

Services and Supports for Youth Substance Use Treatment

Background

Compared to Canadian adults ages 24 and older, youth between the ages of 15 and 24 have a higher prevalence of past-year use of cannabis, hallucinogens, ecstasy and cocaine.¹ Canadian youth also have a very high prevalence and frequency of alcohol and cannabis use when compared to youth in other countries.² While there has been a downward trend in youth substance use in recent years, continued investment in effective prevention efforts remains vital. Youth, in particular, are vulnerable to the cerebral effects of substance use because their brains are still undergoing significant biological, psychosocial and intellectual development.² For this reason, it is especially important that youth who misuse substances have access to appropriate and effective services and supports.

Principles for Providing Services and Supports for Youth

Providing effective services and supports to youth means:

- Ensuring youth have access to a range of services and supports, including prevention, identification and early intervention;
- Ensuring prevention and treatment approaches are evidence-informed;
- Building on a young person's strengths and addressing risk factors associated with substance use (e.g., cultural environment, peers substance use, home environment);
- Providing outreach and other programs that meet youth "where they're at";
- Collaborating with and linking to the broader system (e.g., health care, education, criminal justice and social service agencies); and
- Ensuring smooth transitions between child, youth and adult services.

Monitoring Access to Services: National Treatment Indicators

Canada is in the early stages of developing a national picture of access to treatment for substance use and problem gambling. Released in 2012, the inaugural *National Treatment Indicators Report*³ provides data from 2009–2010 on publicly funded specialized treatment services in Alberta, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island and Saskatchewan, and within the Correctional Service of Canada. Although not yet nationally representative, these data provide a preliminary picture of people in treatment and, more specifically, youth in treatment in Canada.



The distribution of youth across different types of services reflects many factors, including service availability (e.g., wait lists), provincial policies (e.g., mandatory treatment requirements), service policies (e.g., age restrictions), and actual treatment need (e.g., rate and severity of use). Below are some of the key findings from the *National Treatment Indicators Report, 2012*:

- Youth make up a substantial percentage of individuals accessing non-residential treatment (23–44%). In New Brunswick and Saskatchewan, youth aged 15–24 account for the greatest number of individuals accessing non-residential (i.e., outpatient) treatment services.
- There are relatively few youth between the ages of 15 and 17 accessing withdrawal and residential treatment services. This finding likely reflects issues related to accessibility, rather than lack of need for this cohort.
- Youth in the 18–24 age range make up a minority of those accessing opioid substitution programs. These programs are not widely available for youth 17 years of age and younger.
- Consistent with the rest of the treatment population, youth, on average, access treatment services more than once in a given year. This rate varies by type of service, with an average of close to two treatment episodes or new admissions to treatment per year for residential withdrawal management, and an average of just over one episode per year for non-residential withdrawal management. More than one episode within a year can indicate complete exit and re-entry from treatment or movement from one program to another, depending on the method of reporting.

In Canada, there is lack of funding for youth-specific treatment services and there are significant gaps in the healthcare and treatment systems. The above findings indicate that youth are accessing certain types of treatment; however, these figures likely underestimate the true need for youth treatment services as most treatment centres in Canada are adult-focused and do not offer services to individuals younger than 18 years of age. Given the vulnerability of youth, it is important that prevention and treatment services are made available to youth of all ages.

Developing Treatment Capacity for Youth

Addressing youth substance use is a priority across Canada. Better and more consistent data on both service needs and services available are required to inform an evidence-informed approach to treatment. Future editions of the National Treatment Indicators report will include data on an increased number of indicators to provide a more comprehensive overview of treatment use in Canada. Furthermore, a needs-based planning project, intended to identify the need for substance use treatment services in Canada, is underway.

Current Initiatives Addressing Treatment Capacity for Youth

- Health Canada's Drug Treatment Funding Program (2009–2013) provided resources for services targeting high-risk youth such as Moose Jaw's Open Connections project, Alberta's InRoads project and the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health's National Youth Screening Project.
- Recently released substance use and mental health strategies in jurisdictions including Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia have prioritized youth service development.



These initiatives are complemented by innovation and research at the program and regional levels and through academia. Enhanced data and knowledge exchange are key steps toward a comprehensive approach to youth substance use services.

Additional Resources

- [Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey](#) (Health Canada)
- [National Treatment Indicators Report, 2012](#) (CCSA)
- [Canadian Drug Summary: Trends in Drug Use Among Youth](#) (CCSA)
- [Substance Abuse in Canada: Youth in Focus](#) (CCSA)
- [National Picture of Treatment in Canada](#) (CCSA)

1 Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. (2012). Canadian Drug Summary: Trends in Drug Use among Youth. Ottawa: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. Retrieved from <http://www.ccsa.ca/2013%20CCSA%20Documents/CCSA-Trends-in-Drug-Use-Youth-2012-en.pdf>.

2 Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. (2007). Substance abuse in Canada: Youth in focus. Ottawa: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.ccsa.ca/2007%20CCSA%20Documents/ccsa-011521-2007-e.pdf>.

3 Beasley, E., Jesseman, R., Patton, D., & National Treatment Indicators Working Group. (2012) National Indicators report, 2012. Ottawa: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. Retrieved from http://www.nts-snt.ca/2012%20Document%20Library/2012_nts_National_Treatment_Indicators_en.pdf.

