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SUBSTANCE USE BY YORK REGION YOUTH

The Health and Emergency Medical Services Committee recommends that:

- 1. Staff be directed to prepare a report addressing:**
 - i) alcohol use among youth**
 - ii) the decriminalization of cannabis, giving consideration to the resolution of the York Region Police Services Board regarding this issue;**
- 2. The recommendations contained in the following report, January 12, 2005, from the Commissioner of Health Services be adopted.**

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. Health and Emergency Medical Services Committee and Regional Council receive this report for information.
2. The Regional Clerk circulate this report to the York Region Police Services Board for information.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to provide members of Health and Emergency Medical Services Committee and Regional Council with an overview of the extent of substance use by individuals between the ages of 10–18 (“youth”) in York Region, the changing patterns of use, and shifting perceptions of youth.

3. BACKGROUND

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) *Mandatory Health Programs and Services Guidelines (December 1997)* mandates Public Health to support policies and educate the public about the risks associated with illicit substance use and the non-medical use of drugs and other psychoactive substances. Towards meeting this objective, staff of the Substance Abuse Prevention Program (SAPP), the only prevention-focused substance use program in York Region, has developed a broad range of initiatives for all age groups. A primary target group is youth, as research indicates that during these developmental years there is an increase in the experimentation and use of substances.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

The Ontario Student Drug Use Survey (OSDUS), spanning 25 years, is the longest Canadian systematic study of alcohol and other drug use among youth. The study has been conducted every two years from 1977–2003 with students ages 10–18. This survey is a provincial report with findings reported according to Ontario Public Health Planning Regions. The 2003 findings for Central East Public Health Planning Region include student survey data from York Region and are the most accurate estimate of substance use and trends for York Region students. The average percentages of youth substance use in the Central East Public Health Planning Region are similar to the provincial averages.

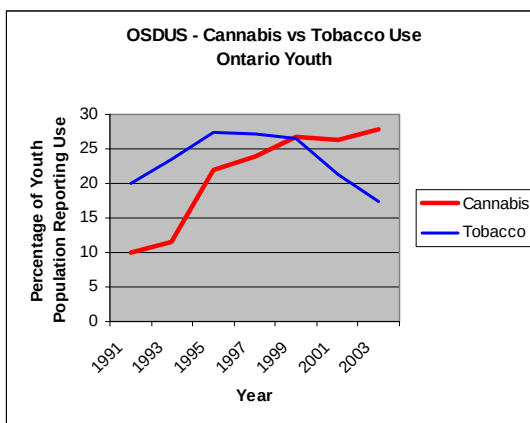
From the OSDUS survey, and their ongoing work with York Region's youth population, the SAPP has identified use of three drugs as a concern—cannabis, cocaine and alcohol. An evaluation of the OSDUS provincial data indicates an increase in the use of cannabis and cocaine, and concerning patterns in the use of alcohol, specifically excessive drinking. At the same time, the OSDUS survey results indicate that youth perception of harm associated with use is decreasing and more students report using substances at an earlier age.

4.1 Extent of Substance Use and Changing Patterns

4.1.1 Cannabis

According to the OSDUS, the use of cannabis by Ontario youth has steadily increased over the past 25 years. As referenced in the graph below, cannabis use has risen from 10% in 1991 to 29% in 2003. In comparison, only 19% of the youth surveyed in 2003 reported smoking tobacco.

Figure 1
OSDUS – Cannabis vs Tobacco Use in Ontario Youth



Source: Ontario Student Drug Use Survey – 1977-2003

Among cannabis users, 25% report weekly use, and 14% report daily use. In 1993, only 1% of grade six students had tried cannabis, but by 2003, 5% of grade six students had reported having tried this substance.

Among those who drive, 20% state that they use cannabis within one hour of driving. This is of particular concern given that marijuana has the similar impairment effects to alcohol. Fourteen percent of students drink alcohol and drive.

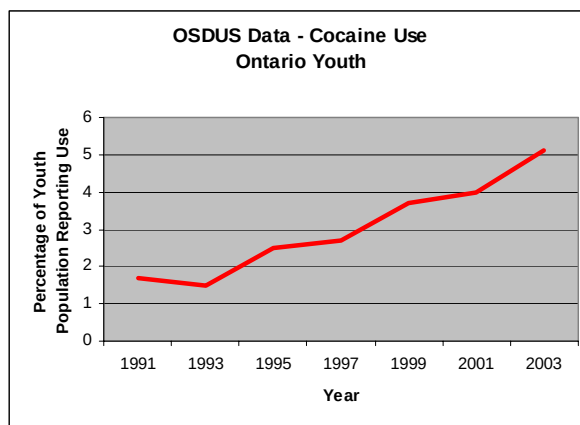
About 32% indicate witnessing the selling of drugs in their neighbourhood, which has steadily increased since 1995. Of the respondents, 55% report that cannabis is easily attainable.

