

INNOVATIONS IN HARM REDUCTION FOR YOUTH CANNABIS USE.

A summary
of youth
focused
projects in
Canada

On October 17th, 2022, the hybrid event Innovations in Harm Reduction for Youth Cannabis Use event showcased new developments in harm reduction research and programs from across Canada. The event brought together youth experts, advocates, community organizations, policy contributors, and researchers to showcase youth-led and youth-centered approaches to cannabis education and harm reduction developed in the post-legalization context.

This digital booklet provides brief summaries of the six programs featured at the October event as well as other programs contributing to youth cannabis harm reduction resulting from our open call for submissions.

Organizing partners: Daniel Bear, Humber College; Rebecca Haines-Saah, University of Calgary, Emily Jenkins, University of British Columbia.





THE *(Incredible)*
PROGRAMS



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Qollab, École de santé publique de l'Université de Montréal and Centre de Recherche en Santé Publique, and BC Centre on Substance Use, University of British Columbia

Overview

Using arts-based research methods, Cannapix seeks to understand the experiences and perspectives of cannabis use among LGBTQ+ youth at the intersection of mental health. The purpose of this research project is to generate evidence to inform health promotion and harm reduction programs on cannabis use that are tailored to the realities and needs of LGBTQ+ youth between the ages of 15-24. For the first phase, 76 LGBTQ+ youth from Quebec and British Columbia took photographs related to their cannabis use, mental health and sexual and gender identities, and then participated in a qualitative, semi-structured interview. A second phase is underway where LGBTQ+ youth will create short films about their cannabis harm reduction strategies.

Context

Cannapix contributes to the destigmatization of mental health issues and cannabis use among LGBTQ+ youth. The project challenges norms and discourses on substance use and mental health and stimulates conversations about cannabis use and harm reduction.

Engagement

All Cannapix activities were led by LGBTQ+ youth to ensure the project is relevant and appropriate. As a part of our integrated knowledge translation strategy, a Youth Advisory Committee has been struck to inform the ongoing data analysis.

Harm Reduction

The first phase of Cannapix increased our understanding of cannabis use motives among LGBTQ+ youth. The project highlighted how LGBTQ+ youth use cannabis to facilitate introspection (i.e., a process which they equate to therapy) and to explore and experiment with gender expression. The project also illuminated the challenges associated with accessing mental health resources among LGBTQ+ youth. In this context, LGBTQ+ youth can use cannabis to address their mental health challenges (e.g., anxiety). The second phase of Cannapix will help us better understand the implications of these insights as we explore LGBTQ+ youth harm reduction practices and their mental health needs.

Funding: Mental Health Commission of Canada, Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Fonds de Recherche du Québec

Partnership: Association des Intervenants en dépendance du Québec (AIDQ)



 <https://getsensible.org/>

 **Get Sensible**

 **Get Sensible**

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**Canadian Students for
Sensible Drug Policy (CSSDP)**

Overview

The Get Sensible program includes print, video and social media resources as well as community events and virtual workshops. The three Sensible Cannabis Education Booklets cover a range of cannabis topics in an accessible and engaging way, and are a creative resource for youth, parents and educators to promote informed decision making and evidence-based conversations when it comes to cannabis use.

The Guiding Principles of Education - This booklet is targeted to adults (parents, caregivers, providers, teachers) who are looking to start the cannabis conversation with the youth in their lives. Cannabis 101 + Harm Reduction and Cannabis in Context - These two booklets are targeted to youth aged 17-25 who want to inform themselves on cannabis harm reduction, current scientific evidence on the potential risks and benefits, cannabis policy and laws and other important things to consider when using cannabis.

Context

Aligning with Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy's mandate to support drug education efforts, and building upon youth consultations on cannabis legalization and regulation conducted in Canada, the Sensible Cannabis Education toolkit and the Get Sensible campaign responds to calls for the development and dissemination of realistic and evidence-based cannabis education for youth.

