

Cannabis Use, Harms and Perceived Risks among Canadian Students

Key Messages

- Cannabis legalization might have unintended impacts on youth. This report synthesizes results from five provincial and two national drug use surveys of students in grades 7 to 12 to offer an important picture of available cannabis indicators before legalization.
- Overall cannabis use decreased between 2007 and 2015. This decrease was true when examining daily, monthly/past-month and past-year cannabis use.
- Among students in grades 7 to 12 surveyed between 2012 and 2015, up to one-third reported using cannabis in the past year.
- Male students were more likely than female students to report frequent cannabis use (daily, monthly/past month).
- Approximately one in five students who use cannabis drove a motorized vehicle after cannabis use. There is insufficient evidence to determine trends, so this is an important knowledge gap to address.
- Greater consistency in cannabis indicators collected across provinces and territories is needed to better understand the impact of cannabis legalization on Canadian students.

Why Does This Matter?

After alcohol, cannabis is the most widely used psychoactive substance among Canadian students aged 15 to 19. Canadian youth have a high prevalence of cannabis use compared to other countries and, since adolescence is a sensitive developmental period, there is an ongoing need to address youth cannabis use. Initiating regular cannabis use in early adolescence and continuing through young adulthood can lead to more pronounced and long-term cognitive deficits. See [The Effects of Cannabis Use during Adolescence](#).

Canada has recently legalized the non-medical use of cannabis. Successful prevention and harm reduction strategies for youth using cannabis need to provide a clear understanding of use and harms that can be measured through appropriate indicators, including perceived ease of access, prevalence of use, prevalence of driving after use and perceptions of harm, consistently collected in all provinces and territories. Pooling the results of student surveys over years provides an outline of trends for these cannabis indicators over time across Canada.

What Did We Do?

The Student Drug Use Surveys (SDUS) Working Group consists of partners from across Canada who work together to develop a comprehensive portrait of student drug use by pooling the results of provincial and national in-school surveys. The SDUS Working Group decided in 2017 to focus their current report on cannabis use and harms among students in grades 7 to 12 for the survey cycles occurring between 2007 and 2015. See the full technical report for a list of the surveys it includes.



CCSA, working in collaboration with the SDUS Working Group, pooled and reviewed cannabis-related survey results shared by working group members and collected before the legalization of non-medical cannabis. The group identified important indicators about youth cannabis use. Results from two national and five provincial surveys were synthesized and compared to illustrate similarities and differences in results. Surveys had variable sampling methodologies, response rates and limitations that are noted in the full report.

What Did We Find?

The trends show that student cannabis use overall is decreasing as measured by indicators of prevalence, including daily or near-daily, monthly, past-year and lifetime cannabis use. Student participants in the surveys perceived regular use of cannabis as more risky than occasional use, and younger students generally perceived cannabis as more risky than older students. Approximately one in five students who have used cannabis have driven a motorized vehicle after using it. A 2014 report from the SDUS Working Group, *Urban and Rural Student Substance Use*, showed that rural youth are more likely than urban youth to operate a motorized vehicle after using cannabis.

Male v Female Cannabis Indicators

Compared to school-aged females, Canadian males:

- Used cannabis more frequently;
- Perceived cannabis as less risky; and
- Were more likely to drive a vehicle after recently using cannabis.

What Does This Study Mean for You?

The report's findings provide a pan-Canadian overview of important indicators about youth cannabis use and have implications for people who work with youth and shape cannabis policy and legislation. Given that cannabis use and driving after cannabis use is more prevalent among males, education efforts directed at youth should consider sex and gender. The report highlights the need to understand why cannabis use among many youth has decreased in the decade before legalization. Successful prevention strategies need to leverage these reasons for decreased use. For youth who continue to experience risks and harms from cannabis use, targeted strategies should continue to be implemented and evaluated across all provinces and territories.

Where Can You Learn More?

You can access the full technical report, *Cannabis Use, Harms and Perceived Risks among Canadian Students*, or the [infographic](#) based on it, as well as the [Student Drug Use](#) webpage for more information. You can also access the [Health Impacts of Cannabis](#) webpage for more information on the effects of cannabis, including effects on adolescents and driving.

