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Issues of Substance 2021: Driving Change Together

Conference Summary Report: Key Takeaways

April 2022

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Executive Summary

Issues of Substance is the flagship event of the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA), a biennial conference held every other November as part of National Addictions Awareness Week. Under the theme of **driving change together**, the 2021 conference – held virtually for the first time ever and consisting of three half-day online sessions – provided more than 750 attendees with an opportunity to share research, best practices and personal experiences to help shape a brighter future for people who use substances.

Day-by-Day Summary

CCSA's Issues of Substance 2021 began with the Honourable Carolyn Bennett, Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, and Rita Notarandrea, CEO of CCSA, both emphasizing the importance of building a system in which people who use substances are supported with compassion and hope. Indigenous author and educator Eddy Robinson shared his story of intergenerational trauma and how connecting with his culture helped him overcome addiction so he could help others facing similar struggles. Day One's concurrent sessions covered a wide range of topics, including the need for more substance-related public education, safe and effective harm reduction models, the expertise of people who use drugs, and the experiences of harm reduction workers.

On Day Two of the conference, the Governor General of Canada, the Right Honourable Mary Simon, stressed the need to listen to those with experience of substance use, particularly Indigenous communities, while Michel Rodrigue, President and CEO of the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC), underscored the value of collaboration at all levels when addressing substance use and mental health. Singer Jann Arden then shared her story of alcohol use and how she achieved sobriety – and how good things can unexpectedly come out of bad situations. In partnership with the MHCC, Day Two's presentations and workshops highlighted the intersections between mental health and substance use, with attendees learning about stigma-reduction programs, the relationship between pain and substance use, the importance of peer support, the impacts of COVID-19 on mental health and addiction, and more.

The conference wrapped up on Day Three with concurrent sessions on the benefits of virtual treatment programs, the need to better regulate alcohol and cannabis marketing, the importance of co-creating culturally appropriate harm reduction and treatment strategies with Indigenous communities, and many other topics. A closing panel moderated by Stephen Lucas, Deputy Minister of Health, touched on key substance use issues facing people in Canada. Christine Massey, Deputy Minister of Mental Health and Addictions for British Columbia, and Kym Kaufmann, Deputy Minister of Mental Health, Wellness and Recovery for Manitoba, described how their jurisdictions are working to address those issues.

Key Themes and Takeaways

Attendees cited a number of key messages and themes that raised awareness, provoked thought and sparked ideas for evidence-informed changes to their own policies, practices and programming. These themes included:

- People with lived experience of substance use should be treated as experts and consulted in all aspects of harm reduction, stigma, recovery, removing barriers to access and so on.



- The sector needs to continue to work closely with and learn from Indigenous communities and other priority populations to improve the way health research is presented and programming is co-designed.
- Being compassionate, person-centred and respectful of people who use substances are principles that should be embraced by all those who work in public health.

Overall, CCSA's Issues of Substance 2021 touched on many important topics, including the intersections between the mental health and addiction fields, the impact of COVID-19 on substance use and mental health, the expertise of people with lived or living experience of substance use, the stigma around substance use and mental health, innovative new treatment and harm reduction programs, current issues related to substances of use (e.g., opioids, alcohol, cannabis), and issues facing specific populations (e.g., youth, Indigenous Peoples, people experiencing homelessness).



Introduction

It will take a wide range of perspectives and collective efforts to shape a brighter future for people who use substances, especially in the context of COVID-19. The 2021 edition of CCSA's Issues of Substance conference provided a forum for sharing those perspectives and efforts in a fully virtual format for the first time ever. It gave people across the country the opportunity to exchange knowledge and network with peers to drive change together.

Intended for a broad audience, this report summarizes the key messages and takeaways from the keynote addresses, panel discussions, presentations, workshops and posters from CCSA's Issues of Substance 2021.