Harm Reduction

While abstinence and delaying the use of cannabis have been framed as harm reduction tools for young people, these may not be realistic for all youth and are somewhat out of alignment with the outlined definition of harm reduction. Get Sensible approaches drug use as a health and human rights issue rather than a criminal-legal issue. We advocate for evidence-based responses to reduce and prevent the harms associated with drug use and drug criminalization.

Engagement

In the first iteration of the toolkit, CSSDP hosted workshops across Canada to talk with diverse groups of youth and people who work with youth about the Toolkit – its messaging, its principles, and its scope. Additionally, CSSDP engaged an external Youth Content Review to ensure the toolkit addressed youth's concerns. In the latest version of the toolkit, we have integrated the feedback we received from our workshops with youth and individuals who work with young people and are excited to continue to build out this work, with the goal of promoting sensible, evidence-informed dialogue.

Funding: Health Canada, Substance Use and Addiction Program (SUAP)

Partnerships: The National Institute for Cannabis Health and Education (NICHE)

Group de recherche et d'intervention psychosociale (GRIP)

The Therapeutic, Recreational and Problematic Substance Use Laboratory

Canadian Drug Policy Coalition



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PAUKTUUTIT
INUIT WOMEN OF CANADA

Cannabis in Our Communities:
A Focus on Inuit Youth and Maternal
Health and Wellbeing
Project launched October 2019.

Let's Talk About Ujarak:
Cannabis Community Care toolkit
Resources Launched November 2021.

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<https://pauktuutit.ca/health/cannabis-in-our-communities/>
www.letstalkaboutujarak.com

Overview

Let's Talk About Ujarak is a cannabis resource toolkit, guided by Inuit values and created to help Inuit increase their knowledge about cannabis use and how to reduce possible harms. The resources in this toolkit include factsheets, posters, a discussion guide, an assessment tool, and more – all developed from a trauma-informed and strength-based Inuit perspective.

Resources are created for (as well as with guidance/directives from) Inuit expecting parents and youth. The toolkit also includes general information that can help Inuit to make informed decisions about cannabis. These resources are offered in English and five dialects of Inuktitut. These resources can also be a valuable tool for service providers, educators, policy makers and all members of the community. The aim of this toolkit is to increase awareness, reduce stigma, and encourage strategies for reducing possible harms of cannabis use.

Context

The first step of this project was an engagement phase, through which the project team connected with expecting or young Inuit parents and youth through discussion groups, online surveys and interviews across Inuit Nunangat and urban centres following the legalization of cannabis in 2018. Pauktuutit gathered information of these groups' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours regarding cannabis. This helped us determine the gaps in knowledge and resources that Pauktuutit could help fill while building on best practices already taking place.

In partnership with and Advisory Committee of professionals and Inuit with lived experience that guide our project activities, we created resources to help fill needs and knowledge gaps to better equip Inuit to make healthy and informed decisions about cannabis use. Resources were reviewed and tested by Inuit youth and revised per their recommendations.

Resources were launched in November 2021 and were accompanied by a series of diverse knowledge sharing activities tailored to the region and stakeholder we were sharing with.

Harm Reduction

This project uses a unique harm reduction approach, in that it is specific to Inuit cannabis use. Indigenous and Inuit experience with substances, including cannabis looks much different than for your average Canadian youth. It is an experience inextricably linked to the impacts of colonization, colonialism, and its legacies, including residential schooling, the child welfare system and disruption of culture and traditional ways of life.

The approach to harm reduction for Inuit youth who use cannabis must therefore be informed and guided by these experiences. Harm reduction is a system for valuing, respecting and having empathy for others irrespective of their substance use. This system has been part of Inuit values as long as Inuit have existed. Our project approaches discussing harm reduction strategies through this lens of Inuit values to relate it to practice that is central to Inuit culture and tradition.

