# A DRUG PREVENTION STRATEGY for Canada's Youth

CCSA - CCLAT

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# A DRUG PREVENTION STRATEGY for Canada's Youth

A five-year plan for mobilizing youth-focused media and youth service organizations in Canada, setting national prevention standards, and building broad-based sustainable partnerships.

**ON OCTOBER 4, 2007,** the Government of Canada introduced its new $64-million National Anti-Drug Strategy, described as a balanced approach that will rely as heavily on enhanced prevention and treatment for users as it will on increased enforcement and stricter penalties for illicit drug producers and distributors.

The Strategy includes a Prevention Action Plan, which focuses on youth as well as parents, educators, law enforcement and communities. This Plan comprises a number of initiatives including the following two complementary components:

- $10-million in new funding over two years to launch a national youth drug prevention mass media campaign to be mounted by Health Canada
- A $10-million Drug Prevention Strategy for Canada's Youth led by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) and a host of partners over five years (funded through Health Canada under the National Anti-Drug Strategy).

The goal of the prevention strategy is to reduce illicit drug use by Canadian youth between the ages of 10 and 24. More specifically, this means reducing the *number* of young people who use illicit drugs, deterring or *delaying the onset* of use, reducing the *frequency* of use, and reducing the use of *multiple* illicit drugs by those who use.

The strategy is intended to work on *risk and protective factors* in youth before illicit drug use begins. Since the *average age* of first substance use is now about 14 or 15, messages aimed at deterring or delaying the onset of use need to start as early as 10 or younger.

Young people are the most likely to *use* substances, to engage in *risky* forms of use, and to experience *harms* as a result. Sixty per cent (60%) of illicit drug users are 15 to 24 years old. For this reason, youth prevention has consistently been identified as a national priority in stakeholder consultations, including the National Framework for Action to Reduce the Harms Associated with Alcohol and Other Drugs and Substances in Canada.

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## AGE OF INITIATION AND COSTS TO SOCIETY

Canadian youth are initiating substance use as early as 14 or younger. This early-age drug use sets in motion a pattern of behaviours that translates into destructive social consequences. The costs to Canadian society from illegal drug use are approximately $8.2 billion a year, increasing at a greater rate than costs for either tobacco or alcohol. Deaths from illegal drug use and alcohol have increased at a rate that exceeds the rate of population growth. The proportion of crimes committed by federal and provincial inmates that are attributed to the use of illicit drugs and/or alcohol in Canada is estimated to be between 40% and 50%, excluding drug-defined crimes.

## WHAT CAN PREVENTION DO AND HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

Some research indicates that prevention programs reduce lifetime consumption of tobacco by 2.3%, lifetime consumption of alcohol by 2.2%, and lifetime consumption of cocaine by 3.0%. These numbers are not large, but because prevention programs are a relatively inexpensive policy option, and because substance use is so costly to society, even small reductions can be highly cost-effective. US research estimated that the cost of one student's participation in a school-based drug prevention program is US$150, while the total quantifiable benefits to society are US$840 based on the social costs of substance abuse in the US. In addition, the dominant cost of the prevention program was time in terms of lost learning opportunity, rather than dollar figures.

## How will the prevention strategy work?

The strategy is built on a five-year business plan that takes full advantage of the collective knowledge and experience of a broad, multi-stakeholder group whose focus is prevention and youth development in schools, families and communities. Research indicates that prevention efforts are most effective when anti-drug media messages are used in tandem with prevention programs involving schools, communities and families.

The strategy uses three complementary approaches, each intended to reinforce and multiply the impact of the others while delivering its own specific results.

### *1. Media/Youth Consortium*

CCSA is inviting national media corporations and organizations who market to youth, as well as organizations that provide services to youth, to join a media/youth consortium aimed at communicating and reinforcing prevention messages. The consortium will unite youth-oriented communications professionals, including Internet, TV, radio, print media, marketers and advertising agencies, with youth-serving organizations, prevention scientists and concerned parent groups.

