

DRUG CHECKING SERVICES NECESSARY TO PREVENT YOUTH DRUG-RELATED DEATHS



Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy (CSSDP) is a national grassroots network of student and youth chapters working on drug policy issues facing their communities.

CSSDP advocates for pragmatic evidence-based drug policies that prioritize the health of people who use drugs.

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Youth in danger of avoidable drug-related deaths

- In August 2014, three overdose deaths and dozens of cases of drug-related illness occurred at music festivals across Canada.¹ In 2012, there were over 25 deaths in Alberta and British Columbia attributed to drugs commonly used in party settings.² Recalling the Coroner's Report on the Inquest into the death of Allan Ho³ conducted by the City of Toronto in 2000, it is evident that these incidents are an ongoing problem in Canada. Amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), such as MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxy-N-methylamphetamine), have remained relatively popular with young people over the past decade,^{4,5} and are now more prevalent than opiates in North America.⁶ Nevertheless, young people in certain subcultures increasingly use opiates in party settings. Given the longstanding popularity of ATS and other drugs used by youth, deaths and health complications are unsurprising, but the majority of cases are avoidable.
- Over the past 10 years in Canada, drugs often consumed in party settings have moved to Schedule I, including ketamine in 2005 and MDMA in 2012.⁷ This increase in criminalization has taken place on a global scale, leading to the emergence and proliferation of New Psychoactive Substances (NPS), with over 348 NPS identified as of December 2013.⁶ Otherwise known as “legal highs,” these substances alter the chemical structure of illicit substances to avoid violating drug laws, but as a result their consumption often causes negative effects due to increased toxicity and mislabelling.⁸
- CSSDP's on the ground experience with youth indicates that they often fail to recognize that their drugs commonly consist of adulterants, including NPS. Youth are also ill-informed of the available strategies to reduce drug-related harms, as well as what to do in the case of a medical emergency. Unless improved, this lack of information will continue to lead to youth deaths and health complications.
- Deaths can be prevented through the implementation of evidence-based public health programs that have been successful throughout Europe.⁹ Drug checking is a harm reduction service that helps young people who use drugs identify and avoid ingesting unknown and potentially more dangerous adulterants found in drugs. Drug checking empowers youth to take control of their health, reduces drug-related deaths, and improves public health epidemiological data on what drugs are currently on the market in order to prevent future harm.
- Drug checking services do not endorse drug use, but rather recognize that youth continue to use drugs despite criminalization. Instead of victim blaming and treating the recent tragedies as warnings against illicit drug use, the Canadian government should prioritize the health of young people by increasing product information, and thereby reducing the systemic risks associated with drug use.

How drug checking works and why

- By providing youth with accurate information about their substances, professional drug checking for purity and potency enables youth to make educated choices about their drug use. Drug checking services are part of strategies implemented across the European Union (EU) in partnership with local governments, hospitals, public health units, and key stakeholders through

References

¹ MacPherson, Donald. "Preventing music-festival drug deaths must go beyond saying 'just say no.'" *National Post*. August 20, 2014. <http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2014/08/20/donald-macpherson-preventing-music-festival-drug-deaths-must-go-beyond-saying-just-say-no/>

² Boseveld, Sarah. "Ecstasy-related deaths in B.C., Alberta spark debate over how to fix poisonous problem." *National Post*. February 5, 2012. <http://news.nationalpost.com/2012/02/05/ecstasy-related-deaths-in-b-c-alberta-sparking-debate-over-how-to-fix-poisonous-problem/>

³ "Report on the Inquest into the death of Allan Ho." *Office of the Chief Coroner*. October 2001. <http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2014/mm/bgrd/backgroundfile-71303.pdf>

⁴ Centre for Addictions Research of BC. "Ecstasy Use in High Risk Populations." *University of Victoria*. <http://www.carbc.ca/FactsStats/AODMonitoring/ProjectComponents/tabid/94/agentType/View/PropertyID/124/Default.aspx>