Inclusion

This project addresses the diverse needs of Inuit youth who use cannabis by looking at cannabis use holistically, including the layered reasons (specific to Inuit). Many of the reasons for use and reasons for potential harms are closely linked with the social determinants of health for Inuit youth. Crowded housing, food insecurity, under-employment, trauma, lack of access to health services or recreation are challenges that Inuit face and that can exacerbate problematic cannabis use or the risks of cannabis use. Pauktuutit continues to advocate and work toward improvement in these areas which will in turn impact youth cannabis use. Pauktuutit also leverages the strength of Inuit values, community and tradition to address cannabis use among Inuit youth.

Engagement

Youth were central in identifying needs, gaps and challenges in cannabis knowledge and awareness in their role as knowledge sharers in group discussions. Youth also play an important role on the advisory committee that guide the project, its activities and key messaging. Our youth reviewers were central in fine-tuning strength-based and Inuit led messaging about safer cannabis use.

Funding: Health Canada: Substance Use and Addictions Program

Partnership: Advisory Committee with members across Inuit Nunangat and urban centres



YMCA
Youth Cannabis
Awareness
Program

Programme de
sensibilisation de
jeunes au cannabis
du **YMCA**



<https://youthcannabisawareness.ymcagta.org/>



@YMCA GTA



@YMCA GTA

Overview

The Youth Cannabis Awareness Program (YCAP) offers free programming to youth aged 12 to 24, as well as adults (parents/guardians and professionals) involved in the lives of youth. Informed by protective factors contributing to youth mental health, YCAP provides a multi-faceted approach to increase knowledge and skills supporting positive youth development.

YCAP takes a harm reduction approach and does not make value judgments regarding recreational cannabis use. The program aims to minimize risks associated with cannabis use by providing youth, and adults involved in youth's lives, with the most accurate and unbiased information.

YCAP is a free education and prevention initiative funded through Health Canada's Substance Use and Addictions Program and delivered by the YMCA of Greater Toronto across Canada.

Context

Youth ages 15 to 24 report the highest prevalence of cannabis use in Canada, particularly those in the 19 to 24 age range. Furthermore, cannabis use during adolescence increases the lifetime risk of developing a substance use disorder and may amplify existing mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety and psychosis. It can also trigger functional and structural changes to the developing brain, which can influence memory, concentration, thinking, learning, handling emotions and decision-making. The stigma associated with youth cannabis use may also prevent some youth from seeking support.

Harm Reduction

We promote a balanced perspective, meaning that YCAP explores both the uses and risks of cannabis. Our presentations are evidence-based, meaning that our materials are based on unbiased research from recognized and well-respected resources. YCAP seeks to reduce harms/minimize harms associated with cannabis use. Examples of harm reduction strategies in the context of cannabis use could be refraining from using cannabis before the age of 25, designating a sober driver if a person chooses to use cannabis, or using products with a lower THC for a new or first-time user. YCAP promotes strategies like these with a focus on promoting healthy communities.

Inclusion

YCAP takes a neutral approach to cannabis, meaning that we do not promote its use, nor do we make value judgements regarding recreational cannabis use. We want to provide youth with the most accurate and unbiased information. Our program promotes a safe space for youth to share their questions, comments, thoughts and beliefs about cannabis, with a focus on promoting positive youth development.

The YMCA, furthermore, is an organization whose core values focus on the importance of respect, caring, honesty and inclusivity. YCAP works with youth from diverse backgrounds and offers education workshops, engaging youth projects and programming for any and all youth. The YMCA also believes in a barrier-free program, and as such all of YCAP's services are offered to the public free of charge.

Engagement

Youth are included in YCAP in various different ways:

Youth Engagement Projects: Adult-youth partnerships creating positive change through the development of youth initiatives, promoting youth expression and community action related to youth cannabis use.

YCAP's Annual Youth for Youth (Y4Y) Digital Media contest: An annual peer-to-peer youth engagement initiative empowering youth between the ages 15 to 24 to raise awareness about youth and cannabis use through a media competition. Youth are invited to create a poster or video (or both!) about the potential risks of adolescent cannabis use, harm reduction strategies and/or how to access referral supports across Canada, and the top 5 poster and video submissions (as voted on by youth across the country) receive a cash prize.

