

SECTION THREE

DISCUSSION

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Why study the patterns of illicit drug use?

From a public health and safety perspective, the single most important reason is summarized in one word – prevention. An understanding of the dangers of popular, yet often hidden modes of drug use is essential to the prevention of harms which they may cause. What activities are posing dangers to which segments of the population? How are these best addressed?

Among the most widespread and damaging of the current drug related concerns is the use of crack cocaine, both smoked and injected. While some jurisdictions have developed plans to help individuals addicted to this powerful drug, the quest for effective treatment for crack use continues.

Homeless youth involved in problematic substance use are another group of those hardest to treat, and their problems appear to be worsening. Reports from several front line sources indicate an increasing number of street youth with serious mental health problems as well as those of drug abuse. The lack of any residential treatment for youth with drug addictions and the corresponding absence of facilities for treating dual diagnosis paint a bleak future for thousands of youth in Toronto.

By no means is dangerous drug use confined to those who live in poverty. Examples of problematic use in the more general population include inhalant use among junior high and high school students as well as marijuana use, binge drinking, and the use of chemicals and prescription pills. While these problems, like those listed above, have existed for years, factors such as the emergence of drug production as a home industry, the popularity of poly-drug use, and the growing use of several highly potent, addictive substances contribute to their potential dangers.

Along with concerns for the health and safety of those who use drugs, there are potential drug-related dangers to the wider community. For example, the dangers of driving under the influence of drugs have, in the past, been addressed only for alcohol. The growing popularity of marijuana, however, and of driving under its influence, raise interesting questions with respect to more general roadside testing. There is a need to educate the significant proportion of the driving population who use marijuana of the dangers of driving while stoned. This, in turn, raises the question, “Is **‘Don’t drive under the influence of weed’** an acceptable public safety message, given that weed is illegal? Or does this tacitly condone use? What is the best way to minimize the potential harms of this practice?

Choosing effective, practical approaches to preventing potential drug-related harm is a challenge which is often divisive. As the example above is intended to show, individuals can be very committed to how they believe illegal drug use should be addressed. Some see punishment as the only solution for the crime of drug use. Others claim that more flexible approaches are more beneficial in the long term. Despite the controversy which has sometimes accompanied them, Toronto has been the birth place of some extra-ordinary programs for drug prevention and treatment.

Given the complexity of the drug scene in Toronto today, questions of how to approach these problems with limited resources become more urgent. Following the lead of Vancouver, front line staff, clients and professionals involved in substance use prevention and treatment in Toronto are currently constructing a strategic plan to address these critical problems. The project entails a thorough review of the information regarding the most significant drug-related problems in Toronto. In addition, a review of the various solutions used internationally, and the feasibility of adopting similar models in Toronto will be a part of this strategic plan. Given the successful initiatives of the past in Toronto, and the extensive community involvement in this new undertaking, there is much reason for optimism with respect to addressing some of the current, serious drug-related problems in the city.