



Recommendations for the legalization of Cannabis

April 2018

April 19th, 2018

Honourable Senators and Members of the Senate Committee:

On behalf of Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services, Ottawa, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Marion Wright and currently I am the Executive Director at Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services.

From my perspective, with approximately 50 years of experience in Ontario in leadership roles for the addiction and mental health sectors, and as a senior surveyor for Accreditation Canada, specializing in addiction and mental health, I welcome an opportunity to speak about the pertinent issues related to Bill C – 45 and how it may interact with individuals accessing Rideauwood services, I will also offer my main recommendations regarding the Bill in question.

I will cover three topics:

- I. A brief description of Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services and the services offered;
- II. Report outlining the substances used by adults and youth accessing Rideauwood services; (Figures 1, 2)
- III. Rideauwood's conclusions and recommendations.





I. Description of Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services and the services offered;

Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services opened in 1976 to support the Ottawa community affected by substance use issues. Early on, Rideauwood recognized that support was essential not only to the people consuming substances but also their families.

With those principles in mind, Rideauwood continues to align treatment programs adhering to best practices, including constantly reviewed evidence based therapeutic models and ongoing development of partnerships and collaborations to improve client access and increase the supports available for clients.

Rideauwood began offering services with a 3 year pilot start-up grant from Health Canada and over the past four decades established funding agreements to enable the organization to continue supporting the community with specialized substance use services. Current funding is provided by the Champlain Local Health Integration Network, Ottawa Catholic School Board, Ottawa Carleton District School board, Ministry of Child and Youth Services, Ministry of the Attorney General, City of Ottawa, Algonquin College and the Children's Aid Society of Ottawa.

Our objective is to provide services to adults, youth, parents, and family members affected by substance use and problem gambling.

Clients receive both individual and group counselling, in addition to screening, assessment and referrals. Additionally, in the interests of prevention and increased public education, Rideauwood offers regular education and information sessions to clients, family members, students, partner agencies and the community. All the services are provided on an out-patient basis at various sites in the Ottawa region and reach on average 1800 clients per year. The organization programs are structured into 3 main departments: "Adult Programs", "Parent and Family Programs" and "Youth and Young Adult Programs".

Evaluation and quality improvement initiatives have been recognized as being essential to supporting our clients and capture the valuable work accomplished by the dedicated staff at Rideauwood.



II. Report outlining the substances used by adults and youth accessing the Rideauwood services;

Rideauwood’s data demonstrates that 75% of adult clients are accessing our services for problematic alcohol use while 33% of adult clients are accessing services for problematic cannabis use.

In terms of the youth demographic, 54% of youth access our services for problematic alcohol and about 65% are accessing services for problematic cannabis use. Other substances are reported at lower rates of problematic use (Fig. 1).