About CCSA's Issues of Substance

Issues of Substance is the flagship event of the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA), a biennial conference held every other November as part of National Addictions Awareness Week. It aims to strengthen Canada's response to substance use and addiction by:

- **Increasing knowledge** of substance use and its harms, and of best practices and evidence-informed innovations across the continuum of care;
- **Increasing capacity** to respond to system, client or community needs, and to apply knowledge across the continuum of care; and
- **Enhancing knowledge exchange** among people who work in the substance use field and people with lived or living experience of substance use.

The theme for this ninth edition of CCSA's Issues of Substance was **driving change together**, inspired by the global collaborative efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and the idea that seemingly insurmountable issues can be tackled if everyone works together. The 2021 conference was attended by more than 750 addiction specialists, allied professionals (e.g., hospital staff, law enforcement, correctional workers), public health professionals, policy makers, researchers, knowledge brokers, private-sector professionals, and people with lived or living experience of substance use. Only when all those groups work in cohesion will it be possible to create a healthier society where evidence transforms approaches to substance use.

CCSA's Issues of Substance at a glance
750+ participants
3 half days
6 concurrent sessions
100+ presentations
7 workshops
115+ poster presentations
13+ hours of live learning
40+ hours of educational resources

Virtual Event, Real-World Impacts

The virtual format of the conference provided an opportunity for people in Canada as well as international delegates to participate in CCSA's Issues of Substances 2021 from home. Over the course of three half-day online sessions, attendees shared new research, best practices and personal experiences related to substance use disorders, prevention, public education, harm reduction, treatment and recovery. Important issues around the link between mental health and substance use were also discussed. CCSA was pleased to partner again this year with the Mental Health Commission of Canada to dedicate one of the half-day sessions to this topic.

"I learned about the range of responses, the quality of the science, the number of people needed to respond effectively... People are doing fantastic, innovative and engaging work."

~ Conference participant



Opening Remarks

Indigenous Land Acknowledgment

CCSA CEO Rita Notarandrea began the conference by acknowledging that CCSA's offices are located on the traditional, unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe people. She also recognized Indigenous Peoples as traditional knowledge keepers – and that society benefits from the sharing of the wisdom of Indigenous Peoples from coast to coast to coast.

“As I always say, two and two make five when we work together.”

~ The Honourable Carolyn Bennett

The Honourable Carolyn Bennett

Named Canada's first-ever Minister of Mental Health and Addictions in October 2021, **the Honourable Carolyn Bennett** said the goals for her new department are the same as CCSA's: to reduce the harms associated with substance use and to support people who use substances with compassion and hope. To achieve those goals, Minister Bennett said the federal government is committed to learning from the expertise and wise practices of people and programs across Canada, including from people with lived or living experience of substance use.

“I know we can work together on whole-of-system solutions, leveraging each other's work and amplifying the impact,” she said.

Key takeaways:

- Mental health and addiction are complex and systemic issues that require complex and systemic changes.
- Canada will need to build a strategy from the bottom up rather than the top down. That must include greater investments in community-based initiatives to improve local and regional capacity and also to increase virtual care, both of which will help more people in Canada access quality, evidence-based support when they need it most.
- The focused efforts to address the stigma related to mental health have increased people's willingness to reach out for support during the pandemic and in turn is driving policy change. The same must now happen for substance use.

SPEAKERS:

The Honourable Carolyn Bennett

Minister of Mental Health and Addictions,
Government of Canada

Rita Notarandrea

CEO, CCSA

Vaughan Dowie

Chair, CCSA Board of Directors

The Right Honourable Mary Simon

Governor General of Canada

Michel Rodrigue

President and CEO, Mental Health
Commission of Canada

Rita Notarandrea

CCSA CEO **Rita Notarandrea** said she believes the creation of the new federal ministry is an opportunity to bring parity between mental health and the relatively new concept of “substance use health” and to ensure the interconnections between the two are recognized and reflected in Canada's health systems.



