hosted by CCSA in March 2013. Attended by 29 organizations from across Canada, the full-day workshop brought together representatives from sport and substance abuse prevention—two sectors that have not had much interaction. Participants reviewed evidence on the use of sport to prevent youth substance abuse and discussed opportunities for cross-sector research, knowledge exchange and collaboration.

The opportunity to share information at the workshop gave rise to an impromptu presentation by Dean Kriellaars of the University of Manitoba on the results of the Sport Medicine Council of Manitoba's Substance Use Survey (SUS). The SUS has been administered since 2007 to amateur athletes from 11 to 25 years of age and covers over 40 sports. The survey asks about multiple substances including marijuana, alcohol, steroids, pain medication and energy drinks. Data compiled between 2007 and 2011 reveal high rates of recreational drug use: 14 to 42% of athletes report regular use of marijuana in the off season; 60 to 92% of athletes report consuming five or more drinks in one sitting; and smokeless tobacco use averages 14.5% across sports.



Key Outcomes of the Workshop

Discussion at the workshop revealed that many gaps exist in research into the connections between sport and youth substance abuse prevention. Participants agreed to form an ongoing network and identified many future research directions to better understand how and in what context sports can be effective for substance use and abuse prevention, especially in Canada.

Workshop participants identified four areas for action, listed in order of priority:

1. **Network development** to promote multi-sector understanding of sport and substance use linkages and implications, as they apply to both program and research design;
2. **Research** to address identified gaps, in particular the lack of Canadian research on the connections between sport and youth substance abuse;
3. **Awareness raising and knowledge exchange** to increase awareness, provide opportunities for dialogue and enhance information sharing on sport and substance use and abuse; and
4. **Program and policy development** to support the use of best practices in new and existing initiatives.

Building on this meeting, CCSA is working to organize a research advisory group. The group will come together to identify priority research questions and related partnership opportunities. An informal network of key stakeholders from the sport and substance abuse prevention sectors is emerging, providing new avenues for information sharing across the sectors to increase understanding of the linkages between sport and substance use.

How To Get Involved

Join the network and stay connected! Learn about opportunities to inform and participate in new research projects and contribute to the development of this growing network. To explore your organization's connection to sport and youth substance abuse prevention, contact CCSA at youth-jeunes@ccsa.ca.



Special thanks to the Working Together Initiative (WTI) for their ongoing advice and guidance. WTI is a group of individuals, NGOs and government departments (federal and provincial) that have pooled their resources to explore how the sport and physical activity sectors can achieve and leverage multiple policy objectives, as well as learn how to work together more effectively.

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