
INTRODUCTION

“Drug Use in Toronto, 2004” is the 13th edition of the Drug Use in Toronto series. It was first compiled in 1990 by the newly formed (former Metro Toronto) Research Group on Drug Use, which included the (former) Addiction Research Foundation, the Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario, the Toronto Police Force, and the Toronto Department of Public Health. These four agencies continue to collaborate on drug-related issues to the present time, recognizing the value in sharing information about this complex subject. In fact, the Research Group on Drug Use (RGDU) now includes members from a diverse set of organizations, including local hospitals, treatment agencies, community health centres and more. The list of current RGDU participants appears on the Acknowledgement pages.

The original mandate of the Research Group on Drug Use (RGDU) was to document statistics on illicit drug use in (then Metro) Toronto. While statistics on alcohol and tobacco use were widely available in 1989, information regarding illicit drugs was not. In this pre-information highway era, it was hard to find any information on illicit drugs outside of the tabloids; it was therefore difficult to separate rumors from the few reported “facts” that could be found. Thus, the first annual reports of “Drug Use In Toronto” compiled the relevant “official” statistics from the original four partners.

Over the past 14 years, the content and format of “Drug Use in Toronto” has evolved. The full data set now includes many indicators dating back one or more decades, affording a view of drug-related trends over time. In addition, information on emerging issues, quantitative as well as anecdotal, is routinely shared and discussed through monthly meetings of the RGDU participants.

Organizing this data for a diverse audience including members of the general public, academics, front line workers, clients and policy makers, is challenging. The agencies collecting drug-related information generally organize this data on a drug-by-drug basis; thus, it is relatively easy to find estimates of the number of users, the number in treatment, the number of seizures, or the number of deaths associated with any of a list of common illicit substances. The Findings section, previously the first part of each report, provides this drug-by-drug summary.

However, understanding drug use goes far beyond a knowledge of these statistics, no matter their sources. Effective prevention and treatment require an understanding of the various drugs available, the role they play in the user’s life, the conditions under which they are used, and the consequences for both the users and those around them. The section Drug Use by Population is an effort to provide this context for the drug by drug Findings section, which follows it.

The description of the Toronto drug scene is divided into two parts: drug use in the so-called mainstream population versus that within more marginalized groups. This population division is commonly made in efforts to describe patterns of illicit drug use. No models, of course, hold without exception; each group is composed of individuals, no two of whom are identical. Therefore these broad generalizations are just that. However, there is some benefit to this framework for examining patterns of drug abuse, as finances and other resources are relevant; they generally play an important role in determining which drugs are used, how safely they are used, which treatment options are available, and the long-term consequences. In addition, a section on emerging issues is included for each of the two population groups. It is important to note, however, that many current and emerging trends transcend this division, given the common, illicit market of supply.

Delivering public health services and information which prevent or minimize serious drug-related problems is a serious challenge. The complexities grow with the constantly evolving nature of the drug scene and require continuing vigilance. This report is provided to assist in this process. Comments and inquiries about this report and the Research Group on Drug Use are welcomed.