



What Canadian Youth Think about Cannabis

Report in Short

The Issue

Canadian youth are the top users of cannabis in the developed world.¹ Despite a decrease in cannabis use among youth in recent years,² cannabis remains the most commonly used illegal drug among Canadian youth, 15- 24 years of age.³ In fact, the number of youth who have used cannabis within the last year is currently three times higher than that of adults aged 25 years and older (21.6% vs. 6.7%).³ In some Canadian jurisdictions, approximately 50% of grade 12 students have reported consuming cannabis within the last year.⁴

Although cannabis can produce feelings of euphoria and relaxation, its use can lead to negative consequences. Short-term use can cause difficulties in brain functions such as memory, perception of time, coordination and balance.⁵ These effects can lead to injuries or car crashes when driving.⁶ In addition to health and safety concerns, youth substance abuse can also lead to difficulties at school and problems with relationships and the law.⁷

Adolescents are particularly at risk for cannabis related harms since their brains are undergoing rapid and extensive development. Research tells us that chronic cannabis use is associated with memory, thinking and attention difficulties, particularly among those who began using cannabis in early adolescence.⁸ Chronic use might also increase the risk of psychosis, depression and anxiety, in addition to respiratory conditions and possibly lung cancer.^{9,10,11,12}

Although there is an increasing amount of knowledge related to the harms linked to cannabis use, we know little about what youth think about the drug and what influences their decisions to use it. To begin addressing this knowledge gap the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) conducted a study to examine these perceptions. Highlights of the [full report](#) are described below.

Description of the Study

The purpose of the study was to increase our understanding of youth perceptions about cannabis use in order to inform the development of initiatives to prevent youth cannabis use and abuse. Youth were asked to describe how their peers' decisions to use cannabis were influenced by family, other youth, community, the law and the medical use of cannabis. Seventy-six youth, aged 14 to 19 years, participated in one of 10 in-person or two online focus groups conducted in five urban and rural Canadian locations. Thirty-eight percent of participants were female. Sixty-two percent of the youth had used cannabis in the past and approximately half of these respondents indicated they had used it within the last 24 hours.



Key Findings

Influences for Smoking and Not Smoking Cannabis

Parents, siblings and friends appear to influence decisions by young people to use cannabis. Youth in the study mentioned that some parents do not make their position on cannabis use clear. Other parents, it was felt, use cannabis with their kids or are disengaged from their children's lives. Peer pressure, social connectedness to peers and the drug's perceived popularity and availability were also mentioned as factors influencing use. In fact, youth held a common belief that "everyone smokes weed" and perceived that not using cannabis is abnormal:

"... people who aren't trying marijuana ... are not standing up because they don't want to [be] looked down upon ... everyone is just too scared."

Concerns about health risks, poor academic performance and the negative impacts on family relationships were also felt to prevent youth from using cannabis. Interestingly, trouble with the law was not mentioned as a factor deterring use.

Perceived Positive and Negative Effects of Cannabis

Youth in the study discussed perceived positive effects more often than negative effects. These included the drug's ability to help youth focus, relax, sleep, be less violent and improve creativity, as well as how it can purify your system or cure cancer:

"For me, I'm thinking about for my health. ... Because I smoke two pack of cigarettes a day. A cigarette gives you cancer, but the weed cover it. It going to clean it up."

Perceived negative effects included developing dependency, losing focus, becoming lazy, developing lung and heart conditions, and increasing criminality. Participants perceived cannabis to affect each person differently, and negative effects, including long-term changes in chronic users, were attributed to the individual and not cannabis itself.

Cannabis as Natural and Safe, and Not a Drug

Many youth did not consider cannabis to be a drug. When asked why, responses included that it was natural (not man-made), safe and non-addictive, and that it reduced violent tendencies and did not change the user's perception of reality, unlike harder drugs.

"I don't look at weed as a drug. I just look at it as another thing you smoke, like a cigarette."

It was widely felt cannabis is much safer than alcohol and tobacco. Participants preferred the term "smoking weed" to "using cannabis," given that the term "using" was associated with addiction to harder drugs.

Cannabis and Driving

A number of the youth believed that cannabis is safe and makes people better drivers by increasing their focus. Drunk driving was seen as being much more dangerous than driving under the influence of cannabis. In contrast, others felt that using cannabis while driving is dangerous and constitutes impaired driving. However, even those opposed to using cannabis and driving stated that it is not as dangerous as drunk driving.



“... it started to make me more cautious and I started to pay more attention to the roads, signs and everything that’s going on around me.”

Legality of Cannabis

Participants were confused about the legality of cannabis. Some felt cannabis was legal depending on age and the amount in your possession. It appeared that the inconsistent reactions of police to cannabis and the legality of medical marijuana were, in part, leading to the confusion.

“After 19 you are allowed to have a little on you, no more than 1.5, I think. ... You’re allowed, you can use a little bit. But if they catch you with a pound you’re screwed.”

Perceptions of Effective Prevention Approaches

In the study youth argued that general information about drugs presented using scare tactics is an ineffective approach to prevention. They suggested that effective approaches would involve providing more fact-based information at an earlier age, providing more content relating specifically to cannabis (and not all drugs) and using approaches that are aimed at reducing the harms of using cannabis, rather than focusing on abstinence.