This approach delivers messaging directly to youth in two ways: through the organizations that work with youth in their environment, and through the media that market to youth. This leads to the development of new partnerships with advertising agencies and media that benefit both the Consortium and youth-focused media outlets.

The Consortium has the real potential to extend partnerships that will allow for messaging to reach special populations such as street youth, immigrant youth, Aboriginal youth, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered youth, youth in care, youth in custody, and Northern youth, as well as populations of youth differentiated by age

#### Mass media...plus

The Consortium is also designed to complement and expand on the messaging outreach of Health Canada's national youth drug prevention mass media campaign. Where the Health Canada campaign will focus on younger teens and their parents, the Consortium targets the larger grouping of 10–24-year olds as well as high-risk populations that require tailored messages.

*Youth-serving organizations* will reinforce delivery of Health Canada's mass media campaign messaging by embedding evidence-based prevention messages and themes into their program material. Media groups will stretch the delivery of prevention messaging through the most effective media and digital communication techniques to promote positive and healthy life choices for youth.

Standards do not propose an impossible ideal of prevention, but recognize the resource constraints that schools and communities face.

### *2. Canadian National Standards for Prevention*

There is a recognized need for national standards for the design and delivery of school-centred and community-based substance abuse prevention programs that can be applied across Canada, and within diverse populations. Setting national standards will involve the establishment of a compendium of existing programs and resources that meet those standards. The ultimate goal is to provide a means for communities, schools, families and others to access and implement a wide array of evidence-based programs.

National prevention standards constitute a sound benchmark against which program developers and deliverers can measure the strength of their resources and determine how well existing programs meet evidence-based criteria. Standards do not propose an impossible ideal of prevention, but instead recognize the resource constraints that schools and communities face, identify a minimum standard for required components of prevention programming, and serve as a self-assessment tool for self-improvement.

#### How do we get there?

Establishing national standards takes time and perseverance. CCSA and its partners are committed to a proactive strategy to increase the uptake and use of standards as a benchmark for prevention programs in Canada. This will require the creation of a database to provide immediate access to a repository of existing programs that conform to the standards.

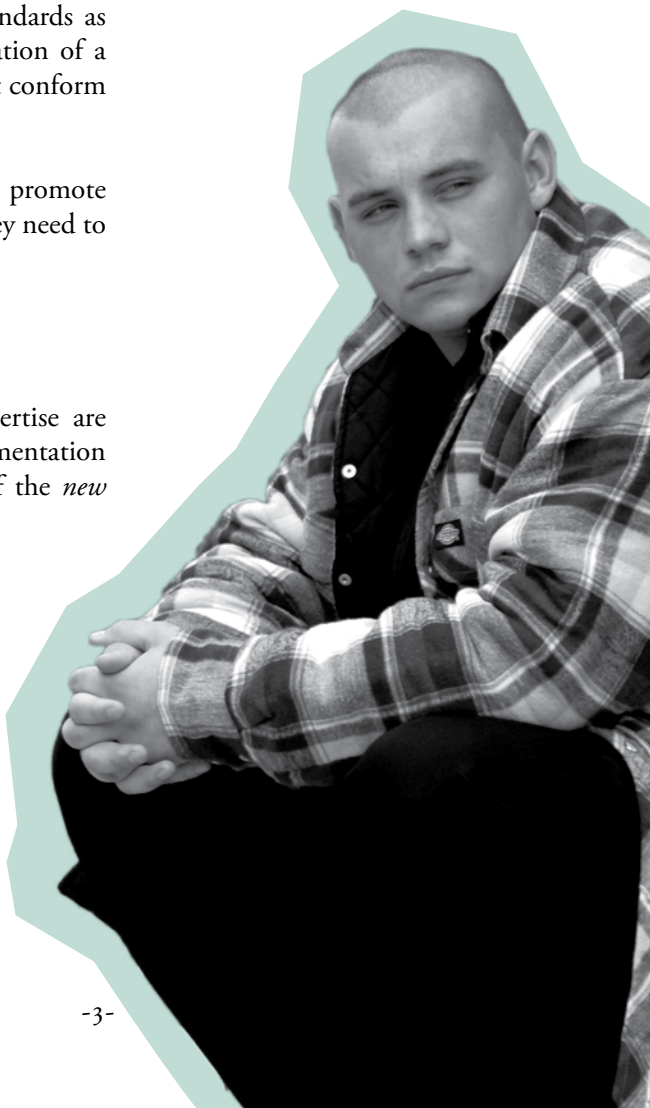
The strategy also calls for the development of information toolkits that will promote healthy development and sound choices, and will give parents the resources they need to discuss prevention with their children within the family environment.