Youth Advisory Council: The YCAP Youth Advisory Council is a national advisory council of youth volunteers that represent Canada's youth voice and perspective pertaining to the YCAP initiative and its prevention and education programming. Youth members engage in leadership opportunities related to reducing the harms of youth cannabis use across the country.

Education Placement Opportunities: Students studying post-secondary programs in Canada are welcome to conduct their placements with YCAP, during which time they will create a media-based awareness project of their choosing, co-facilitate workshops and community events for youth in Canada, and work with YCAP's team to research and further the knowledge brokering of cannabis education for teens, young adults and parents.

Funding: YCAP is funded through Health Canada's SUAP funding stream

Partnership:

YCAP has supported and partnered with various agencies across Canada on diverse projects, including: Cannabis & Psychosis
Drug Free Kids Canada
Weed Out The Risk
Centre for Excellence in Women's Health Rural Development Network
Youth Gambling Awareness Program (YGAP)

To book a workshop, access a youth engagement opportunity, join **YCAP's Youth Advisory Council** or partnership committee, collaborate on a community project, or any general inquiries, please contact ycap@ymcagta.org or connect with a YCAP's Education and Awareness Coordinator in your province. Contact information for all YCAP staff can be found at:
<https://youthcannabisawareness.ymcagta.org/contact-us>



CANNABIS & MENTAL HEALTH

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Cannabis and Psychosis: Exploring the Link

 cannabisandmentalhealth.ca
 cannabisandpsychosis.ca

Overview

The Cannabis and Mental Health project was created by youth for youth, expanding the reach of our original Cannabis and Psychosis - Exploring the Link project. In collaboration with YouthREX and the Mental Health Commission of Canada, The SSC built on the strengths of each partner, to co-create the Cannabis and Mental Health Course for youth 14-25 and the Mentor Guide is designed for educators, program leaders, and mentors working with youth ages 12-18. We aim to equip youth with the tools to make their own informed decisions by embracing:

- **harm reduction**
- **health promotion and**
- **stigma reduction.**

These resources aim to benefit individual and community wellness.

Context

The continued development of cannabis education for youth is of critical importance. According to a recent article, “the longer-term success of cannabis legalization as a policy experiment that benefits public health and safety outcomes remains uncertain. However, these desired beneficial outcomes will require people who use cannabis, especially the disproportionately large number of young users, to have guidance on how to reduce key risk behaviours that contribute to adverse health outcomes and related disease burden.” (Fischer et al., 2022)

Preliminary data on cannabis use trends and clinical outcomes for youth since cannabis legalization is beginning to yield key insights, highlighting the need for Canada to continue to deliver on the public health mandate by:

- 1) providing education on potential health risks and guidelines for safer cannabis use to youth populations, and, 2) providing targeted intervention approaches for individuals most at risk from cannabis use-related harm.

In addition to changes resulting from the legalization of cannabis, youth in Canada have faced many unforeseen challenges over the past 18 months, navigating the new restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, dramatically shifting the ways in which they are connecting with their peers, community, and school environment. Since the pandemic, those aged 15-24 reported the greatest declines in mental health.

Harm Reduction

The new reality of legalized cannabis has shifted the conversations we're having about the relationship between cannabis use and mental health, especially among youth. We know that youth are sophisticated consumers of information and must be equipped with tangible skills, tools and knowledge to help them understand the risks and benefits of cannabis use for mental health and wellness.

Canadian youth have told us they want "reliable, evidence-based educational material on cannabis" and that they can be credible key partners in the development of such materials. They have encouraged "all levels of government to see the value of promoting balanced cannabis discussions and co-designing resources with youth." The Cannabis and Mental Health Harm Reduction approach includes

- **Evidence-based approach**
- **Minimizes health, social and legal impacts associated with cannabis use**
- **Provides youth with knowledge and tools to make informed decisions**
- **Non-judgmental and meets people "where they're at"**

Inclusion

The Cannabis and Mental Health course, and the Cannabis and Psychosis project provide balanced, engaging and comprehensive information to help youth navigate credible evidence as well as learn from youth with experiential knowledge. It is reaching diverse youth populations across Canada who can most benefit from harm reduction and health promotion resources geared to their needs and realities.

