

Say Nothing About Me
Without Me!



Saskatchewan Young Persons Voices
on Addiction and Intervention Methods

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36 Saskatchewan Young Persons Said...

Young Persons Voice on Addiction and Intervention Methods

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law. (Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child)

Say Nothing About Me Without Me

The Children's Advocate Office (CAO) promotes the interests of, and acts as a voice for children who have concerns about provincial government services. The CAO engages in public education, works to resolve disputes and conducts independent investigations. The CAO also recommends improvements to programs for children to the government and/or the Legislative Assembly. The following report is a communication tool for facilitating and elevating the voices of Saskatchewan young persons to the public.

More than ever, young persons yearn for their voices and opinions to be heard and considered in policy and program development, specifically those policies and programs that directly impact them, "Say nothing about me without me!" Young persons have valuable opinions, ideas and suggestions on the creation and implementation of services that merit the attention and consideration of decision-makers.

In recognition of this need and the value that young persons are capable of providing, the CAO is committed to incorporating youth voice in the work of the office. The CAO engages in four main services: Individual advocacy, investigations, public education, and youth voice, which are all components of and contribute to systemic advocacy. Systemic advocacy is concerned with promoting best interests, rights and well being of children and youth; drawing community and government attention to issues; influencing decisions, laws, policy and practice that impact children and youth, and where possible, is citizen-initiated. An important element of this service is ensuring the input and opinions of young people in the identification and advancement of issues that affect them. The objective of this report is to amplify the unrefined voices of Saskatchewan young persons on a CAO-identified systemic issue, to the public.

The issue of drug-addictions and proposed intervention strategies was recently identified by the CAO as a pressing matter that required systemic action. Part of the research conducted regarding the issue was consultations with young persons. Four focus groups were conducted to incorporate the experiences and opinions of Saskatchewan young persons on this issue that directly affects their lives. This report reflects the thoughts of the 36 young people that voluntarily submitted their voices to be heard by the public on this important issue.



36 Saskatchewan Young Persons Said...

The CAO's Summary of Four Focus Groups

The CAO conducted four focus groups between June 20th, 2005 and July 21st, 2005, with a variety of youth from across the province to better understand their view on drugs and intervention strategies.

We spoke to youth with diverse backgrounds and experiences, including young people who have experience with detention centers, and addictions services; young parents; youth attending school and others in the workforce. They ranged in age from 16-28 years old and were from Prince Albert, North Battleford, Regina, and Saskatoon. Within Saskatchewan, there are an estimated 218, 417 young people between the ages of 15 and 29 (Sask Trends Monitor, 2004).

The youth we spoke to during our four focus groups were from an array of community groups including; two high schools, one secure custody facility, and one street outreach center. Of the four groups, one consisted exclusively of males, one of females and two of an approximately equal representation of both genders. In total, the CAO spoke with 36 youth. 20 of these 36 youth were female and 16 were male.

It is our hope that the following excerpts reflect the voices of these 36 Saskatchewan youth. It is important to note that these are solely the opinions of these participating youth. Participants were asked specifically to speak from their individual experiences and/or knowledge of the issue.

Focus Group Discussion Responses

1. Do you think there is a drug problem in your community / school?
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Each of the four focus groups reported that they believed drugs were a problem in their communities. The youth identified that a "community drug problem" exists when a significant number of people are using drugs. Some youth relayed concern about drug use at their schools but identified that the majority of drug problems occur in the community at large.

"I know more people who are doing drugs than not."

"There are drugs on school grounds."

"Drug problems happen overall more in the community than at school."

"It's not too bad in schools, some kids are doing it at breaks but not bad."

The youth we spoke to identified that drug use becomes a problem when:

"It takes over your life...your life revolves around the drug."

"It becomes the main focus of your life."

"It changes your life, you count on the drug to get you through the day."

"You begin to steal from your friends and family."

"Your friends change, you lose your friends."

"Your priorities change."

"You don't look after yourself anymore."

"You physically change – you look sick or ugly."

"You stop caring about yourself and others."



36 Saskatchewan Young Persons Said...

2. What kind of drugs are you the most concerned about?

Crystal Meth

18 of the 36 youth reported that crystal meth was the drug that they were the most concerned about.