“Wellness will be improved in a future where barriers and silos are broken down, stigma is recognized and eliminated, and substance use harms are dealt with in the same way as all other health matters,” she said. Just as physical health and mental health have come to be understood as a spectrum with multiple supports for lifelong wellness without presumed illness, “substance use health” also occurs across a spectrum from “no use” to “lower risk” to “disorder.”

Key takeaways:

- The pandemic and growing drug toxicity crisis are bringing greater urgency to the work of the people in the substance use and addiction field to “row in the same direction” and bring about much-needed change.
- Whole-of-government approaches are needed to address the social determinants of health and improve access to care no matter how people enter the system. No door should be the wrong door to get help.
- A coordinated, seamless approach is needed, as it would be impossible for any one person or group to address all the gaps on their own.

The Right Honourable Mary Simon

In pre-recorded remarks that kicked off Day Two of the conference, the Governor General of Canada, **the Right Honourable Mary Simon**, talked about the need to come together as “members of our large and diverse Canadian family” and put aside our differences for the betterment of those who need help, especially during tough times like the pandemic.

“Let us build a stronger safety net for our loved ones, colleagues and members of our communities,” she said. “And let us be there no matter where they live. One life lost to substance use or suicide is one too many.”

Key takeaways:

- Racialized peoples and minority groups, including Indigenous communities, have experienced disproportionate physical and psychological impacts not just during the pandemic but generally throughout history.
- Suicide rates are five to 25 times higher among Inuit compared to the national average. “Not all of it is related to substance use,” said Simon, “but it does underscore the need to have poignant and open conversations about how we treat those in mental distress and how to promote and advance well-being of the mind as well as the body.”
- Having open conversations – and listening to the people living every day with the consequences of substance use – will help reduce pre-conceived notions surrounding addiction. “They will tell you what is needed, what has worked and what hasn’t,” she said.

“Addressing substance use, including the devastating impact of the opioid crisis and wider issues of mental health and wellness, is vital to building stronger, healthier and more prosperous communities.”

~ The Right Honourable Mary Simon



Michel Rodrigue

According to MHCC President and CEO **Michel Rodrigue**, “driving change together” does not always have to mean rewriting public policy. Change can happen on a much smaller scale, such as leveraging the insights and resources of partners and allies across both the mental health and addictions sectors to support friends or colleagues struggling with substance use.

“We may not always share the same opinions, but everybody has valuable knowledge and experience,” he said. “This conference is an opportunity to learn from diverse perspectives on substance use health and mental health, and a celebration of our commitment to come together to drive change, big and small.”

Key takeaways:

- Collaboration rather than competition within the mental health and addictions sectors is needed.
- The creation of a federal portfolio that combines mental health and addictions is a significant step taken to bring together what are clearly two inseparable fields.



Plenary Sessions

Urban Indigenous Ways of Knowing

Anishinaabe/Muskegowuk Cree artist, musician, author and educator **Eddy Robinson** believes “90 percent of Canadians have only 10 percent of the story” about the oppression experienced by Indigenous Peoples and why substance use and addiction have disproportionately affected Indigenous communities for more than 100 years.

SPEAKER:

Eddy Robinson

Anishinaabe/Muskegowuk
Cree artist, musician,
author and educator

To help bring the truth to light, Robinson shared his own life story, describing how the lingering trauma of his family history, including his father being taken to a residential school and his mother’s abuse by Jesuit priests, made the Toronto apartment he lived in a “hub for violence and alcoholism.” He recalled how it was not until he visited his uncles in jail that he experienced his own culture for the first time, hearing the drums and smelling the sweetgrass as the Indigenous inmates held a ceremony.

An unexpected ally — a Catholic priest — encouraged Robinson to seek out his Indigenous roots when he was a young teen. But it wasn’t easy: he was on his own at age 14, drunk or high most nights. But his life changed at age 18 when he met an Indigenous healer who took him on a vision quest. By fully connecting with his Indigenous culture, he was able to overcome his alcohol and drug addiction. With a new sense of belonging and identity, Robinson has since worked to help others struggling as he and his family had.