Engagement

Our work has been fully led by our Youth Advisory Committee (YAC), composed of a diverse range of young people from across Canada. Members of the YAC provided critical input at all stages of the development and implementation of the project, ensuring that the lived experiences of young people are central. They spearheaded the digital, research, and evaluation components of the project. Their expertise spanned knowledge mobilization, mental health advocacy, harm reduction and lived experience.

Funding: Health Canada's Substance Use and Addictions Program (SUAP) /Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC)

Partnership: Health Canada's Substance Use and Addictions Program (SUAP) /Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) / YouthRex

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**University
of Victoria**

Canadian Institute for
Substance Use Research

Overview

Lower Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines for Youth are youth-led and evidence-based safer cannabis use guidelines designed to help young people minimize the harms and maximize the benefits associated with cannabis. The project began when we characterised the various Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines available to youth and found that existing guidelines were either adult focused or adapted from the adult guidelines, demonstrating a clear gap in youth-focused harm reduction materials. To guide the development of youth-focused lower risk cannabis use guidelines, we recruited a diverse Working Group of young people based on their lived experiences and expertise to join the team as co-investigators. With guidance from this Youth Working Group, we reviewed available guidelines, launched a national online survey on young people's experiences with cannabis, and synthesized existing research on the impacts of cannabis on youth. Using this information, we devised a set of guidelines that youth can use to make informed choices about their cannabis use and to help them mitigate its potential negative side effects.

Context

Following the legalization of cannabis in 2018, the Government of Canada published an official set of Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines targeted towards people of legal age (19+). Beyond recommending that young people delay initial use until adulthood, these official guidelines offered no youth-specific recommendations on how to reduce harms associated with cannabis use. With growing concerns with how legalization could negatively affect youth, our draft Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines for Youth are a set of harm-reduction recommendations to address the needs of young cannabis users who have their own distinct experience with cannabis.

Harm Reduction

We understand that most youth who choose to use cannabis are already aware of its potential negative side effects. While abstaining from cannabis is the best way to avoid potential harms, there are limited evidence-based harm reduction strategies targeted to young people that go beyond recommending abstinence. Our Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines for Youth are a set of draft recommendations that provide young people who use cannabis with information that they can use to maximize the benefits of cannabis use while minimizing potential harms.

Inclusion

We recognize the diversity of young people who use cannabis, each with their own distinct experiences, cannabis use patterns, and personal circumstances. To include as many of these different voices as we could, we independently recruited our Youth Working Group from our community partner, Foundry Victoria Youth Clinic, to reflect a diversity of lived experiences, cannabis use patterns, age, gender identity, experiences with mental health, Indigeneity, and race. Additionally, our Internet Youth Cannabis Experiences survey was designed to collect data across young people's intersecting identities and experiences with cannabis use.

Instead of providing a "one size fits all" set of recommendations, our Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines for Youth provide youth with the necessary information to make their own informed choices about which recommendations to use. This allows the youth to tailor the guidelines to their specific situation and ignore the ones that are unsuitable for them.

Engagement

Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines for Youth were designed with the belief that engaging youth in the design will lead to recommendations that are best suited to address young people's current needs and lived experiences. To properly ensure that young people were engaged throughout the project, we established a Youth Working Group to guide the development of the Lower-Risk Guidelines. This working group consisted of 7 youth aged 16-25 who we engaged throughout the project digitally rather than in person, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At each step of the project, we gathered the youth's critical feedback on existing adult-focussed guidelines, our data collection process, and drafting a set of lower-risk guidelines specifically for youth. This feedback was incorporated into the final Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines for Youth to ensure that these recommendations provided nuanced, practical, and feasible strategies to help young people mitigate the harms and maximize the benefits associated with cannabis use.

