



Canadian Centre
on **Substance Abuse**

Centre canadien de **lutte**
contre les **toxicomanies**

Partnership. Knowledge. Change.
Collaboration. Connaissance. Changement.

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Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance

2015 Pre-Budget Consultation

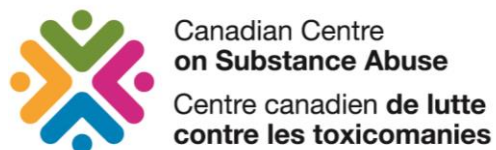
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The **Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse** (CCSA) was created by an Act of Parliament in 1988 as a national agency at arm's length from government that reports to parliament through the Minister of Health. It is governed by a distinguished volunteer Board of Directors, five of whom are Governor-in-Council appointments and eight of whom are members at large. The Deputy Ministers of Health and Public Safety are ex-officio members of the Board.

CCSA provides national leadership on substance abuse and advances solutions to address alcohol- and other drug-related harms. Over the past quarter-century, the organization has provided credible, research-based information on topics including the costs of substance use, emerging trends, and how we can better inform prevention and treatment practices to improve the health, safety and lives of Canadians. The organization is uniquely positioned at the intersection of government and not-for-profit organizations, public health and industry to bring about collective impact through collective action.

Our Vision: All people in Canada live in a healthy society free of alcohol- and other drug-related harm.

Our Mission: Provide national leadership and advance solutions to address alcohol- and other drug-related harm.





Executive Summary

Substance abuse costs society more than \$40 billion annually, representing lost productivity, as well as direct costs to health care and law enforcement. This amount represents more than \$1,200 for every man, woman and child in Canada.

Substance abuse is a significant contributor to diseases such as cancer, HIV/AIDS, cardiovascular disease and diabetes. More than half of federal offenders reported being under the influence of drugs or alcohol when committing their crime. And the harms associated with prescription drug misuse are reaching crisis proportions. Canada now ranks as the world's second largest per capita consumer of prescription opioids, with the United States as number one. Prescription opioids are rising in popularity among youth as their drug of choice – a position currently occupied by alcohol and marijuana.

The recommendations outlined in this submission focus on federal investments that support the government's commitment **to supporting families and helping vulnerable Canadians by focusing on health, education and training.**

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1

CCSA recommends the Government of Canada invest in an examination of the economic and social impact of marijuana in Canada, and enhance the evidentiary basis for exploring regulatory options.

Recommendation 2

CCSA recommends the Government of Canada invest in a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to raising awareness of the health effects of marijuana among Canadian's youth, based on current and ongoing CCSA research.

Recommendation 3

CCSA recommends the Government of Canada expand the National Anti-Drug Strategy to include alcohol, in partnership with the National Alcohol Strategy Advisory Committee.



Introduction

The federal government has an important role to play to help Canadians maintain and improve their health. Enhancing research opportunities and providing support for innovative ideas to improve health outcomes – including health-related issues attributable to the harms of substances such as drugs and alcohol – ensures that the government supports Canadians’ ability to live in a healthy society free of alcohol- and other drug-related harms. This brief provides tangible, actionable recommendations on how the federal government can help alleviate the burden of substance abuse on individual Canadians, their families and their communities.

Examination of the Economic and Social Impacts of Marijuana

Issue: There is momentum for policy change with regard to the regulation of marijuana. An evidentiary baseline is required to inform ongoing dialogue and debate, and ensure that decisions are evidence-based.

Marijuana is the most commonly used illegal substance in Canada, with 8.4% of Canadians aged 25 and over – and, more alarmingly, 20.3% of youth aged 15–24 – reporting use in the past year in 2012. The impact of marijuana use is felt across health, social and economic sectors. The health harms of marijuana use include cognitive impairment, decreased motor control – including reduced ability to safely operate a motor vehicle – increased risk of psychosis, and risk of respiratory damage.

Many of the social impacts of marijuana use are related to the criminal justice system. More than half of the drug crimes reported by police in 2012 (57,429) were for the possession of marijuana. These crimes impact Canada through costs to the criminal justice system, but also through the economic and social impacts associated with having a criminal record. This feeds into economic harms, including barriers to education, employment and housing – all of which place at risk the long-term productivity of our country.

Debate is ongoing as to the most effective regulatory approach for reducing the risks and harms associated with marijuana use. Various options have been implemented internationally. These include de-penalization (the removal of prison sentences), decriminalization (fines and ticketing schemes) and legalization. Canadians have shown support for exploring these options; a recent IPSOS-Reid poll found 37.3% supported legalization and 33.4% decriminalization. However, as is being experienced in the United States, there is no common understanding of the difference between the two.

CCSA recommends the Government of Canada invest in an examination of the economic and social impact of marijuana in Canada, and enhance the evidentiary basis for exploring regulatory options.

The proposed examination will establish a baseline on which regulatory options can be reviewed to construct an approach that responds to Canada’s unique context. This context includes the current ticketing option proposed by the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police. Continuing to monitor key indicators and comparing them against this baseline will provide the evidence needed to determine the impact of any regulatory change. This monitoring will ensure that such change has the desired effect of reducing the health, social and economic harms of marijuana.



A review of international experiences will allow Canada to learn from the evidence available in, for example, the Netherlands, Australia, Colorado, Washington and Uruguay.