Key takeaways:

- Despite many years of working with at-risk youth, Robinson feels the narrative has yet to change for families affected by drugs and alcohol with many teens going through the exact same experiences he did 25 years ago.
- Healing from past and present trauma, including the trauma inflicted by residential schools, will require a combination of Western science with traditional Indigenous ways of knowing, supported by relationships, communities and kinship.
- Approaches to healing need to be rooted in empathy and supporting one another. “Remember that we are all spiritual beings having this human experience,” Robinson said. “It’s about listening to each other and stoking a fire inside of people to learn the truth and want to heal.”

“Look at our faults and our strengths and be honest, then transformation can happen. I went from being on the streets and being violent to being an educator and writing books. I never thought I would be in this place.”

~ Eddy Robinson

Jann Arden: My Story

Singer, actor and author **Jann Arden** is a strong believer that good things can come out of bad situations. Seeking refuge from her father’s alcohol use disorder, the 10-year-old Arden holed up in the family’s basement each day after school listening to records and learning to play songs by ear on an old guitar, laying the foundation for her successful music career.

SPEAKER:

Jann Arden

Singer, actor and author



Arden knew she did not want to follow in her dad's footsteps and believed she would be "shielded from" addiction. But as a teenager in a rural setting without a lot of supervision, she and her friends started drinking at a young age. She continued to drink heavily even as she was trying to kickstart her musical career, singing in cover bands in Vancouver. She eventually worked up the courage to sing her own original songs and people started to take notice, leading to her taking the trip to Nashville to record demos. There, she was initially turned down by every record label in town, which made her drinking worse. But Arden persevered and has now been with the same label for 30 years.

Arden achieved sobriety at age 54 when her mother's struggle with Alzheimer's disease, combined with her own trip to the hospital for a heart condition, made her realize how precious our time is and the importance of being in the moment.

Key takeaways:

- People who drink heavily find ways to qualify or validate their behaviour and make it seem normal. They also think they are in control when in reality "alcoholism is what plans your days for you."
- Being vulnerable and showing people who you really are can be an act of bravery and strength. The arts are a useful tool to help people with addiction tap into their emotions and find that vulnerability.
- "It's not easy being a person," Arden said. "But it's easier to make your way through all of it when you're able to be fair, tolerant, forgiving and understanding of others who are struggling."

*"Good things can come out of bad things.
You don't know what is around the corner or how things will affect your life."*

~ Jann Arden

Driving Change Together: Priorities for Substance Use and Mental Health Beyond the Pandemic

As Canada emerges from the pandemic and transitions to endemic COVID-19, collaboration among those involved in providing health care will be critical to improving the quality of care and access to care. That includes sharing knowledge about what has worked in different jurisdictions and with different populations so that promising practices can be adopted across the country.

Moderated by **Stephen Lucas**, this panel discussion looked at the key mental health and substance use issues facing people in Canada, as well as the programs and services that are addressing those issues in two specific jurisdictions: British Columbia and Manitoba.

In British Columbia, Deputy Minister **Christine Massey** said her province is dealing with three main issues. First is the increasing toxicity of illicit drugs, which is now the leading cause of unnatural death among people aged 19 to 39, a public health crisis in need of innovative new solutions. Second is the unmet demand for mental health and addiction services that has surged with recent

MODERATOR:

Stephen Lucas

Deputy Minister, Health Canada

SPEAKERS:

Kym Kaufmann

Deputy Minister, Department of Mental Health, Wellness and Recovery, Government of Manitoba

Christine Massey

Deputy Minister, Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions, Government of British Columbia



crises including the pandemic, flooding and wildfires. Third is the disproportionate impact of all the above on Indigenous communities.

Manitoba faces many of the same issues. Deputy Minister **Kym Kaufmann** mentioned how difficult it is for people to access and navigate the health system, referencing a 2018 report that called the system a “pinball machine” due to the ways people are bounced from service provider to service provider. She also cited rising wait times as an area of concern, including for substance use programs.