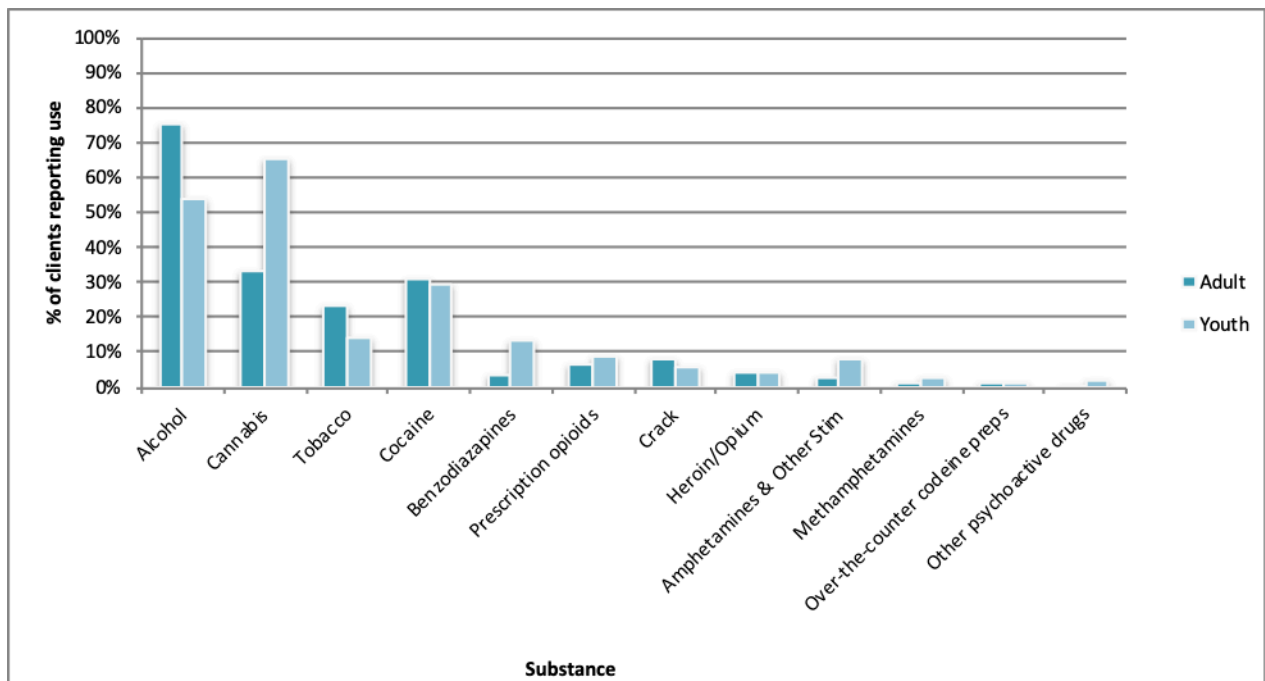
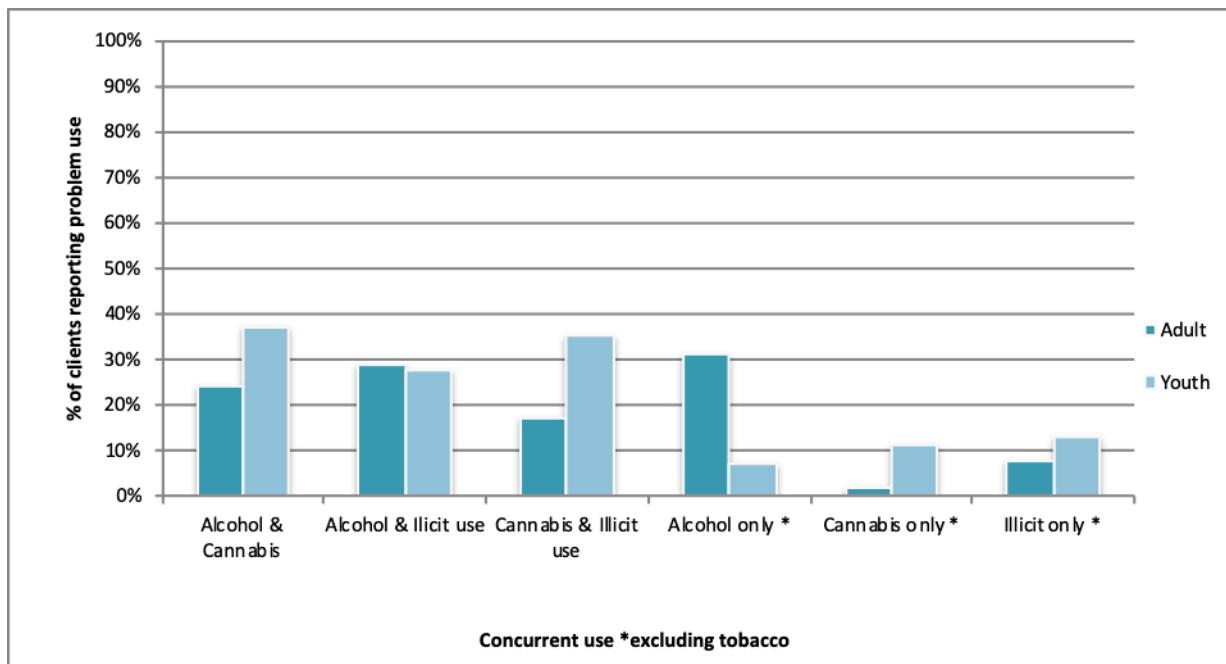


Figure 1: Youth and young adults (under 26 years of age) access services at higher rates from problematic cannabis use than do adults (26 years of age and older).



Adult and youth clients show some consistent differences in reported problematic use. Adult clients were most likely to only report alcohol use and youth were more likely to report cannabis use only or combined problematic use of cannabis and alcohol or other substances (*please note that 'illicit' substances includes non-prescription use of pharmaceutical drugs*). Over the past 7 years, cannabis, alcohol and nicotine have been the substances of use most frequently reported by youth clients accessing Rideauwood services.



III. Rideauwood's conclusions and recommendations;

In short, substance use disorders are strongly affected by multiple factors such as social, biological, psychological and emotional, and rarely these are in isolation. The disorder is complex and is diagnosed in DSM 5 in three main categories (mild, moderate and severe). The cannabis legislation is relevant for each domain, in particular society and health.

Legislation changes have been taking place across multiple states in the US, including Colorado providing opportunity for academic and policy study. Hopfer (2014) from the University of Colorado has conducted an extensive review which confirms the unknown long term health effects correlated to the change in legislation. One can expect an overall increase in the use of a newly legalized substance and despite regulation the available strains, potencies and consumption forms will require further study to truly understand the long term health implications.

