Youth and Cannabis Legalization: Prevention, Education and Harm Reduction

JENNA VALLERIANI, PHD
POST-DOCTORAL FELLOW AT THE BC CENTRE ON SUBSTANCE USE (BCCSU); FACULTY OF MEDICINE, UBC
STRATEGIC ADVISOR, CANADIAN STUDENTS FOR SENSIBLE DRUG POLICY (CSSDP)
OBJECTIVES

• Provide an overview of the cannabis landscape in Canada as it pertains to young people –unpack what it means to “protect” youth in new policy era

• Draw on some youth engagement efforts lead by Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy (CSSDP)

• Discuss a youth-centered and public health approach to cannabis education / harm reduction and why new approaches must be prioritized to maximize effectiveness and **protect all youth**
CANADIAN CANNABIS USE

(source: Canadian Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey (CTADS); Statistics Canada: 2015)

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

• Body of policy literature notes harms of cannabis control policies disproportionate to the harms of cannabis itself

• Criminalization resulting cannabis control policies is also disproportionate and has harms

• The evidence on health risks and benefits for youth is still developing – particularly around brain development and mental health (but there are no studies which demonstrate cannabis as the cause)

• Many common approaches to youth prevention and education we know are not effective – harder to know “what works”
YOUTH HARMS — FIRST CONSIDER:

• Cannabis legalization is an opportunity for evidence based and realistic drug education for youth

• Some youth will use cannabis no matter what resources or messaging is provided

• Youth in Canada already have some of the highest cannabis using rates in the world¹

• Tend to view cannabis as less harmful than other illegal substances¹

• Also disproportionate targets of drug-related enforcement²
  ◦ Highest drug-related arrests - 18-25, followed by 12-17
  ◦ 80% cannabis related (possession!)
  ◦ Between October 2015 – April 2017: nearly 7,000 young people under 25 charged with possession³

³
“Youth Speak: Cannabis Legalization in the 21st Century”

"Young people shouldn’t be worst off under legalization than they are under prohibition."
- Participant at Youth Speak
SOME OF THE ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY YOUTH

• Mostly rooted (covert) abstinence or stigma based programming
• Doesn’t speak specifically about cannabis
• Exaggeration of risk, doesn’t resonate with young people’s experiences
• Ignores anything other than “abstinence” & “problematic”
• Lacks harm reduction
• Limited sessions or time devoted to curriculum in schools
• Delivery misses the mark
• Parents often left in the dark
1. 10 Principles for Approaching Cannabis Education with Young People

2. Pull Away Curriculum
   a. Cannabis 101
   b. Why Youth Use and Don’t Use Cannabis
   c. Harm Reduction
   d. Legislative Overview
   e. Literature Review of Health Harms (as of Dec 2017)
TEN GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. Education grounded in evidence-based information rather than fear
2. Open dialogue that is non-judgmental and use interactive approaches
3. Meaningful inclusion
4. Delivery by a trained facilitator or peer
5. Starting earlier with age-appropriate content
6. Supporting parents to have age appropriate and open conversations
7. The inclusion of harm reduction
8. Education tailored to the specific context
9. Ongoing education available to youth
10. Attention to overlapping issues of racism, social justice, and stigma
GROUND IN EVIDENCE BASED INFORMATION

• Fear-based, authoritarian, exaggerated and abstinence-based approaches do not resonate with youth\(^1\)

• Environmental factors can increase or decrease the likelihood of use and should be accounted for in approaches to education\(^2\)

• Go beyond just facts: include additional approaches such as skills-development in drug education\(^3\)

• Include youth to ensure education is relevant and reflective of their experiences, and more generally, to be involved in conversations that value their experience

---


---

Abstinence-based approaches are centered on the idea that avoiding drug use is the only acceptable option and often relies on the stigmatization of drug use and users.
OPEN DIALOGUE & INTERACTIVE APPROACHES

• Youth don’t have many opportunities to have balanced discussions about cannabis, which can shed light on how youth experience their choices related to cannabis use

• Listening and asking open-ended questions without judgment is important to building rapport and fostering open dialogue about cannabis

• Studies that have assessed the use of innovative resources, such as films, to encourage these conversations have shown promising results

• Education efforts around cannabis should prioritize interactive approaches that provide contact and communication opportunities for the exchange of ideas among participants

---

INCLUDE HARM REDUCTION

- Harm reduction strategies also address the needs of young people who may already be using

- Most effective with older youth (senior high school and above) and heavy youth cannabis users\(^1\)

- Teaching harm reduction strategies doesn’t encourage youth to use cannabis, and is an effective approach in a range of contexts\(^2\)

---

KEY MESSAGING IN HR CONTEXT

• Consider if education does not include harm reduction, what are we offering youth who are already using cannabis? Parents?

• What do norms around appropriate adult use look like? (much like we do with alcohol messaging)

• Rather than “don’t”:
  • Ask open-ended questions about use
  • Suggest delaying use
  • Use cannabis occasionally or less frequently
  • Consume less potent cannabis (i.e., lower percentage of THC)
YOUTH ARE A GREAT RESOURCE

- Important to ensure messaging resonates with target age and audience
- Adults may think adult-created messaging is “spot on” – but we often are disconnected
  - Critical to have youth involvement and ensure messaging is not stigmatizing or backhanded
- Consider the idea that cannabis **may be a harm reduction strategy in and of itself**
  - EX: “substitution” effects is a rapidly developing area of research with adult and medical populations
  - research is considering how youth may substitute cannabis for other substances, namely alcohol and other harder illicit drugs
Evidence is guiding Canada’s legalization policy - legalization is not a recommendation for, or endorsement of youth cannabis use\(^1\)

Evidence suggests cannabis prevention and education has not been effective and legal regulation of cannabis offers an opportunity for more pragmatic approaches – the same old approach repackaged will likely miss the mark

Access to evidence based and non-judgmental drug education is critical for young people, their health literacy and well-being – this must include harm reduction when age appropriate

Approaches that meaningfully include youth voices and experiences should be prioritized – ensure education resonates with current youth experiences as both users and non-users

Drug education and cannabis conversations should be inclusive of both prevention and harm reduction in order to maximize effectiveness and protect all youth

• CSSDP’s Sensible Cannabis Education Toolkit

• CRISM’s Lower Risk Use Guidelines

• CCSA’s Cannabis Communication Guide

• HeretoHelpBC’s Cannabis and Youth: A Parent’s Guide

• International Center for Science in Drug Policy’s Using Evidence to Talk About Cannabis

• Dr. Rebecca Haines-Saah CPHA’s seminar on Cannabis Legalization and Youth: Implications for Public Health (2018)
Thank you

Jenna.valleriani@bccsu.ubc.ca
@jennav5