

Prevention

The use of alcohol and other drugs affects individuals, families and communities across Ontario. Most people will be touched in some way by substance use, either by a family member, a friend, or by their own use. Not all substance use is harmful, but people do experience harm – they may develop an addiction, contract an infectious disease such as Hepatitis C or HIV/AIDS, they may become injured or even die as a result of substance use. Communities also experience harm such as violence and other crime and disorder associated with alcohol and other drugs.

A comprehensive approach to substance use includes a range of prevention, harm reduction, treatment and enforcement efforts working together. Prevention is a key part of that overall approach and yet very little attention or investment is targeted to these efforts. We need more investment in prevention to reduce the harms of alcohol and other drugs.

Prevention works

Considerable research has been done in the area of prevention and we know what works and what doesn't work. For example, education about alcohol and other drugs on its own is not effective, nor are scare tactics or hard-line approaches like zero-tolerance. Effective prevention begins early and continues through the life span. It includes multiple strategies such as skill building, mentoring, engaging youth in developing prevention messages, and ensuring environmental supports are in place such as employment, positive school culture, and strong family supports. Effective legislation and policies (e.g., legal drinking age) are also important prevention measures.

Prevention is cost-effective

Prevention is cost-effective. It is estimated that for every \$1 spent on alcohol and other drug prevention, \$10 is saved in treatment costs.¹

The cost of harmful substance use

In Ontario, the health and social cost of harmful use of alcohol and other drugs is estimated at \$8.2 billion². Many of these harms are preventable and many can be mitigated. But this requires a commitment from governments to take action, including investing in evidence-based prevention.

Prevention initiatives in Toronto

In addition to Toronto Public Health and the Centre for Addiction & Mental Health, many community-based agencies and groups across Toronto deliver alcohol and other drug prevention initiatives.

These programs are making a real difference in people's lives.

Family-based programs:

The Centre for Addiction & Mental Health adapted the *Strengthening Families for the Future* program for at-risk children aged 7 to 11 whose parents have a history of substance use. A five year clinical trial of this program had the following results:

- more effective parenting techniques
- reduced parental hostility and aggression
- better child social skills and coping skills
- reduced behaviour problems among children

"The tips I learned through the program helped things get a lot better at home."

- Parent participant

Strategies for high-risk youth:

Youth Skills Zone helps street youth stabilize their lives and increase their employability. Every year 100 homeless/street-involved youth (aged 16-24) participate in this 10 week program. Annual program results include:

- 56% secured employment
- 50% found housing
- 29% entered substance use treatment
- 26% enrolled in further education

"In the long run hundreds of youth like me will need this program, for most it's the only chance to be free from the street and for some it's their last chance."

- Youth Skills Zone graduate

Prevention initiatives in Toronto (con't)

Mentoring programs for children:

Toronto Public Health's *One on One Mentoring* program fosters resiliency in children enabling them to better deal with life's pressures and difficulties. Adult volunteers are matched with school-aged children to spend one lunch hour a week together. Research on children in mentoring programs has found:

- 53% are less likely to skip school
- 27% are less likely to begin to use alcohol
- 46% are less likely to use other drugs.

"I feel that the program has set me on the right path."
- Program participant

Peer-based programs:

Peer programs use youth as facilitators to offer the benefits of their own experience and engage their peers in discussions about alcohol and other drugs.

- In a program focused on marijuana use, Parent Action on Drugs (PAD) found that 66% of grade nine students changed their minds about the risks of marijuana use after participating in a peer program.
- In a PAD program to increase personal leadership skills and acknowledge community strengths, 90% of peer leaders in Toronto's vulnerable communities reported significant increases in their leadership skills and belief in their community's strengths.

"We showed the kids leadership and how to help our community. It showed that we can give back to our community."
- PAD peer educator

- In "*Stay Safe and Know the Facts*," a harm reduction program for high school students, 80% of participants said they had a better understanding of the risks involved with substance use, 44% of students in grades 7-10 who were currently using drugs plan to decrease their use, and 30% of grade 11 and 12 students said they would decrease use.

"I am glad I came here – now I have a much better understanding." "The presentations give options!"
- Student participants

Substance use among Toronto youth

The Centre for Addiction & Mental Health's student survey³ found that Toronto students (grade 7 to 12) reported the following rates of substance use during the past year:

- 51.3% drank alcohol
- 14.8% reported "binge drinking" (more than 5 drinks on one occasion)
- 20.1% smoked cannabis
- 8.3% reported use of illicit drugs other than cannabis.

Some youth are more vulnerable to substance use, especially youth that have mental health issues, youth that live in a household where substance use is an issue, or youth who are survivors of abuse.

It should be noted that the above statistics do not capture the experience of youth who are homeless or otherwise street-involved for whom rates of use are higher and the impacts more severe.

This document was prepared by the Toronto Drug Strategy Prevention Working Group, which is a multi-sectoral group working to expand comprehensive prevention programming for children, families and youth in Toronto.

For more information on the Toronto Drug Strategy, please call 416-338-3585 or visit www.toronto.ca/health/drugstrategy.

¹ National Institute on Drug Abuse. (1999). *Infocasts: Lessons from Prevention Research*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

² J. Rehm, et al. (2006). *The Costs of Substance Use in Canada 2002*. Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. The estimated costs are for alcohol and other drugs in Ontario and include direct health care, law enforcement, corrections, prevention and research, lost productivity (due to injury, disability and death), and other direct costs.

³ E. Adlaf and A. Paglia-Boak. (2005). *Drug Use Among Ontario Students, OSDUS Highlights, 1997-2005*. Centre for Addiction & Mental Health.