

Findings from the National Alcohol and Other Drugs Survey

The prevalence of alcohol consumption in Canada has declined slightly in the last decade, according to a national survey conducted by Health and Welfare Canada in March 1989.

Findings from the National Alcohol and Other Drugs Survey show that since the Canada-wide survey conducted in 1979, more Canadians have stopped drinking or are drinking less.

Survey data were gathered from telephone interviews with 11,634 Canadians, aged 15 and over, in all the provinces. Households were selected through random dialling methods in order to ensure a broad sampling of Canadian homes.

Of those contacted, 79% agreed to the interview. Respondents were asked a variety of questions about their use of alcohol and other drugs, including the extent and patterns of use, and the circumstances and settings associated with consumption.

Alcohol Use

The survey found that approximately eight in ten adult Canadians (78%) were "current drinkers," having consumed alcoholic beverages at least once in the 12 months prior to the survey. An additional 16% of the population had consumed alcohol at some time earlier in their lives and were classified as "former drinkers," while 7% reported they had never consumed an alcoholic beverage.

The percentage of "current drinkers" in 1989 represents a decrease of 4% since 1978-79. At the same time, the proportion of former drinkers has increased by 12%.

"Current drinkers" are also consuming less alcohol per week. According to Health and Welfare's 1985 Health Promotion Survey, the average drinker consumed 5.1 drinks per week. In 1989, the average drinker consumed 3.7 drinks - in other words, 1.4 drinks less per week.

Of all current drinkers, 47% had not had a drink in the week prior to the survey. However, 38% reported consuming one to seven drinks, 9% had consumed eight to fourteen drinks, and 6% had consumed fifteen or more drinks. This heavier consumption by a small proportion of current drinkers inflates the average consumption to its level of 3.7 drinks per week.

Interestingly, the proportion of the population who are current drinkers tends to increase from east to west, with Prince Edward Island showing the lowest percentage (64%) and British Columbia the highest (83%).

In general, the survey found an inverse relationship between age and amount of alcohol consumption. In addition, younger Canadians tended to consume more alcohol at a time.

Most Canadians (77%) reported they never drank alone or when others were not drinking. About half the respondents reported drinking with friends, and almost half reported drinking with their spouse.

At some point in their lives, 4% of current and former drinkers (approximately 615,000 Canadians) had used a formal agency or service to help them deal with problems caused by their alcohol use.

The results of the survey also indicate that at least once in the 12 months prior to the survey, almost one in five current drinkers drove after having consumed two or more drinks.

Illicit Drugs

Cannabis (marijuana or hashish) was the most commonly used illicit drug, with 23.2% of the sample reporting use at some time in their lives. Approximately 7% of respondents were "current users."

