

Visual Abstract



Summary

The **Closing the Gaps Research Initiative** funded **19 research projects** to fill information gaps about the impact of recreational cannabis legalization in Canada. The initiative saw a combined research investment of **\$1.8 million** into projects that support the study of cannabis policies, regulations, and programs in Canada. More details on the Closing the Gaps Research Initiative, funded projects, and the findings and recommendations detailed below can be found in the **Closing the Gaps: Cannabis Research Summary Report**.

Methods



Populations Studied



Findings and Recommendations

The **19 research projects** from the **Closing the Gaps** initiative yielded key findings and recommendations across **eight** themes: *impacts of legalization, medical vs. non-medical use, cannabis and mental health, cannabis and physical health, purchase decisions, modalities of use, polysubstance use, stigma and responsible cannabis use.*

The Impacts of Legalization

Key findings Following cannabis legalization:	 Overall cannabis use did not significantly increase among youth (age 15-18) or people with a substance use disorder.	 A higher legal age may reduce cannabis use among those close to that age (18-20), but not younger youth (15-18).	 Cannabis-related emergency department visits increased overall.
Researcher recommendations	 Evaluate the longer-term impacts of legalization on substance use disorder, given the time it takes for symptoms to emerge and for people to report or seek treatment.	 Consider a higher legal age and additional policy measures to curb cannabis use among younger youth.	 Improve public health and patient services to address increased emergency department visits.

Medical vs. Non-Medical Use

Key findings	Researcher recommendations
 48% of cannabis consumers used cannabis for both medical and non-medical purposes.	 Existing Lower Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines should be updated to meet the needs of people in Canada who use cannabis.
 Self-reported medical/health reasons for cannabis use included: pain management, mental health support, and sleep aid.	 Research should focus on the effectiveness of cannabis for managing pain and mental health issues.
 18% Reported medical use decreased by 18% immediately after legalization and wider access to recreational cannabis.	

Cannabis and Mental Health

Key findings	Researcher recommendations
 The relationship between recreational cannabis use and mental health risks and benefits is complex and inconclusive.	 Consider the impacts of cannabis use on mental health and other co-occurring conditions.
 There may be a perception that cannabis is an effective mental health treatment, despite limited evidence and potential harms.	 Encourage people to seek guidance on cannabis use from healthcare professionals.
 Risks of negative mental health outcomes may increase when self-medicating with cannabis.	 Increase availability and accessibility of information on lower risk cannabis use.

Cannabis and Physical Health

Key findings	Researcher recommendations
 Cannabis use risks and harms appear to vary by sex and consumption method.	 Public health messaging should acknowledge risk differences between sexes and possible interactions between cannabis and other drugs.
 There is an urgent need for evidence on cannabis use during pregnancy and chestfeeding.	 Policies that regulate the availability of high-strength (THC) products and prohibit bulk purchasing could be important harm-reduction tools.
 The way cannabis interacts with other drugs is not well understood.	 Strategies are needed to support safe disclosure of cannabis use by pregnant and chestfeeding people.

Purchase Decisions

Key findings	Researcher recommendations
 The percentage of people buying cannabis from the legal market is increasing.	 Consider public health and safety implications of strategies that move people from the illegal to legal market (e.g., reducing price, adjusting product offerings, prioritizing customer experience).
 Product price is the most important factor influencing where people buy cannabis. Product quality and customer experience are also important factors.	 Consider including prominent, plain language, and specific health warnings on packaging.
 The impact of product packaging and labelling on purchase decisions is unclear.	 Explore environmentally friendly cannabis packaging options.

Modalities of Use

Key findings	Researcher recommendations
 Most people who consume recreational cannabis choose inhalation-based methods, like vaping or smoking.	 Consider new strategies to encourage non-combustible consumption methods, by targeting perceived cost effectiveness and convenience.
 Inhalation-based methods are also common among people who report self-medicating with cannabis.	 Public health stakeholders should explore the relative risks and benefits of restricting access to vaping products.
 Emerging adults (18-30) who vape regularly may not fully understand vaping or the associated risks.	

Polysubstance Use

Key findings	Researcher recommendations
 So far, cannabis legalization does not appear to be associated with major changes in tobacco, alcohol, or other substance use.	 Maintain or strengthen regulations that prohibit sale of alcohol and cannabis in the same place.
 Using alcohol and cannabis together may be associated with higher health and wellbeing risks.	 Continue public health messaging about risks of consuming cannabis and alcohol at the same time.
	 Continue to monitor the impact of cannabis legalization on other substance use, as the cannabis market evolves.

Stigma and Responsible Cannabis Use

Key findings	Researcher recommendations
 Research and public policy that frames cannabis use as inherently problematic may contribute to stigma.	 Take steps to eliminate the stigma related to cannabis use for all populations, given the harms associated with stigma and concealing cannabis use.
 Stigma may limit people's willingness to disclose cannabis use and seek support.	 Consider policies that balance the need to share information on lower-risk cannabis use with the need to reduce stigma.
 Treatment options that support diverse recovery goals (vs. abstinence alone) may be important for improving cannabis-related treatment access and completion.	 Develop standardized measurement tools to accurately differentiate between low risk and problematic cannabis use.