### *3. Sustainable Partnerships*

Organizations across Canada with a variety of strengths and areas of expertise are committing to pool and leverage their abilities to develop and sustain implementation of the Drug Prevention Strategy for Canada's Youth. Following are some of the *new* partnerships that will be created through this Strategy.

#### National Advisory Group on Youth Prevention

This group will provide representative input from across sectors and jurisdictions. The partnership includes CCSA, the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission, and the Drug Prevention Network of Canada, but also embraces other national partners in education, health promotion, parenting and family life, policing, and youth services. The group is designing a countrywide consultative process to determine the best way to deliver the Strategy and meaningfully engage youth as a resource.



## FOUR POTENTIAL AREAS FOR ACTION

In *Substance Abuse in Canada: Youth in Focus,* authored by prominent youth addiction and health experts and published by CCSA in September 2007, four potential areas for action were identified as needing immediate attention and investment:

- Adapting programs and services to the ages and specific needs of youth
- Developing standards for prevention and treatment programs
- Improving awareness and training in early detection, brief intervention and referral among professionals working with youth
- Implementing comprehensive program evaluations.

## RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

A number of studies in North America have identified specific groups of youth who are at much higher risk than their peers for heavy use, multi-drug use and substance abuse. These include runaway and street-involved youth, youth in custody, adolescents with co-occurring disorders, sexually-abused and exploited youth, gay, lesbian, bisexual and questioning teens, and First Nation, Inuit and Métis youth.

Fortunately, not all youth exposed to these higher risks end up with chronic substance abuse or dependence disorders. There is growing evidence that protective factors and assets in the lives of even the most vulnerable may buffer their risk, and support resilience and healing. Connectedness to school, positive relationships with caring adults within or outside of the family, and supportive peers seem to reduce the likelihood of the distress and difficulties in coping that lead to problem substance use.

### National Standards Task Force

This task force is specifically committed to designing and delivering a set of Canadian national standards for school/community/family-based prevention activities. Potential members include an array of organizations committed to youth prevention standards, school-based and school-linked prevention, school and public health, and the role of parents in public education. Representation is also being sought from First Nations and Métis organizations.

### Working Group on Special Populations

A number of North American studies have identified specific groups of youth who are at much higher risk than their peers for heavy drug use, multi-drug use and dependency. This working group will provide a lens for the Strategy and will help identify approaches and interventions aimed at addressing the underlying factors that put these special populations at risk. An example of this approach is a project CCSA is currently carrying out with the Public Health Agency of Canada to reach a common understanding of how to make health services and supports more responsive to the needs of youth at risk of HIV/AIDS and substance abuse problems.

A number of North American studies have identified specific groups of youth who are at much higher risk than their peers for drug use and dependency.

### Media/Youth Consortium

As mentioned earlier, the Consortium enables youth-focused groups to incorporate prevention messaging into their established programming and interactions with youth and extends the reach of Health Canada's media messaging to a broader population of youth. Potential members include multimedia corporations, magazines and music programmers.