Funding: Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) & Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR)

Partnership: Victoria Youth Clinic Foundry, Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research



Exploring cannabis use and mental health in sexually and gender diverse youth: A qualitative, community-based study

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Overview

This study was born out of a need to better understand and nuance the relationships between cannabis use and mental health among queer and trans (QT) youth from a community-based lens. While QT youth have higher rates of cannabis use and face more mental health challenges than their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts, few studies have examined the contextual factors that impact the associations between the two. Further, explanations of these associations have often been limited to self-medication, which may play a key role, but may also not tell the full story.

Thus, as a QT youth-led project, this study sought to give voice to members of our community so they could describe their experiences and contextualise realities that are often seen only through statistics – a helpful yet limited approach to understanding our lives. This study also sought to benefit QT youth specifically and directly, both through its process and content.

Context

While this research did not have an explicit aim to examine the impacts of cannabis legalization on QT youth in Québec, it was influenced by various considerations in our province as well as in Montréal, where many participants were living. For example, with the legal age to purchase and possess cannabis being set at 21 in Québec, we opted to include only youth aged 21-25 in order not to ask participants to have to disclose criminalized activity. This resulted in a narrower picture of the realities of QT youth cannabis use in Québec but was also highly informative as many participants had undergone significant shifts in their cannabis use from their late teens to their early twenties.

Another important aspect linked to legalization was its potential influence on stigma in healthcare. Young people who use cannabis have often been faced with the additional burden of having their mental health challenges blamed on their use in these settings, and this may be exacerbated for QT youth who also face QT oppression in these highly cisheteronormative spaces. In other words, QT youth have to find mental healthcare providers that understand queerness/transness from a depathologized lens, and also adopt a harm reduction approach to cannabis use, all while offering helpful mental health support. Despite legalization, participants still mentioned struggling to find a mental healthcare provider who was able to check all these boxes.

Another remaining gap from a century of cannabis prohibition is the lack of adequate educational materials and campaigns encompassing queerness, transness, cannabis use and mental health. Participants described how they rarely, if ever, came across this level of specificity in their drug education, if they had received any at all. Considering the particular contexts in which QT youth find themselves, this specificity is important. However, much work remains to create and circulate materials that speak to young people's differing experiences and do not take a "one size fits all" approach.

Harm Reduction

As all of the queer youth researchers as well as the Youth Expert Committee members were deeply versed in harm reduction, this framework was a guiding lens of the project. In addition to definitions of harm reduction that are beautifully described elsewhere in this compendium, our team viewed harm reduction as a framework through which we could challenge the triple pathologization that QT youth who use cannabis face (i.e., our sexuality/gender being a medical and “distress-provoking” anomaly, our cannabis use being limited to problematic use and “self-medication,” and the embodiment of the QT oppression we face being seen as individualized “mental health challenges”). Harm reduction allows us to recognize and advocate for the wide variety of needs and goals of people depending on their circumstances and context. Similarly, this approach helps us in nuancing the experiences, needs and goals of QT youth who use cannabis.

Harm reduction also positions individuals’ agency as a core principle of support. In our project, extending this approach meant recognizing and naming the ways in which QT youth who use cannabis exert their agency and careful reflection when it comes to their use and avenues for support in their lives more generally. Importantly, this also meant advocating in our materials (whether research papers or knowledge translation documents) for key figures of support in QT youth’s lives to do the same.

Inclusion

In our study, we heard from QT youth who were at many different places in their relationship with cannabis, including participants who used every day, while others used more infrequently or had stopped using. In hearing from participants with these varied relationships and in exploring the connections with experiences around queerness and transness, we realized that participants described a wide variety of ways in which these were connected. An aim for us thus became to communicate through our published work that: 1) there seems to be unique and powerful ways in which QT youth use cannabis; and 2) these connections can vary deeply depending on various contextual factors.

