

MEDIA RELEASE | June 2016

Is marijuana use harmful to BC youth?

McCreary Centre Society has today released an in-depth report about marijuana use among BC youth aged 12-19. The report is based on data from the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey.

In addition to providing a snapshot of usage among this age group and information about where use appears to be linked to negative health consequences, the report provides a baseline picture of young people's marijuana use prior to upcoming changes in marijuana legislation.

The study found that harms were most commonly associated with using marijuana from an earlier age and using daily or almost daily.

The progression from first use to regular cannabis use appeared to be as rapid as tobacco progression, and more rapid than that of alcohol. Among students who first tried alcohol in the past year, 4% drank on 6 or more days in the past month and less than 1% drank on 20 or more days. In contrast, 11% of youth who first tried marijuana recently used it on 6 or more days in the past month and 3% on 20 or more days.

Although the percentage of youth who had driven after using marijuana decreased from 2008 to 2013, youth who had ever driven after using marijuana were twice as likely to have been recently injured in a motor vehicle accident as those who had never driven under its influence.

Challenges in youths' lives could be linked to their reasons for using marijuana. For example, youth with depression and those who were bullied were more likely than their peers to report using marijuana because they felt sad.

Annie Smith, Executive Director of McCreary Centre Society and a co-author of the report, said: *"There is so much that we don't yet know about the effect of marijuana use on young people's healthy development. The findings of this study do seem to support the findings of other studies and suggest that if young people do decide to try marijuana they should wait until they are older to first try it, and that they should use it infrequently."*

"When we look at what young people are saying about marijuana on the survey, they are often confused about the conflicting messages they hear from different sources and would really welcome the opportunity to have their questions answered. Our data clearly shows the value of youth having an adult they can approach, and the link that this has with healthier choices about marijuana use."



McCreary Centre Society is a non-profit organization committed to improving the health of BC youth through research and community-based projects.

Founded in 1977, the Society sponsors and promotes a wide range of activities and research to address unmet health needs of young people.

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BACKGROUND

This report was based on the responses of youth who completed the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS). The survey was completed by 30,000 mainstream public school students aged 12-19. Fifty-six of the 59 BC school districts participated in the survey.

The BC AHS includes 130 questions asking youth about their perceptions of their physical and emotional health, risky behaviours, and health promoting practices. It includes questions about frequency of marijuana use, age of first use, perceived consequences of use, driving and marijuana use, reasons for use, and source of marijuana.

This report was funded by BC Ministry of Health. The 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey was funded by BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, BC Ministry of Health, and BC Office of the Representative for Children and Youth.

A SELECTION OF KEY FINDINGS

In the space of a decade, the percentage of young people aged 12-19 who had tried marijuana decreased from over a third (37%) to around a quarter (26%). Among youth who did try it, more were waiting until they were at least 15 years old to do so.

Despite the decrease in the percentage of students who had ever tried marijuana, among marijuana users the percentage who had used it on 20 or more days in the past month remained stable between 2008 and 2013.

Among older youth (aged 16 to 18), 34% who started using marijuana at age 12 had used it on 20 or more days in the past month, compared to 6% of those who started using it when they were 15.

Among 16- to 18-year-olds, the younger youth were when they first tried marijuana, the less likely they were to report positive overall or mental health or to have positive plans for the future; and the more likely they were to have tried substances such as cocaine, hallucinogens, and amphetamines, and to report they had an alcohol or other drug addiction.

The progression from first use to regular cannabis use appeared to be as rapid as tobacco progression, and more rapid than that of alcohol. Among students who first tried alcohol in the past year, 4% drank on 6 or more days in the past month and less than 1% drank on 20 or more days. In contrast, 11% of youth who first tried marijuana recently used it on 6 or more days in the past month and 3% on 20 or more days.

Youth who had been using marijuana for more than a year were more likely than those who were newer to the substance to have used it recently and frequently. For example, youth who first tried it more than a year ago were almost seven times as likely as their peers who first used it within the past year, to have used marijuana on 20 or more days in the past month.

Among youth who used marijuana, those who used it on 20 or more days reported the poorest health picture. However, among youth who had tried marijuana exclusively (i.e., had not tried alcohol or other substances), those who used it on 3 or more days in the past month were twice as likely as those who used it on fewer days to report negative consequences of their use.

Seven percent of youth who used marijuana exclusively felt they needed help for their use in the past year, which was comparable to the rate for youth who used other substances as well as marijuana. Youth who started using marijuana when they were 12 or younger were the most likely to feel they needed help for their use, whereas those who waited until they were at least 15 were the least likely.

Predictors of early and frequent marijuana use included stressful life circumstances (including sexual abuse, dating violence, and going to bed hungry), a history of risk-taking behaviours, mental health challenges, and having no positive future plans.

The percentage of youth who had driven after using marijuana decreased from 2008 to 2013. Youth who had driven after using marijuana were twice as likely to have been seriously injured in a motor vehicle accident as those who had never driven under the influence of marijuana. The longer youth had been using marijuana and the more frequent their recent use, the more likely they were to have driven after use.

Students most commonly got their marijuana from a youth outside their family. However, youth who were using marijuana frequently were more likely to get it from an adult and less likely to get it from a youth. Also, youth who reported getting their marijuana from an adult inside their family were less likely to feel connected to their family.

Among youth who used marijuana, a number of protective factors were identified which reduced the risk of early and frequent use, even among youth who were experiencing one or more of the risk factors for such use. These included having family support, positive relationships at school, feeling connected to community, and engaging in meaningful extracurricular activities.

The report will be launched at 8am on Thursday July 14th 2016.

Webinar presentations are scheduled for 8.30am, noon and 3pm on July 14th; 1pm on July 18th and 9am on 19th July. Webinar details are available at: www.mcs.bc.ca/upcoming_webinars.

A copy of *Blunt talk: Harms associated with early and frequent marijuana use among BC youth* can be downloaded at www.mcs.bc.ca.

Other reports looking at youth substance use using BC Adolescent Health Survey data are available at www.mcs.bc.ca, including the 2015 publication *How many is too many for BC youth? Alcohol use and associated harms*.