

MEDIA RELEASE | March 31st 2020

In depth look at youth cannabis use released today

McCreary Centre Society today released *Blunt Talk II: A picture of cannabis use among BC youth*. The report is a sequel to the Society's 2016 *Blunt Talk* report and includes data from the 2018 BC Adolescent Health Survey. The comprehensive survey was completed by over 38,000 of the province's Grade 7–12 students.

Results showed that three quarters of BC youth had never used cannabis, and those who had used it waited longer to first try it. For example, among those who had used cannabis, 47% waited until they were at least 15 years old to first do so, compared to 28% in 2003. Findings also showed that most youth who used cannabis did so infrequently, and when they did use it they did so because they wanted to experiment or have fun.

However, the more frequently youth used cannabis, the more likely they were to experience negative consequences of their use, with those who used on 20 or more days in the past month the most likely to report direct negative consequences of their use, as well as challenges with their physical and mental health and school life.

McCreary's Executive Director Annie Smith explained: "*Youth who became frequent users were those who started using before their 13th birthday, had been using for more than two years, or had started using recently during a time when they were experiencing trauma and challenges in their life.*"

"The results show us that youth who became frequent users seem to be doing so as a way to self medicate, as we see they have experienced high levels of challenges such as poverty, deprivation, abuse, trauma and victimization. However this is not and should not be a given, as the results also showed us what we need to do to support young people who would otherwise turn to substances like cannabis to help them cope. Youth who had experienced these challenges were less likely to use cannabis at potentially harmful frequencies if they had a supportive family, felt safe and supported at school, were part of their community, had supportive adults in their lives, and/or had healthy peer relationships."

A copy of the report *Blunt Talk II: A picture of cannabis use among BC youth* is available at www.mcs.bc.ca.

Webinar presentations of the results are scheduled for April 6th at 3pm, April 8th at 9am, April 9th at noon, April 10th at 10am and April 13th at 2pm. Details of how to join are available at www.mcs.bc.ca.

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

Founded in 1977, our vision is that all youth are supported to be healthy and connected.

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BACKGROUND

Blunt Talk II uses data from the 2018 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) which was collected in the months (February–June 2018) before cannabis was legalized in Canada.

The 2018 BC AHS was conducted in 58 of BC's 60 school districts and is the sixth time students have been asked to complete the comprehensive health survey since 1992. Participation was the highest since the survey began, and the results are considered representative of over 95% of mainstream school students in Grades 7–12 in the province.

The survey provides essential information about health trends, and about risk and protective factors that can influence young people's healthy transitions to adulthood. The 2018 survey included 140 questions asking youth about their perceptions of their current physical and mental health, their engagement in health promoting and health risk behaviours, including substance use, and about factors that can contribute to a healthy transition to adulthood.

Some key findings from the report:

The percentage of students who had used cannabis was lower in each of BC's five health regions than it was 15 years earlier, and was lower than 10 years earlier in all regions except Vancouver Coastal. However, the only region to experience a decrease in cannabis use over the past five years was the North (from 35% in 2013 to 32%). Among the 16 Health Service Delivery Areas, the percentages of youth who had ever used cannabis ranged from 15% in Richmond and Vancouver to 42% in the Northwest.

Youth were more likely to have vaped in the past month than they were to have ever used cannabis.

Youth who used cannabis on most days in the past month were less likely to report negative consequences of their substance use than those who used alcohol this regularly. However, among youth who had used cannabis and had not used any other substance, 32% reported that their use resulted in at least one negative consequence in the past year, including 7% who experienced three or more negative consequences.

Fourteen percent of youth who had used cannabis had driven after using it. Males were more likely than females to have driven after using cannabis (18% vs. 11%) and to have done so in the past month (10% vs. 5%).

In the past year, 1 in 10 youth (10%) who had used cannabis reported their use had reached a point where they needed help, including 38% of those who used cannabis on 20 or more days.

Youth who became frequent users (used on 20 or more days in the past month) were those who were early users (first started using before their 13th birthday), were longer-term users (had been using cannabis for two or more years), and those who were

neither early nor longer-term users but first started using cannabis during a time when they were experiencing trauma or other challenges.

Predictors of starting to use cannabis before age 13 included identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; experiencing poverty and deprivation; experiencing bereavement; living in a rural community; and having a history of abuse. Some of these same risk factors predicted longer-term use, as did experiencing mental health challenges.

Youth who had not used cannabis before their 13th birthday and who had been using cannabis for a year or less were more likely to become frequent users if they were experiencing poverty and deprivation, had attempted suicide in the past year, had someone close to them die of an overdose, had run away or been kicked out in the past year, and/or currently had no close in-person friends.

Young people aged 16-24 who were members of McCreary's Youth Research Academy reflected on the results in this report and made a number of recommendations. These include:

- Addressing risk factors for frequent cannabis use (such as poverty and deprivation); for example, by providing breakfast and lunch programs at schools and no-cost opportunities for youth to engage in extracurricular activities.
- Offering youth opportunities to try new hobbies and develop new skills, as this can be a protective factor against frequent use.
- Understanding that youth who use cannabis frequently may be doing so to self-medicate.
- Taking a trauma-informed approach is important as youth may have experienced trauma and have had previous negative experiences with adults. This includes taking the time to build relationships with youth who are frequent users and to understand the role that cannabis use might play in their life.
- Creating safe school and community environments, and addressing discrimination and violence.
- Supporting youth to develop a sense of hope for the future, and to make achievable goals and plans.
- Ensuring youth have access to mental health and substance use supports regardless of where they live in BC.

To accompany the launch of the report, the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research has created lesson ideas to talk to youth about cannabis use:

<https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/drug-blunt-talk-reasons.pdf>

<https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/drug-blunt-talk-risk-management.pdf>

<https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/drug-blunt-talk-cann-alcohol-vaping.pdf>