In one group, five of the seven youth rated crystal meth as their top concern. This focus group was held in a youth outreach centre. The youth we met with provided the following commentary:

"It is all over the news, people seem to be really concerned about it."

"It eats your skin, and the puss in the boils makes you high."

"You can't sleep on it, it has very negative physical effects."

"It's supposed to be easy to make, the ingredients are easy to find and buy."

"It rots your body."

"It's cheap."

"You age prematurely ..."

"I've never been in this scene."

Even though the majority of this group identified crystal meth as the drug they were the most concerned about, one participant anonymously indicated that she/he witnessed someone over 18 using crystal meth. Another participant anonymously indicated that she/he witnessed someone between the ages of 12 to 18 use crystal meth. The responses in this group may be more reflective of their increased awareness due to the media rather than direct exposure to crystal meth. It is also noted that this group identified that alcohol was just as concerning to them.

In our two northern focus groups, five of the eight and six of the 11 youth rated crystal meth as the drug they were the most concerned about. One of these focus groups was held in a community school and the other was held in a custody facility. 11 of the youth in these two focus groups anonymously indicated that they had witnessed someone over 18 years of age use crystal meth. Nine of these same youth anonymously indicated that they witnessed someone between the ages of 12 to 18 use crystal meth, and one of these same youth anonymously reported that she/he witnessed someone under the age of 12 use crystal meth. The youth in these groups identified that they were concerned about crystal meth because:

"People do stupid things when they're on meth."

"The physical effects are gross – skin peeling, don't sleep."

"The problem is getting worse."

"Saskatoon is pretty bad, it takes the reserves longer to get into crystal meth, marijuana and alcohol are much more common there."

"People use other drugs and then get into meth."

"When I was dealing the stuff [crystal meth], it was becoming really popular, especially in Edmonton, I wouldn't touch the stuff though."

"All ages use crystal meth."

In the final focus group, two of the 11 youth rated crystal meth as the drug they were the most concerned about. This focus group was held in a non-inner city high school. This focus group reported that crystal meth was a problem "out there" but didn't believe it was an issue at their school. One of these youth reported that the people who were using crystal meth were doing so "because they can't get the high from other drugs anymore." None of the youth in this group reported witnessing anyone using crystal meth. This group identified that alcohol was more concerning to them.



36 Saskatchewan Young Persons Said...

Alcohol

11 of the 36 youth we spoke to reported that alcohol was the drug they were the most concerned about.

In one focus group, no one reported that they were concerned about alcohol. This was the group mentioned above where five of the seven youth rated crystal meth as their top concern but noted "alcohol was just as bad".

In our two northern focus groups, one of the eight and four of the 11 youth reported that alcohol was the drug they were the most concerned about. One of these focus groups was held in a community school and the other was held in a custody facility. These youth explained their concerns as follows:

"Alcohol is still the worst drug because it's killing people."

"Lots of deaths on reserves [are because of alcohol]."

"Alcohol is a problem for First Nations – how do you resist it when even the Chief and council members are drinking?"

"People are used to alcohol and almost encouraged to do it."

"It's everywhere, and it makes people fight and do stupid things."

"Affects families, abuse issues (wife and child abuse)."

"No money for food, people commit crime to get it."

"Easy to get and it's everywhere."

In our final focus group, six of the 11 youth reported that alcohol was the drug they were the most concerned about. This focus group was held in a non-inner city high school. These youth told us the following:

"Alcohol – underage drinking is very common, it happens at school. It can lead to drunk driving and people getting hurt."

"Alcohol isn't as harmful as other drugs."

"Alcohol is horrible for relationships."

Marijuana

Five of the 36 youth we spoke to reported that marijuana was the drug they were the most concerned about.

In one group, one of the seven youth rated marijuana as their top concern. These youth explained their concerns as follows:

"People think it's not addictive."

"Pot heads are boring, no energy, ambition, all they want to do is stay in and smoke."

"Their mind changes, they become dumb and simple."

"They stay home and burn out."

"Lose intelligence."

"Can't think for themselves."

"It has become socially acceptable and mainstream."

