



Canadian Centre
on Substance Abuse

Centre canadien de lutte contre
l'alcoolisme et les toxicomanies

Attention: News and Assignment Editors

Public perceptions about the seriousness of substance abuse are not consistent with actual costs, says new report by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse

OTTAWA, March 28, 2007 – Canadians have an exaggerated view of the harms associated with illegal drug use, but consistently underestimate the serious negative impact of alcohol on society and the economy, says a new research report released today by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA), Canada's national organization working to reduce alcohol- and drug-related harm.

CCSA researchers analyzed data from the 2004 Canadian Addiction Survey (CAS) and The Costs of Substance Abuse in Canada (2002) and found that direct social and economic costs associated with alcohol (\$7.4 billion) were more than twice the costs associated with illicit drugs (\$3.6 billion). However, when Canadians were asked in the CAS to rate problems at the national level, only 25% of Canadians identified alcohol abuse as "very serious" while 45% felt that illicit drug abuse was very serious. The report points to public opinion data that suggest that the perceived level of risk associated with a particular substance is highest among those who are least personally familiar with that substance.

"The divergence between the perceived seriousness and actual costs points to the need to reset public misconceptions about the size and scope of illicit drug abuse in Canada, especially injection drug use, and to better educate Canadians about the significant and largely unrecognized risks of alcohol," said Rita Notarandrea, CCSA's Director of Research and Policy.

The research report, *Comparing the Perceived Seriousness and Actual Costs of Substance Abuse in Canada*, points out that institutional, social and cultural factors (including media) play a significant role in amplifying or downplaying perceived levels of risk. For example, as a legal commodity, alcohol is heavily promoted through advertising while its negative aspects are largely under-reported. As for illicit drugs, perceptions of their seriousness are likely skewed by the tendency of the media to report on vivid but relatively rare cases of drug abuse.

A current example of this can be seen in policy responses to methamphetamine use. While acknowledging that methamphetamine is a dangerous drug that is relatively easy to manufacture and whose use is increasing in some jurisdictions in Canada, the report argues that overall rates of use are small compared with other substances, as are the total health and social harms derived from its misuse. "(This) does raise questions about the appropriateness of methamphetamine as a primary driver for substance abuse policy, which it currently appears to be in a number of jurisdictions in Canada," the report states.

To access the full report and for information on how CCSA is involved in addressing these issues, please visit the website at www.ccsa.ca.

About CCSA:

CCSA has a legislated mandate to provide national leadership and evidence-informed analysis and advice to mobilize collaborative efforts to reduce alcohol- and drug-related harms. CCSA is supported by Health Canada through Canada's Drug Strategy.

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