In this way, we explored the diverse needs of youth who use cannabis by addressing what might connect QT youth in their experiences of cannabis use, but also what distinguishes us from one another. For example, since our project focused heavily on QT youth experiences with mental health and healthcare systems and services, we sought to address how this could differ based on being neurodivergent and/or racialized, and how cannabis use fit into these differing experiences. In taking this focus, we also heavily put participants’ narratives in the context of their access to community support and the impact of informal and alternative networks and practices (examining also how cannabis use fell into some of these alternative practices). Portraying this complexity is key to better addressing the various needs of young people who use cannabis, as systems and services often do not know enough about what our lives look like.

Engagement

This project was entirely led by queer and trans youth, with the support of the broader research team. Four queer youth researchers created the study materials and conducted the interviews, coding, analysis, result dissemination and knowledge translation efforts. Additionally, a Youth Expert Committee of 10 queer and trans youth of various backgrounds reviewed all materials, participated in pilot interviews and provided feedback on each step of the research process. Participants themselves also provided feedback on the preliminary results and the direction of knowledge translation efforts.

The project collaborated with two youth-led cannabis education groups, namely Get Sensible and project VoxCann, from the initial grant submission to the final knowledge exchange efforts. Finally, knowledge exchange products were created in collaboration with a queer youth graphic designer.

Funding: CIHR & MHCC Catalyst grant

Partnership: Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy – Get Sensible, Project VoxCann (GRIP Montréal)



Engaging and Educating Young-Adult Cannabis Consumers

 weedoutmisinformation.ca

 [@weedoutmisinfo](https://www.instagram.com/weedoutmisinfo)

 [@weedoutmisinfo](https://twitter.com/weedoutmisinfo)

 [weedoutmisinformation](https://www.youtube.com/weedoutmisinformation)



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Overview

Engaging and Educating Young-Adult Cannabis Consumers is a research project produced by cannabis researchers at Humber College in Toronto, Canada. The project was launched with the goal of understanding how young people in Canada were engaging with public education information about cannabis, and to use that information in collaboration with project partners to create more effective, stigma free, honest public education materials. The project sought to identify where cannabis consumers were obtaining information about cannabis, what information they wanted, who they trusted to deliver the information, and in what platforms they wanted that information delivered. The results highlight the need to target drugs education campaigns to the self-professed needs of people who use drugs, and to ensure the language in such campaigns is carefully considered to avoid the inadvertent use of stigmatizing language or depictions.

Weed Out Misinformation is the harm reduction focused public education campaign created by the EYCC team. It was designed to help ensure people can enjoy cannabis while minimizing the relatively low risks that can accompany cannabis consumption. The Weed Out Misinformation website includes public education content in the form of posters, brochures, quizzes, and short videos from cannabis experts.

Context

The legalization of cannabis in Canada in 2018 created new opportunities to engage young-adult cannabis consumers with more effective public education information about the drug. In both the illicit and legal phases of cannabis regulation the efficacy of public education campaigns was quite limited and focused on abstinence, fear, and othering cannabis consumers.

Our team conducted a mixed methods study involving 1,598 survey responses from Canadians 18-30 who consume cannabis, and ten focus groups with 87 respondents. Respondents identified shortcomings in past education campaigns, what harms they believed might be caused by cannabis consumption, where they obtained information about safe cannabis consumption practices, and how they wanted such information to be delivered in the future. With the data from that research, we asked students in a Bachelor of Creative Advertising program to develop initial ideas for a public education campaign focused on harm reduction and young cannabis consumers, and utilizing a human-centred design approach. A further six focus groups were held with cannabis consumers, budtenders, and cannabis policy experts. Their responses and feedback were analyzed, and the Weed Out Misinformation campaign was created by Research Assistants hired from the Bachelor of Creative Advertising at Humber.

Harm Reduction

The research we conducted showed respondents were exposed to frequent myths about cannabis and had difficulty separating true harms from hyperbolic myths. They had little knowledge or access to harm reduction information about cannabis consumption practices. They were also very sensitive to language used in past campaigns that stigmatized or othered people who consume cannabis.

