

Stigma, Discrimination & Substance Use

Experiences of people who use alcohol and other drugs in Toronto

Report Summary

This is a summary of the report *Stigma, Discrimination & Substance Use*. The report describes the results of a Toronto Drug Strategy research project. The Toronto Drug Strategy is an action plan based on the four areas of prevention, harm reduction, treatment and enforcement. The goal of the strategy is to reduce the harms of substance use for individuals, families and communities. One area of concern for the Toronto Drug Strategy is the stigma and discrimination experienced by people who use alcohol/other drugs.

What was the study about?

Six focus groups were held at community agencies across Toronto in the summer of 2010 to hear from people who use alcohol/other drugs about:

- the stigma and discrimination they experienced
- the impact of these experiences on their lives, and
- ideas of how to reduce stigma and discrimination towards people who use alcohol/other drugs.

“Discrimination is everywhere when it comes to drugs. You walk down the street and people judge you.”

Who did we hear from?

Sixty people who were former or current users of alcohol/other drugs participated in the study, including women, men, adults, youth, and people from various ethno-cultural groups.

What did people tell us?

Focus group members were clear that stigma and discrimination has a negative impact in all areas of their lives. The main themes discussed included:

- Families are the most significant source of discrimination, with the most negative impacts.
- People face many forms of discrimination at the same time (e.g., related to their substance use, poverty, race, gender and age) and this increases its impact.
- Negative self-esteem leading to self-stigma is the main impact of stigma and discrimination.
- People do not access services they need to improve their lives because of discrimination from workers at those services.
- Discrimination stops people from asking for help because they fear how they will be treated.
- Peer support helps people cope with the negative effects of stigma and discrimination.
- People need better information about their rights to use programs and services.

“Have people who use drugs go out and talk to people so they can see what it’s like to have an addiction - that we are normal like everyone else.”

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- The language we use about people who use drugs should be less negative and judgmental.
- Putting a human face on the issue may increase understanding and compassion for people with substance use issues.

Will anything be done about stigma and discrimination in Toronto?

Yes. The report has the following recommendations that will be implemented as part of the Toronto Drug Strategy.

1. Set up a *Stigma and Discrimination Working Group* to implement the recommendations.
2. Support and educate the families of people with substance use issues.
3. Help people tell their stories of stigma and discrimination to use in anti-stigma initiatives in Toronto.
4. Educate and train health care and other service providers on the complexity of substance use.
5. Create more peer programs to support people dealing with stigma and discrimination.
6. Expand health care services in community agencies used by people with alcohol/other drug issues.

The Toronto Drug Strategy Implementation Panel, which is the leadership group for the drug strategy, is inviting interested members of the community to join the *Stigma and Discrimination Working Group*. The group will start working on the recommendations in early 2011.

To get a copy of the full report, *Stigma, Discrimination & Substance Use*, or to find out more about the Toronto Drug Strategy, please go to www.toronto.ca/health/drugstrategy or call 416-338-0625.

Thank you to everyone who participated in the focus groups for this study; your voices and experiences are the heart of this project. Thanks also to the community agencies who contributed their time and expertise to host, recruit participants and to co-facilitate the focus groups. This research project could not have happened without your help and support.