*Some partnerships that existed before the new Youth Prevention Strategy will also come into play and make a contribution to the overall effort, including the following:*

### CCSA's HEP Program

CCSA's National Health, Education and Enforcement in Partnership (HEP) Program provides a platform where national, provincial/territorial and municipal substance abuse stakeholders can share information and resources.

### CCSA's Scientific Advisory Council

CCSA's Scientific Advisory Council is composed of scientists and clinicians in biomedical and neuroscience fields working together to provide a comprehensive understanding of substance abuse in areas such as the effects of cannabis on the adolescent brain.

### Canadian Network of Substance Abuse and Allied Professionals

CCSA's recently-established Canadian Network is devoted to workforce development and brings together the expertise of substance abuse specialists, educators, and other allied professionals. It has mechanisms in place for sharing toolkits and information flowing from the Strategy with professionals in the field.

## How will the success of the Youth Prevention Strategy be judged?

The Strategy will be subjected to several forms of evaluation aimed at learning from the implementation process, assessing participation levels and uptake of national standards, and, ultimately, monitoring changes in patterns of drug use among Canada's youth.

### *Process Evaluation*

This ongoing examination will determine whether the implementation process is meeting its overall objectives. It tracks "lessons learned" for future use.

### *Self-evaluation*

Information kits will enable program deliverers in schools and communities to assess their activities against the Canadian National Prevention Standards.

The Strategy will be subjected to several forms of evaluation.

### *Outcome Evaluation*

This will assess observable changes at the end of the five-year business plan, including the number and type of partners involved in the Media/Youth Consortium, and the number of youth prevention messages that can be traced to the Consortium; the number of new and existing programs that comply with National Prevention Standards; and the extent to which partnerships have led to investment in the prevention strategy and plans for sustaining its momentum and implementation.

### *Impact Evaluation*

This will monitor youth drug use using existing surveillance mechanisms to track changes in behaviour that are consistent with the goals of the Strategy and the National Anti-Drug Strategy. This will be a critical stage for establishing baseline data and for building a compendium or database of all youth-oriented prevention programs. Finally, this evaluation will constitute a stakeholder survey of parents and communities, and will assess awareness of existing programs, their quality and utility, and any limitations or gaps in current program delivery.

## A NATIONAL FRAMEWORK PRIORITY

*Focusing on Children and Youth* is one of 13 priorities of the National Framework for Action to Reduce the Harms Associated with Alcohol and Other Drugs and Substances in Canada, a broad, collaborative effort to build capacity in the substance abuse field and achieve consensus on national priorities. The National Framework has so far been endorsed by 43 organizations from the NGO sector, government and industry.

The Framework calls for meaningful youth engagement and investment in long-term, sustained programming for school curricula; comprehensive prevention and health programs, including appropriate messaging about the harms associated with substance use; approaches aimed at improving resiliency and promoting protective factors; improved access to and availability of youth-specific treatment programs; and implementation of public policies, such as restricting access to alcohol.

## What's Next? Year One

The first year of the Drug Prevention Strategy for Canada's Youth will be a busy one with start-up activities across all three components of the Strategy. What follows is a brief outline of what will be accomplished during this period.

### *Media/Youth Consortium*

- Approach partners and establish a forum to assess interest and resources.
- Formalize partnership agreements and commitment to sustain the implementation of the Strategy and its deliverables.
- Establish terms of reference and work plan.
- Hold two meetings of the full Consortium.

### *Canadian National Standards*

- Establish youth prevention and special populations expert groups and formalize objectives through terms of reference.
- Develop a knowledge summary.
- Conduct a stakeholder survey of knowledge, awareness, needs and gaps among parents and communities.
- Establish baseline measures of illicit drug use among youth from relevant surveys.
- Establish partnerships to begin to develop resources for educators, communities and families.
- Hold one meeting of the Canadian National Standards Task Force.

### *Sustainable Partnerships*

- Determine membership of the National Advisory Group on Youth Prevention.
- Develop terms of reference, formal partnership agreements and work plan.
- Determine special populations and their needs.