⁵ Boak et al. "Drug use among Ontario students, 1977-2013: Detailed OSDUHS findings." *Centre for Addiction and Mental Health*. 2013.

http://www.camh.ca/en/research/news_and_publications/ontario-student-drug-use-and-health-survey/Documents/2013%20OSDUHS%20Docs/2013OSDUHS_Detail_ed_DrugUseReport.pdf

⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. "World Drug Report 2014." *United Nations*. June 2014. http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr2014/Statistics/Annual_prevalence_drug_use_by_regions_and_globally_by_drug_types.pdf

⁷ "Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (S.C. 1996, c. 19)." <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-38.8/>

⁸ "People overdosing on 'research drugs,' police say." *CityNews Toronto*. September 14, 2014. <http://www.citynews.ca/2014/09/14/people-overdosing-on-research-drugs-police-say>

⁹ Charlois, Thierry. "Safer Nightlife in Europe." *EXASS Net, Pompidou Group, and Council of Europe*. May 2009. http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/pompidou/Source/Activities/EXASS/guide/SaferNightLife_en.pdf

¹⁰ Ventura et al. "Drug Checking Service Good Practice Standards." *Nightlife Empowerment and Well-being Implementation Project*. 2012. http://www.safernightlife.org/pdfs/standards/NEWIP_D_standards-final_20.12-A4.pdf

¹¹ "Use of new psychoactive substances now an epidemic." *United Kingdom Parliament Home Affairs Committee*. December 20, 2013. <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/home-affairs-committee/news/131220-drugs-rpt-pubn/>

the Nightlife, Empowerment & Well-being Network (www.safernightlife.org). There are many models of drug checking that have been evaluated as standard good practices by this EU-funded initiative,¹⁰ including mobile settings (using thin-layer chromatography, known as TLC, or reagents) and lab settings (using gas chromatography–mass spectrometry or high-performance liquid chromatography–mass spectrometry, known as GC-MS and HPLC-MS respectively). In Vienna, ChEck-iT partners with the Vienna General Hospital to provide drug checking services funded through Vienna's Addiction and Drug Coordination department, as well as the Federal Ministry of Health. ChEck-iT combines the best of both models through a mobile GC-MS lab. While GC-MS and HPLC-MS are more scientifically accurate than TLC or reagents, these models of drug checking all share the following public health outcomes:

- Provide early intervention for youth including drug education, information on health services, peer counselling, HIV/HCV prevention, and access to naloxone for opiate users;
 - Assist in lowering short-term and long-term negative effects associated with substance use;
 - Improve public health drug epidemiological data and government ability to respond; and,
 - Reduce deaths associated with adulterated substances and lower rates of problematic substance use.
- Drug checking services would be an invaluable resource in response to the increasing prevalence of NPS. Health complications resulting from NPS consumption have become a serious problem in several countries, including the United Kingdom.¹¹ Since the lack of accurate data on the chemical compounds being consumed impedes the ability of health departments to respond, drug checking services mitigate this challenge and allow for effective and timely responses to NPS-related health complications.

Recommendations for implementation of drug checking services

- Ensure that drug checking services are more than just an accessible and professional laboratory. Drug checking services should be a youth-friendly resource which offer strategies for reducing drug-related harms including; peer education, information about drug use and its risks, harm reduction supplies, and treatment options.
- Publicly share existing drug epidemiology data collected by Health Canada and hospitals, as well as future information collected via drug checking services. People who use drugs can benefit from understanding the purity and potency of drug samples analyzed in their communities. Health Canada, as well as service providers and public health researchers, can also use drug epidemiology data to further their understanding of the drug market, and create more effective prevention, harm reduction, and treatment programs.
- Partner with existing organizations working with young people to remove potential barriers to drug checking and legally protect frontline health workers. For example, the Trip Project (<http://www.tripproject.ca>) promotes safer drug use by providing youth with information and supplies, and has been funded by the City of Toronto for over 20 years. Trip's on the ground experience with young people who use drugs makes them a crucial partner in implementing drug checking services in Toronto and elsewhere in Canada.