"It impairs functioning."

"People can't function in daily lives."

"It can be a gateway drug, but this depends on the person, it often takes an addictive personality to become addicted."

"People find anyway they can to rationalize it, even more than alcohol."

"3 categories of people [use marijuana] – potheads, upper class people who use it to relax, and medicinal users – find their way to rationalize their use."



36 Saskatchewan Young Persons Said...

In our two northern focus groups, one youth rated marijuana as the drug she/he was the most concerned about. Only one person in the community school focus group perceived marijuana to be a drug. The youth in this group provided the following commentary on marijuana:

- "Marijuana and alcohol are much more common [on reserves than crystal meth]."
- "Addictive."
- "Makes you feel good."
- "Not that harmful."
- "It's everywhere so it should just be legalized."
- "All ages use."

In the final focus group, three of the 11 youth rated marijuana as the drug they were the most concerned about. This focus group was held in a non-inner city high school. One youth in this group stated,

"Marijuana is now becoming a regular thing, it is escalating, however, this is not a trend of all drugs, alcohol is not growing in popularity, the problem is staying the same, there is a phase for each drug."

Cocaine

Two of the 36 youth we spoke to reported that cocaine was the drug they were the most concerned about.

In one group, one of the seven youth rated cocaine as their top concern. The youth in this group provided the following commentary on cocaine:

- "Easily addictive."
- "One try and you will want more – "not true"."
- "People don't believe the hook it has, they take it as a self challenge to beat the supposed addictive effects."
- "Ugly people use it and want to be paid back."
- "It is very expensive so you have to do a lot to get it, therefore it takes away from your basic needs."
- "The high doesn't last long."
- "It leads to a dangerous lifestyle."
- "People lose their jobs and family."
- "People become violent to get it."
- "More accessible than 10 years ago."

In our two northern focus groups, one youth reported cocaine as the drug she/he was the most concerned about. These youth explained their concerns as follows

- "It's big in cities, not really in towns."
- "Over doses are common in P.A."
- "It's easy to access."
- "You become addicted easily."
- "A lot of people go from cocaine to crystal meth."
- "It feels different than all other drugs."
- "At a party you would often see both cocaine and crystal meth."

In the final focus group, none of the youth rated cocaine as the drug they were the most concerned about. This focus group was held in a non-inner city high school.

Cigarettes

One of the 36 youth we spoke to reported that cigarettes were the drug she/he was the most concerned about. This youth participated in one of the northern focus groups held in a custody facility.



36 Saskatchewan Young Persons Said...

3. Who do you think uses drugs the most?

The majority of the youth we spoke to identified that they thought drugs are used by adults and youth and did not see drugs as an exclusively "youth issue". They told us their thoughts on who uses drugs:

- "People of partying ages."
- "High school age youth experience EVERYTHING."
- "Adults use alcohol, pot and meth."
- "All ages use coke."
- "Adults use needles and Rx pills."
- "These adults could be professionals because they are the ones who have the money."
- "Adults are the ones supplying the drugs to young people."
- "Gangs, First Nations, people in cities."
- "Agree that it's a youth issue, there are adults that use but not as many."
- "Not only a youth issue, it's adults as well."

Youth tend to socialize with other youth their age. Therefore, their exposure to, and witness of, drug use would be, for the most part, within their social circles. However, even with this obvious bias, the majority of youth we spoke to identified that all ages of people use drugs.

4. Why do you think people use drugs?

- "People use drugs to escape and wind up getting into trouble."
- "People trying to fill voids in their lives."
- "People who want to relax or are depressed."

5. What do you think works best for people who do have problems with drugs?

- "Don't use scare tactics."
- "Must acknowledge the problem."
- "Peer support."
- "Address the problem."
- "Address underage drinking, teachers and parents must address it as opposed to allowing it, teachers know students come to school drunk and yet do nothing about it."
- "Must make a note and take action against people "pulling." "Pulling" is a term used for purchasing alcohol on behalf of a minor.
- "No drinking and no drug policy must be enforced in schools."
- "Person has to want help."
- "Detox centers don't work because you can run away."
- "Treatment centers have to be supportive."
- "It is hard to get a spot in Detox."
- "Need an ongoing support program – mom, after Detox had no job or money, couldn't buy food or medicine, no finances makes the situation more stressful, therefore revert back to the abuse, couldn't get into Detox here, had to go to a small town."
- "Jail- lock them up where they can't leave, they get drug free; it's not a solution but it's one option."
- "People use drugs in jail too."
- "Will go out and use again."
- "They need treatment like programs and counseling."
- "Listen to a role model."
- "People go to treatment and come back to the same community and go back to the same stuff."