Youth Substance Abuse Prevention — A Focus on Marijuana

Issue: Canadian youth are our future. The high rates of drug and alcohol use in Canada could be detrimental to their development and brain function. Investing in their health and well-being at an early age is essential as they will be contributing to the country's economy and productivity for generations to come.

According to the 2012 Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey, youth 15 to 24 years old have the highest self-reported past-year use of illicit substances compared to other Canadians. Of these drugs, marijuana is the most commonly used; in fact, Canada's youth are the highest users of marijuana when compared to other developed countries.

Adolescence is a time of rapid development that can set the stage for success later in life. Conversely, it can also set the stage for experiencing challenges in adulthood, as youth are more likely than adults to disproportionately experience greater harms from drug use. Consuming drugs and alcohol during adolescence can lead to problems in adulthood, including chronic disease, addiction and mental health disorders.

Early marijuana use in particular has been linked with deficits in short-term cognitive functioning, reduced IQ, impaired school performance and increased risk of leaving school early — all of which can have significant consequences on a young person's life trajectory. There is also growing evidence that early and frequent use of marijuana can alter structural aspects of the developing brain, including those that are responsible for memory, decision making and executive functioning.

Continued investment in evidence-informed health promotion and prevention initiatives aimed at preventing, delaying and reducing marijuana use among Canada's youth can help reduce the demand on an already strained treatment system and alleviate the cost of substance abuse to society. Analysis of numerous prevention programs shows reported savings of \$15–\$18 for every dollar spent on drug abuse prevention.

CCSA recommends the Government of Canada invest in a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to raising awareness of the health effects of marijuana among Canadian's youth, based on current and ongoing CCSA research.

Reducing the Overall Harms of Alcohol Abuse

Issue: Alcohol is legal but is the most addictive substance in Canada. Statistics from The World Health Organization indicate that 3.3 million people worldwide were killed by alcohol in 2012. Canadians should be better informed about the health harms associated with risky drinking behaviours.

Alcohol is a popular drink in Canada with special social and cultural significance, yet it also causes many types of harm. In 2013, nearly one in seven (5.5 million) of Canadians aged 12+ reported drinking patterns that classified them as heavy drinkers. Furthermore, about one million Canadians had a profile consistent with alcohol abuse or dependence in the last 12 months.

The prevalence of alcohol abuse has significant impacts on Canada's enforcement, justice, health and social care systems. The greatest cost is to our healthcare system. In Ontario alone, the burden



of alcohol use disorders was equivalent to that of lung cancer. Recent research scheduled to be released by CCSA this coming fall also shows that alcohol use contributes to more hospital stays than all other substances combined.

Community and personal safety is also directly impacted due to the abuse of alcohol. A 2002 CCSA study on the costs of substance abuse attributed \$3.1 billion to alcohol offenses (compared to \$2.3 billion related to drug offenses). More than two-thirds (67%) of those accused in spousal homicides were believed to have consumed either drugs or alcohol. In addition, about 38% of fatally injured drivers tested for alcohol tested positive. Renewed efforts to reduce the prevalence and harms of alcohol abuse could alleviate burdens on our enforcement, justice, health and social care systems.

Alcohol is a particular concern with youth ages 15–24. Those youth who drink are more likely to drink above the low-risk drinking guidelines than people above 24 years of age. Risky and binge drinking is not uncommon, especially among post-secondary students. In a recent survey of 32 Canadian campuses, about one quarter of post-secondary students who drink had seven or more drinks the last time they “partied” or socialized, often resulting in behaviours they later regretted.

Canada’s National Alcohol Strategy, called *Reducing Alcohol-Related Harm in Canada: Toward a Culture of Moderation*, provides 41 recommendations to reduce the harms of alcohol. It is the product of a national working group of more than 30 representatives, including provinces and territories, relevant federal departments, non-governmental organizations, researchers, addictions agencies, public health organizations, and the alcohol beverage and hospitality industries. To date, this strategy has resulted in the development of a number of impressive tools to combat the harms associated with substance abuse, including Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines, a Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral Tool for physicians, and initiatives to reduce risky substance abuse on university campuses.

CCSA congratulates the Government of Canada for its recent expansion of the National Anti-Drug Strategy beyond illicit drugs to include prescription drug abuse. An opportunity exists to do the same with alcohol, recognizing its significant health, social and criminal justice harms. This could be achieved through partnership with the National Alcohol Strategy Advisory Committee (NASAC), a group comprised of experts in alcohol-related issues from all levels of government, non-governmental organizations, First Nations, Inuit and Métis service providers, and the alcohol industry, and responsible for leading the implementation of the National Alcohol Strategy.

Given its overall emphasis on youth substance abuse prevention, the National Anti-Drug Strategy also provides a mechanism by which the Government of Canada can address alcohol abuse among the country’s young people, ensuring they have the best opportunity to enjoy positive economic, social and health outcomes in later life.

CCSA recommends the Government of Canada expand the National Anti-Drug Strategy to include alcohol, in partnership with the National Alcohol Strategy Advisory Committee.

Conclusion

Through collective action and shared responsibility, Canadians and Canadian society can continue to see significant reduction in the harms associated with substance use and abuse. CCSA appreciates the opportunity provided by this submission to highlight areas where our organization’s unique, legislated mandate can contribute to the federal government’s investments in the country’s overall health and well-being. We welcome the invitation to provide further information and input on any of the recommendations outlined above.