Lucas then asked how the two provinces are responding to the following issues: access to care, virtual care, children and youth services, concurrent disorders and health human resources.

Access to Care

Manitoba	British Columbia
<p>Youth hubs integrate mental health, primary care and various social services at a single site</p> <p>24/7 drop-in centres have helped redirect people away from emergency departments</p> <p>A new screening, brief intervention and referral program has increased primary care capacity to support people with mental health or substance use issues</p>	<p>Taking a whole-of-government approach since 2017, the Ministry of Mental Health, Wellness and Recovery works closely with the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, BC Corrections and other departments</p> <p>A one-stop online resource, wellbeing.gov.bc.ca, ensures “warm handoffs” between the growing number of mental health, addiction and social services across the province</p>

“Our goal is to work across government to build a seamless mental health and addictions system. We’re looking to make it so there is no wrong door.”

~ Deputy Minister, Christine Massey

Virtual Care

Manitoba	British Columbia
<p>A 2019 plan for virtual services had to be implemented quickly when the pandemic hit</p> <p>The plan includes investing in virtual beds as part of crisis stabilization units as well as telepsychiatry services to reduce the number of people in Northern Manitoba having to travel to Winnipeg for assessments</p> <p>The province has connected 125,000 people in rural and remote areas to high-speed internet, including 30 First Nations communities</p>	<p>BC has had great success with mobile apps, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Foundry app for youth, which will be a key piece of the province’s integrated youth services beyond the pandemic • The Here2Talk counselling service for post-secondary students • The Lifeguard app, which helps prevent overdoses by automatically connecting people who use substances alone to a first responder if they become unresponsive



Children and Youth Services

Manitoba	British Columbia
<p>A school-based mental health and addictions pilot program sends clinical teams into schools to offer early interventions to students who need them</p> <p>“Thrival Kits” bring evidence-based mental health practices such as mindfulness into classrooms</p> <p>Project 11 allows students to get virtual lessons on positive mental wellness strategies from famous people such as hockey players</p>	<p>In close collaboration with school districts, integrated Child and Youth Teams provide single points of contact and help families navigate to the right services for their children, whether connecting to a primary care provider or to specializations such as mental health or addictions support</p>

Concurrent Disorders

Manitoba	British Columbia
<p>Manitoba’s new Department of Mental Health, Wellness and Recovery (created in January 2021) is working to build a comprehensive treatment system to address individuals with concurrent mental health and substance use issues</p> <p>The goal is to improve resource planning and allocation</p>	<p>A complex care housing program is in development to provide a continuum of care for people with concurrent disorders</p> <p>The program will offer clinical health services and social services to people living in supportive housing units, which should help them stay in their units longer</p>

“What are the core mental health, addiction and concurrent disorder services that should be available in Manitoba? How much do we need for a province of our size? Those answers will help build a more robust system that ensures cost-effective, least-intensive services are available to all Manitobans.”

~ Deputy Minister, Kim Kaufmann

Health Human Resources

Manitoba	British Columbia
<p>Virtual cognitive behavioural therapy, including 15-minute “booster sessions” on topics such as stress management, helps healthcare workers cope with pandemic-related concerns</p> <p>Critical incident stress management uses a “train the trainer” approach to help healthcare workers better respond to the mental health needs of their colleagues</p>	<p>BC sees a challenge in addressing the health sector labour shortage without stealing people from other provinces that are also desperate for workers</p> <p>To increase resilience and reduce burnout among frontline workers, the province has launched initiatives such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Care to Speak, which provides one-on-one mental wellness peer support by telephone or online chat • BC Hub for Workplace Mental Health, developed in partnership with WorkSafe BC, to



provide all workers with foundational mental health training and those in sectors hit hardest by the pandemic, such as hospitality and tourism, with customized supports

“One of our biggest priorities is engaging with partners and stakeholders to inform our roadmap going forward. We’re hearing we need a whole-of-government approach with more comprehensive, population-based planning.”