36 Saskatchewan Young Persons Said...

6. What do you think about making people go for treatment?

"Parents could use this, and manipulate the system to get their kid locked up."

"Not right to lock up 10yr-old you will just cause more harm to the kid."

"Jail is just a revolving door, the cycle keeps going, it won't DEAL with the problem."

"A person has to be willing to go to treatment, being forced won't work."

"You can't make people go into treatment."

"It would be better if you can't take off."

"Worse if you can't take off because you would be stuck with your decision."

"It's a good idea, but it won't take care of addiction."

"Should be longer time that they're locked up, after 5 or 30 days, they'll just go right back into the same stuff they were in before."

"Shouldn't be a forced entry to apprehend the youth."

"It may cause more harm, institutionalizing people, they learn how to be a better criminal in those kind of places."

"Should do it for 18 and up too."

"Some people should be forced into treatment, especially those who are not used to having a better life, they need to see what life could be like."

"What about kids concerned about their parents?"

"All ages can't hurt, see if treatment would work, it could help in the long run."

"Detox shouldn't be as cushy and welcoming, people often go to detox several times, and it should be more like a boot camp." "People sometimes go to detox to find drugs because of the dealers that are there."

"Need to teach life skills, lifestyle changes so that they can go on with their lives, without the drug."

"It should be mandatory for 14 and under, once you start mixing the 15 and 16 year olds in there then you have problems with youth recruiters for child sexual exploitation. The 15/16 year-olds get the young ones hooked on drugs and then they get them into prostitution that way."

"We must deal with the underlying social problems before the kids are that addicted, we need to improve detox facilities but that's not all we have to do."

"It's against their rights."

"If someone is being hurt by the drug abuse, then it must be addressed."

"It is acceptable because in the state the person is in, they are unable to make a reasonable choice."

"If parents are worried then there's clearly a problem, if they want them to go, then they should."

"The person has to want to quit."

"As a parent they should have the right."

"If I was in that position I would feel oppressed, however, from the outside it seems reasonable because they have impaired judgment."

"Yes, if they have the right evidence."



36 Saskatchewan Young Persons Said...

7. What do you think about making people go for treatment even if they don't want to go?
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"Just will relapse anyway"
"Need to want to quit a bit."
"If rights are upheld."
"Can't get help until they want it... they will just get worse into it... need supports when they are out."

The young people we spoke to had the following comments to add about the possibility of secure care legislation being implemented in Saskatchewan.

"The only referral should be allowed to come from a parent or guardian."
"It is unfair that a youth could not do this for their parent."
"I think if someone goes to detox there should be a program put on in front of them after they sober up about the repercussions of the use of their choice of drug."
"The new program should apply to all citizens, NOT just youth."
"Parents should not have the ability to force their children into treatment."
"I believe that the problem lies in society and removing them against their will is unconstitutional, it should be voluntary."
"[I agree with secure] detox in order to get someone to get help they will need/want help."
"Only for some drugs."
"They have to be willing to take the help before you can offer the help."

Conclusion

Although the 36 youth we spoke to did not formulate any formal recommendations, they provided many issues, concerns, and suggestions that are worthy of consideration by Saskatchewan's decision makers. The CAO has forwarded their voice, with liberal quotations, to capture their thoughts, opinions and concerns.

References:

Sask Trends Monitor. (2004, November). Saskatchewan Labour Market Trends: 2004 Update of the 2000 Saskatchewan Labour Market Trends Report. Regina, SK: Saskatchewan Learning.

For more information contact:
Children's Advocate Office
315 25th St. E.
Saskatoon, Sask.
S7K 2H6
1-800-322-7221
childadvocate@saskcao.ca