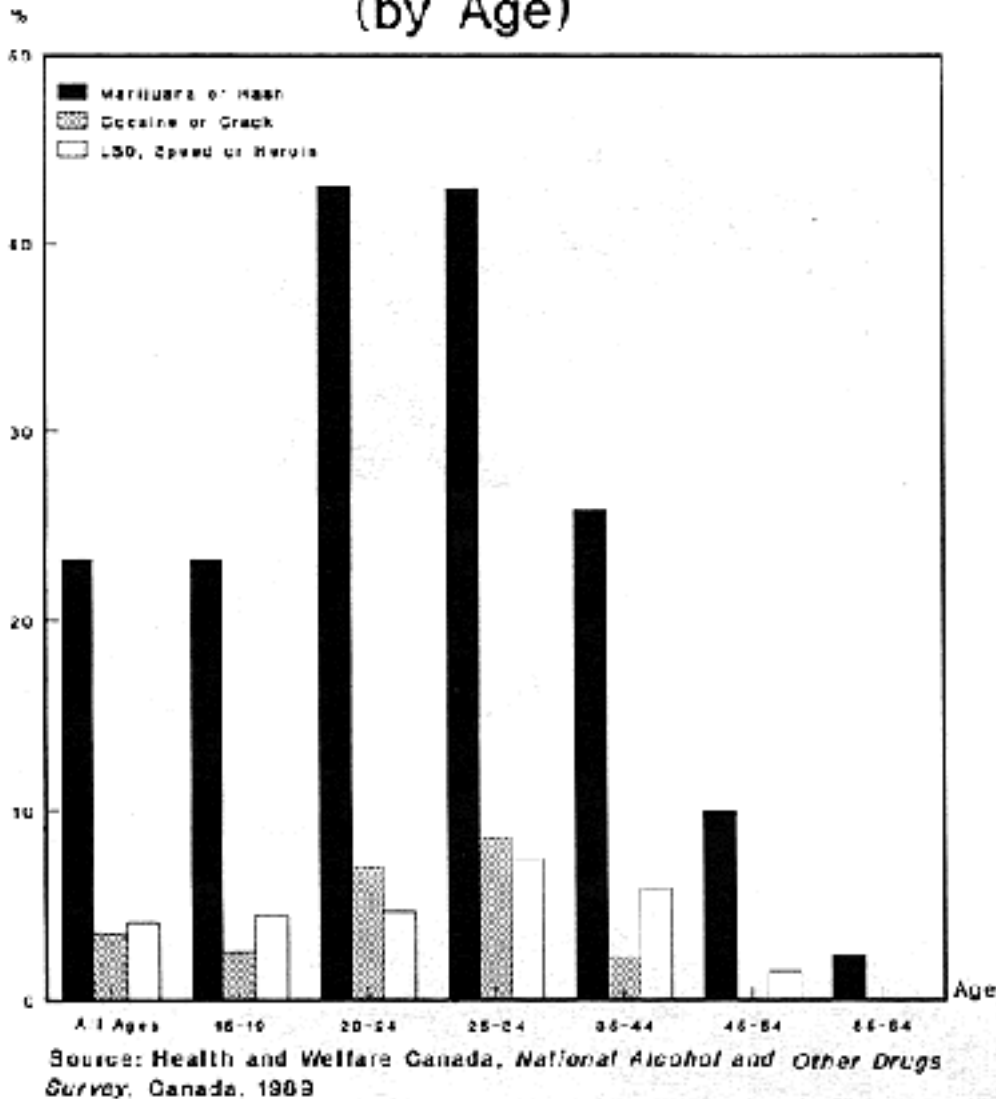
Most current cannabis users (48.6%) used it less than once a month, 24.8% used it between one and three times a month, and 22.4% used it once a week or more. Respondents between the ages of 20 and 24 reported the highest rate of current use.

Cocaine or crack had been used by 3.5% of adult Canadians at some time in their lives, while 1.4% were "current users." The survey shows that approximately 86 out of 1,000 Canadians aged 25 to 34 years and 70 out of 1,000 adults aged 20 to 24 have tried crack or cocaine at least once.

As Figure 1 indicates, approximately 43% of the 20-to-24 and 25-to-34 age groups had used marijuana or hashish in the 12 months preceding the survey. These two age groups also accounted for the highest percentages of cocaine and crack use. Data on drug use are omitted in three categories as the percentage of users was negligible.

Figure 1

Figure 1
Percentage of Population Who Had
Used Selected Illicit Drugs
(by Age)



Finally, the survey questioned respondents about their use of LSD, speed and heroin. At some point, 4.1% had used at least one of these drugs.

For each category of illicit drug studied, the proportion of former users greatly exceeds the proportion of current users. Unlike patterns of alcohol use, however, patterns of drug use in Canada have remained quite stable over the past four years, relative to previous studies.

Licit Drug Use

In the 30-day period prior to the survey, 5% of respondents used prescription narcotics such as codeine, morphine or demerol. In each age group, more women than men reported use of these medications. Survey results also indicated higher rates of use by Anglophone respondents.

Sleeping pills were reportedly used by 3.6% of the respondents during the 30-day period preceding the

survey. Francophone respondents, particularly those in Quebec, reported higher rates of sleeping pill use.