~ Deputy Minister, Kym Kaufmann

“Coming out of the pandemic, the opportunity we have now is to determine the right balance between in-person and virtual services. I’m looking forward to digging into that.”

~ Deputy Minister, Christine Massey



Concurrent Sessions and Posters

The conference featured more than 100 presentations and workshops covering a vast range of important topics, including:

- Substances of use (e.g., opioids, cannabis, alcohol, other)
- Substance use by specific populations (e.g., youth, Indigenous Peoples, people experiencing homelessness)
- Concurrent substance use and mental health disorders
- Innovations in treatment and harm reduction
- Stigma
- Issues affecting the substance use and health workforce
- Substance use during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Virtual care and digital health resources
- Drug regulations and legalization
- New research approaches
- Bringing traditional Indigenous knowledge and culture into addiction programming

This breadth of options and the ease with which they could be livestreamed over the conference's online platform allowed attendees to focus on the topics and themes of most interest to them. More than 115 poster presentations were also made available for viewing during the event. Attendees were also given the opportunity to connect with poster presenters to discuss their research.

Some of the key takeaways that emerged during the presentations, workshops and posters included:

The System and Workforce

- Mental health and addiction are complex and systemic issues that require complex and systemic changes, including efforts to improve local and regional capacity.
- Although harm reduction workers continue to report high levels of work satisfaction, the vast majority are experiencing burnout symptoms, and more than half are experiencing secondary traumatic stress.
- The mental health and addictions sectors need to work together, not compete with each other.
- Increasing resiliency and self-compassion among health service providers decreases substance use stigma.

COVID-19

- COVID-19 has had a significant impact on people's mental health and well-being, with many increasing their use of drugs and alcohol to cope with stress, isolation and uncertainty.
- The pandemic has highlighted the inequity that exists in Canada around health and access to health care, which disproportionately affects marginalized populations, including Indigenous Peoples.
- As Canada transitions to endemic COVID-19, collaboration and sharing knowledge about what has worked in different places and with different populations will be critical to improving the quality of care and access to care.



- The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted usual drug supply channels and led to higher risks for people who use drugs.
- Substance use health care and mental health care must be considered essential services during a pandemic.
- Opioid-related emergency department visits and hospitalizations increased during the pandemic, especially those involving fentanyl and its derivatives.
- Greater regulation of alcohol and cannabis is needed to reduce their associated harms, particularly following the pandemic, which saw increased use and loosened restrictions to access.

Stigma, Substance Use Health and Recovery

- For the greatest impact, stigma reduction programs should be ongoing and integrated, and should incorporate social contact and personal stories.
- Just as there is mental health there is also “substance use health,” and the interconnections between the two need to be recognized.
- Material and financial resources, as well as personal strengths, play a significant role in recovery, and should be taken into account in recovery program design.

People with Lived or Living Experience

- Listening to the people living every day with the consequences of substance use will help reduce the pre-conceived notions surrounding addiction.
- Many people with substance use disorders struggle despite appearing “functional.” They also might not be aware of the services and supports in place to help them, highlighting the importance of healthcare providers to be knowledgeable about available resources to fully support their patients.
- Stigma and discrimination remain significant barriers for people with lived or living experience of substance use for accessing services and supports.

Policy and Program Innovations

- Virtual programming can be an effective way to support people with concurrent substance use and mental health disorders.
- Effective treatment and harm reduction methods, such as the rapid access addiction medicine (RAAM) model, drug checking services, injectable opioid agonists and other medications, should be expanded.
- Many existing digital resources for substance use health incorporate principles of gender- and trauma-informed care, but more content related to culture and ethnicity would be useful.
- More public education and awareness is needed around topics such as the Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines and the *Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act*.