According to the Ontario Drug and Alcohol Treatment Registry, cannabis is currently the number one substance that youth are seeking treatment for.

4.1.2 Cocaine

As seen in the OSDUS graph below, since 1991 there has been a steady increase in Ontario in the use of cocaine by youth. The reported use of cocaine by youth in the Central East Region is currently 4.3%, slightly less than the provincial average of 4.8% but also showing a steady increase over the same time frame.

Figure 2
OSDUS Data – Cocaine Use in Ontario Youth



Source: Ontario Student Drug Use Survey – 1977-2003

Over this same period Ontario youth perception of risks associated with using cocaine has decreased from 42.7% in 1991 to 27.8% in 2003. Although the use of cocaine is limited in York Region, the availability and affordability of the substance is of concern. Through ongoing communication with York Regional Police, schools and treatment agencies SAPP has noted signs of “dumping” of cocaine in late 2003. Dumping refers to the street level selling of cocaine at a competitive price to marijuana. There has been an increase in the number of youth identifying cocaine in treatment as a secondary substance of choice. SAPP continues to actively monitor and evaluate the use and availability of

cocaine through reports of use from local treatment agencies and partnerships with York Regional Police.

4.1.3 Alcohol

Alcohol has always been the primary drug of choice for youth. Excessive drinking which encompasses binge drinking, hazardous drinking and harmful drinking is of particular concern. The World Health Organization's Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) screen is used to detect hazardous and harmful drinking. Hazardous drinking is an established pattern of drinking that increases the likelihood of future medical and physical problems (e.g. liver dysfunction). Harmful drinking is a pattern of drinking that is already causing damage to one's health (e.g. alcohol related injuries). The 2003 OSDUS survey indicates that 70% of youth drink, and 27% are drinking in excess.

4.2 Strategies of SAPP to Address Concerns

SAPP has developed comprehensive programming to prevent and reduce the harm associated with the changing trends of substance use by York Region youth. Three specific strategies developed in 2003–2004 address the increase in substance use, these are the Cannabis Summit, Party in the Right Spirit and Drug Awareness Week.

SAPP designed and piloted a successful *Youth Summit on Cannabis* in 2003 to identify issues around cannabis use in youth. Curriculum support has been created, along with teacher and parent training workshops, as well as ongoing active involvement with youth. SAPP also addresses excessive drinking through peer focused programming such as Party in the Right Spirit. This annual program, first piloted by SAPP in 2000, provides peer leaders with an opportunity to receive information on hosting a safer grad/prom and on a variety of prevention and intervention strategies including excessive alcohol use. SAPP utilizes the National Drug Awareness Week to provide an opportunity for public health to join with the Province of Ontario to provide education about substance use. York Region Drug Awareness Week initiatives in 2003-2004 involved 38 schools and over 69,000 individuals from public, Catholic and private schools participating in individual and group activities.

SAPP also initiated and is the lead in the York Region District School Board Substance Abuse Advisory Committee. This committee helps facilitate the implementation of strategic initiatives to address substance use in schools and assists in comprehensive health promotion. SAPP is also actively involved in the York Catholic District School Board Substance Abuse Advisory Committee.

Program areas currently in development include cannabis use and driving, and strategies to address the pending federal legislative change to decriminalize cannabis.

4.3 Relationship to Vision 2026

Education about substance use including illicit substances, over the counter medications, herbal supplements, alcohol, and prescription medication are consistent with several of the guiding principles of Vision 2026. SAPP contributes to safe and secure communities and promotes wellness through partnering with major York Region institutions. Some of the program's partners include York Regional Police, York Region Catholic District School Board, York Region District School Board, Addiction Services for York Region, and other addiction and mental health service agencies within the Region.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The Substance Abuse Prevention Program utilizes the skills of 1.5 Public Health Nurses, 1.0 Health Educator and a fraction of management and clerical time to service York Region program needs. Annualized staffing costs are estimated at \$217,000, along with approximately \$14,000 in program costs, all of which is included in the Council approved 2004 Business Plan and Budget. This estimate does not include any support corporate costs.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

SAPP offers services including education, advocacy, new initiatives and consultation to all nine area municipalities in York Region.

7. CONCLUSION

The use of cannabis and cocaine, and the incidence of excessive drinking by youth are increasing provincially and in York Region. At the same time, youth perception of harm associated with substance use is decreasing. SAPP focuses on comprehensive programming and strategies to deal with these trends in youth and to prevent and reduce the harm associated with substances use.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.