“They just make stupid ... commercials that everyone is like, that’s not what happens.”

Participants also suggested that to be effective prevention efforts should ensure that those who deliver prevention messages have an ability to connect with youth, as well as have first-hand experience with the drug.

Implications

Although based on a small sample size, the findings of this study highlight the complexity surrounding the use of cannabis by youth in Canada and point to the challenges associated with preventing its use and misuse. Canadian youth appear confused with what they perceive as the current mixed messaging they receive about this illicit drug. The study underscores the need for a coordinated, comprehensive, factual and consistent approach specific to preventing cannabis use and abuse. Such prevention efforts need to reflect the lived reality of Canadian youth and address existing misperceptions by clearly communicating what we know about cannabis—both harms and benefits—and what information is still emerging.

Consideration should also be given to creating supportive environments in the home, school and community that do not normalize the use of cannabis, but instead redefine social norms. This change would include building awareness that the majority of youth do not use cannabis. Focusing awareness on the impact of cannabis on brain development could also provide a fact-based way to encourage dialogue. The influence of peers, parents and family in decisions to use or not use cannabis points to the importance of their involvement in prevention and encouraging healthy lifestyles.

When asked directly, youth identified several key considerations they thought would be helpful for cannabis-related prevention efforts. These included increasing content specific to cannabis in prevention programs and materials, delivering prevention efforts at a much earlier age, ensuring those delivering the prevention message have credibility with youth and selecting approaches aimed at reducing the harms associated with cannabis use.



Additional Resources

- What Canadian Youth Think about Cannabis, [Technical Report](#)
- Clearing the Smoke on Cannabis, [Highlights](#)
- [Cannabis: Drug Summary](#)
- [Cross-Canada Report on Student Alcohol and Drug Use](#)
- [The Real Deal on Marijuana and Driving](#)

¹ UNICEF Office of Research (2013). Child well-being in rich countries: A comparative overview, *Innocenti Report Card 11*, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence.

² Although cannabis is the illegal drug most commonly used by youth, its use in recent years has decreased. According to the 2011 Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey (CADUMS), 37% of youth in 2004 reported using cannabis in the past year compared to 21.6% in 2011.

³ Health Canada. (2012). Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey: Summary of results for 2011. Retrieved from http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hc-ps/drugs-drogues/stat/_2011/summary-sommaire-eng.php.

⁴ Young, M.M., Saewyc, E., Boak, A., Jahrig, J., Anderson, B., Doiron, Y., Taylor, S., Pica, L., Laprise, P., and Clark, H. (2011). *Cross-Canada report on student alcohol and drug use: Technical report*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. Retrieved from http://www.ccsa.ca/2011%20CCSA%20Documents/2011_CCSA_Student_Alcohol_and_Drug_Use_en.pdf.

⁵ Porath-Waller, A.J. (2013). *Clearing the smoke on cannabis: Highlights*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. Retrieved from <http://www.ccsa.ca/2013%20CCSA%20Documents/CCSA-Clearing-Smoke-on-Cannabis-Highlights-2013-en.pdf>.

⁶ Asbridge, M., Hayden, J.A., & Cartwright, J.L. (2012). Acute cannabis consumption and motor vehicle collision risk: systematic review of observational studies and meta-analysis. *British Medical Journal*, 344, e536.

⁷ Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse and Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health. (2013). *When mental health and substance abuse problems collide*. Ottawa, ON: Authors. Retrieved from <http://www.ccsa.ca/2013%20CCSA%20Documents/CCSA-Mental-Health-and-Substance-Abuse-2013-en.pdf>.

⁸ Porath-Waller, A.J. (2009a). *Clearing the smoke on cannabis: Chronic use and cognitive functioning and mental health*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. Retrieved from http://www.ccsa.ca/2009%20CCSA%20Documents/ccsa0115422009_e.pdf.

⁹ Beirness, D.J., & Porath-Waller, A.J. (2009). *Clearing the smoke on cannabis: Cannabis use and driving*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. Retrieved from <http://www.ccsa.ca/2009%20CCSA%20Documents/ccsa-11789-2009.pdf>.

¹⁰ Diplock, J., & Plecas, D. (2009). *Clearing the smoke on cannabis: Respiratory effects of cannabis smoking*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. Retrieved from <http://www.ccsa.ca/2009%20CCSA%20Documents/ccsa-11797-2009.pdf>.

¹¹ Kalant, H., & Porath-Waller, A.J. (2012). *Clearing the smoke on cannabis: Medical use of cannabis and cannabinoids*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. Retrieved from <http://www.ccsa.ca/2012%20CCSA%20Documents/CCSA-Medical-Use-of-Cannabis-2012-en.pdf>.

¹² Porath-Waller, A.J. (2009b). *Clearing the smoke on cannabis: Maternal cannabis use during pregnancy*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. Retrieved from http://www.ccsa.ca/2009%20CCSA%20Documents/ccsa0117832009_e.pdf.

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