The campaign provides harm reduction information, including considerations of the set and setting cannabis is consumed in, alternatives to smoking cannabis, and information about cannabis overconsumption. Young people can view a First-Time Cannabis Checklist on our website or read our handout on which method of cannabis consumption is right for them.

Inclusion

The needs of young people were recognized in all phases of planning and creating the public education materials of Weed Out Misinformation. Young cannabis consumers were surveyed and interviewed in focus groups to identify exactly how existing public education materials about cannabis were lacking. When draft materials were created, they were again taken back to young people for feedback to ensure the creation of successful content.

The research team sought participation from cannabis consumers from under represented populations, and worked with drugs consumer support groups to engage with under represented communities. The team worked with Humber's Centre for Human Rights, Equity, and Diversity to conduct outreach to students, and review materials for markers of bias. The team also worked with Humber's Student Wellness and Accessibility Centre to ensure the campaign materials were easily engaged by individuals with diverse learning and comprehension needs.

Engagement

The Weed Out Misinformation campaign includes interactive materials to encourage young people to engage with the information. On the campaign's website, young people can take a quiz on general cannabis knowledge, take a quiz on spotting cannabis myths, view posters and brochures, or watch short videos of experts in the field dispelling common cannabis myths.

In addition to the online content, Canopy Growth Corporation, a licensed cannabis producer in Canada, has encouraged retail stores to disseminate our public education campaign materials.

Funding: Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC): College and Community Social Innovation Fund

Partnership: Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy, Canadian Public Health Association



TRACE V - Developing Cannabis Education and Harm Reduction Messages with Youth: A Qualitative Youth Engagement Research Project

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Overview

TRACE V is the continuation of the Teens Report on Adolescent Cannabis Experiences (TRACE), a qualitative research program that began in 2006. Our study addresses critical gaps in approaches to cannabis education for youth by exploring how young people's lived experiences of health and social inequities shape their cannabis use.

Overall, our team conducted 56 interviews and four focus groups with young people aged 15 to 24 from across Canada. We recruited young people from diverse backgrounds (i.e., gender, ethnicity, sexualities, and community). We asked them about how their cannabis use is connected to what we described as "health and social struggles," including connections to mental health or mental illness.

Context

Prior to legalization in Canada, many cannabis education initiatives had limited reach and relevance to youth who use cannabis because they were focused on abstinence-based approaches, and youth were not meaningfully engaged in their development. Our work is grounded in the belief that cannabis legalization presents the opportunity to either mitigate or exacerbate the association between cannabis-associated harms and what is termed 'structural marginalization', which results from intersecting inequities including socioeconomic status, racism, gender discrimination, trauma and social exclusion. Cannabis education developed specifically for youth whose structural contexts may position them at greater risk for harms and problematic use is non-existent and is urgently needed.

Harm Reduction

Our approach to youth cannabis use is guided by harm reduction and youth engagement principles. Harm reduction has emerged from a perspective of health equity and human rights for people who use substances, in recognition that preventing substance use harms need not be an 'all or nothing' approach, but one that considers how harms can be reduced, based on the needs of the individual and their context. In the youth context, harm reduction provides an orientation to substance use intervention that extends beyond an emphasis on abstinence and has the potential to overcome shortfalls of existing programs.

Inclusion

TRACE V was carried out under the aims of centering youth voices and empowering youth to make choices towards reducing harms, while accounting for the structural context that 'wraps around' use, and the complex ways in which health and social inequities shape youth cannabis and other substance use. The inclusive approach steps away from "one size fits all" drug prevention programs and moves towards the development of youth-centered cannabis education grounded in harm reduction and young peoples' lived experiences.

Engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a shift in our youth engagement strategies and research methodologies. Youth who had experienced health and social inequities and have used cannabis were invited to participate in online individual interviews over zoom. During the interview process participants were asked about other topics that were relevant to them that the question guide did not cover. The team also asked for feedback on the interview guide to remain open to youth input during the research process. Additionally, youth were consulted via focus groups to check the initial themes uncovered from interviews by the research team.

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