Opioids

- Appropriate education on pain, including diagnosis, treatment and management, can help address the opioid crisis.
- Virtual opioid treatment programs produced positive health outcomes and reduced access barriers during the pandemic.
- Many people do not stick with their opioid agonist treatment programs long enough to achieve the minimum effective dose, suggesting the need for improved retention strategies.
- Drug analysis services are essential in addressing the overdose crisis.
- There is a need to expand opioid treatment options and accessibility for pregnant women and new mothers in ways that align with the evidence and with their needs.
- People who died of opioid overdose while experiencing homelessness were more likely to have died of accidental causes, and fentanyl or methamphetamine were more likely to have contributed to their deaths.

Cannabis

- The legalization of cannabis has not had equal benefits to all communities, and Indigenous and racialized communities continue to be over-policed and feel the residual effects of prohibition.
- In the context of legal cannabis, Canada's drug policy requires systemic changes to ensure public health protection is prioritized over profitability.
- More public education is required about minimum wait times before driving after cannabis.
- People with ADHD might find it more difficult to recognize cannabis misuse and moderate their cannabis use.

Alcohol

- Problematic alcohol use may be a contributing factor to suicide and suicidal ideation: addressing it may help prevent suicide.
- Alcohol use tends to fit into daily life differently for men and women, and health promotion messaging should be tailored accordingly.
- There is a general lack of awareness of Canada's Low Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines and understanding about what constitutes a standard drink.

Methamphetamine, Other Substances and Polysubstance Use

- People who use methamphetamine are seeking to self-medicate their mental health challenges or reduce their risk of an opioid overdose, as many people who use methamphetamine believe methamphetamine overdose to be impossible.
- Putting a greater emphasis on the reasons why people choose to combine substances may be a key factor in understanding high-risk polysubstance use patterns



- Polysubstance use is a burgeoning issue among students in grades 7–12, with rates steadily increasing in Canada between 2014–2015 and 2018–2019.

Indigenous Peoples

- For Indigenous Peoples, healing from past and present trauma will require a combination of Western science with traditional Indigenous ways of knowing, supported by relationships, communities and kinship.
- Working with Indigenous communities to co-design appropriate harm reduction strategies builds trust and improves health outcomes for these communities.
- In addition to programming focused on First Nations, cultural programming specific to Métis is also beneficial.

Youth

- Youth who use drugs often have intersecting vulnerabilities, which need to be accounted for in research methods to produce appropriate policy decisions.
- Peer support is an innovative care approach for young adults presenting with mental health and substance use problems in emergency departments.
- Younger people are more likely to use opioids and stimulants concurrently and are more likely to experience non-fatal overdoses, emphasizing the need for age-appropriate harm reduction strategies.



Conclusion

The 2021 edition of CCSA's Issues of Substance conference touched on many important topics related to substance use and mental health, providing attendees with several key takeaways aimed at strengthening Canada's response to substance use and addiction. The learnings from this event paralleled the lessons learned during the ongoing global pandemic: the need to be able to adapt to changing context, the immense opportunity for innovation through research and technology, and the need to work together to shape a better future.

In the conference's post-event evaluation survey, respondents cited a number of messages, themes and insights from across the three days that raised awareness, provoked thought and sparked ideas for evidence-informed changes to their own policies, practices and programming. These included:

- People with lived experience of substance use should be treated as experts and consulted in all aspects of harm reduction, stigma, recovery, removing barriers to access and so on.
- The sector needs to continue to work closely with and learn from Indigenous communities and other priority populations to improve the way health research is presented, to co-design programming and to receive other appropriate guidance.
- Being compassionate, person-centred and respectful of people who use substances are principles that should be embraced by all those who work in public health.

The Impacts of CCSA's Issues of Substance 2021

81%

of participants were satisfied or very satisfied with the conference

88%

of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they could apply what they learned to the work they do

79%

of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the conference will help them respond to system, client or community needs

85%

of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the conference increased their knowledge of substance use and its harms

81%

of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the conference increased their understanding of best practices and evidence-informed innovations

95%

of participants said they were more aware of the work others across Canada are doing in the substance use field

"Despite the complex challenges, there is energy, urgency and commitment. Great research is being done; groups are taking risks to address hard issues... I am inspired. Thank you."

~ Conference participant