Hopfer (2014) also concludes that public health, medical and scientific resources dedicated to understanding and reducing negative consequences of youth cannabis consumption need to be substantially increased to levels commensurate with those efforts for tobacco and alcohol.

At Rideauwood, adults and youth accessing the services present for a multitude of reasons, but one that is more common is that they have become marginalized and therefore experience barriers that limit and delay their recovery process. Overcoming legal issues in addition to biological and psychosocial substance use is more arduous and demanding on the individual and the services available to assist them.

At Rideauwood, youth more often access services to receive support due to cannabis use than for alcohol use (figure 1), nonetheless, the overall rates for alcohol use are higher (Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey, 2017). Youth attending our programs report an array of impacts caused by the use of cannabis, such increased anxiety, decrease motivation and insomnia. One should note that the majority of the youth using cannabis are not engaged in



services and the general view of cannabis is that the substance is natural, safe and not addictive and indeed, research has noted that youth who do not think cannabis presents risks are more likely to report using the substance. Furthermore, some youth have said that using cannabis could enhance their focus while driving, improve their health and even prevent or cure cancer (Canadian Center on Substance Use and Addiction, 2017). Legalization could further increase these views.

Legalization may decrease the perceived risk of cannabis further, but risk perception has fluctuated in past decades despite no change in legislation and so too has the use of the substance. Guardians and educators play a significant role in encouraging youth to access treatment services. Legalization may reduce referrals. Therefore education should be provided to parents and youth, specifically in relation to the possible harms related to the use of cannabis.

Trends in substances of choice will fluctuate over time and youth use will reflect these changes, in other words it can be difficult to determine if youth are always more likely to use cannabis or if a correlation may be generational.

It is most important to provide youth with accurate information about the substance as early as possible but it is equally important that these preventative strategies provide broad information to reduce the potentially harmful effect of influencing trending use towards more or otherwise harmful substances.

a) Recommendations:

- i) **Increased Prevention and Education** is suggested to be an effective measure to prevent and reduce problematic substance use (Publicsafety.gc.ca., 2018). Approaches which include resistance-skills training to teach students about social influences to engage in substance use and specific skills for effectively resisting

these pressures alone or in combination with broader-based life-skills training appear to reduce substance use.

Preventative strategies that prove successful could effectively minimize use of a targeted substance such as cannabis but fail in sufficiently informing youth about the risks posed by other substances, for example there is suggestion that some youth perceive a lessened risk in the recreational use of pharmaceutical drugs because they are legal and regulated. Opportunities for further education will enable a platform to address the multiple misperceptions, for instances ***‘how can cannabis be harmful if it is also medicinal’***, but also the opportunity to educate more broadly about the risks and harms associated with all substances, the high co-occurrence of mental health issues and cannabis use.

ii) **Increased Treatment;**

Based on the possible Health impacts and increased use of Cannabis expected in the first years of the legalization of Cannabis, Rideauwood strongly advises that Education, Prevention and Treatment are increased and made widely accessible.

Further, that existing organizations specialized in the provision of these services receive increased resources to adequately prepare the communities in which these services are integrated, and also respond to the problematic issues that will result. Rideauwood recognizes that only a significant increase in these services will adequately reduce wait times and enable education and prevention programs to be readily available.

Future funding and leadership opportunities must continue to bridge the multiple substance use treatment and mental health care. A positive example of these coordinated strategic leadership initiatives is the one led by Project STEP (support, treatment, education and prevention), this program brings together multiple agencies to assure adequate transition of services for youth across the Ottawa region with the support of the United Way Ottawa, Ottawa Public Health, the Champlain Local Health Integration Network, the Ottawa Network for Education, all four local school



boards and service providers such as Rideauwood, Dave Smith Youth Services and Maison Fraternite. This project has been highlighted in the Ontario's Comprehensive Mental Health Strategy as one that consolidates existing initiatives and promotes the collaboration of services while assuring high quality standards while providing services to youth (Health.gov.on.ca, 2018).

b) Position:

i) Support of the Bill C- 45

World Health Organization (WHO) has called on countries to develop policies and laws that decriminalize drug use in order to reduce incarceration and improve coverage of harm reduction services (Azim, Bontell and Strathdee,. 2015). The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health have all endorsed a harm reduction approach to drug use (Opensocietyfoundations.org, 2016).

The evidence presented through this document is grounded both on the current literature and Rideauwood experience as a health service provider. The evidence supports the need for a shift in the approach to drug use policy and legislation that marginalize people who use substances for recreational purposes and/or have a substance use disorder.



References:

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