Tranquillizers were used by 3.1% of respondents during the 30-day period preceding the survey. The highest rates of use were reported by women, particularly seniors and widows, Canadians with low incomes or limited education, and Francophone respondents.

Twenty-two percent of respondents reported having a friend with a licit or illicit drug problem, 14% reported having a relative or family member with a drug problem, and 11% reported knowing a co-worker with a problem.

Canadian Public Opinion

Survey results show that the majority of respondents either were satisfied with current policies on alcohol and other drugs or would like to see increased efforts to prevent alcohol and drug problems.

A strong majority believed that there should be increased prevention and treatment activity, including broader efforts to prevent the serving of intoxicated persons, expanded drug and alcohol education programs, warning labels on alcoholic beverages and increased government advertising against drinking.

In addition, 50% of the sample believed that a person caught in possession of marijuana should receive a criminal conviction, while more than one third of the sample disagreed.

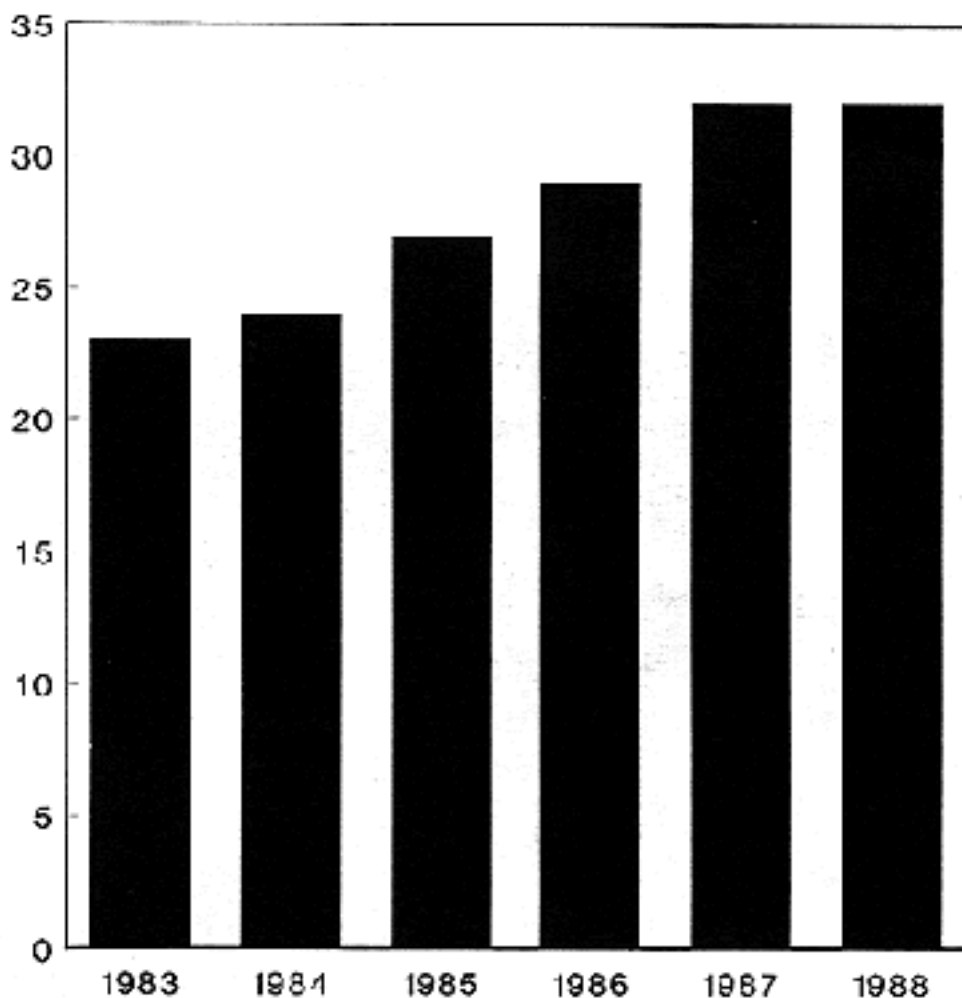
Convictions for Drug Offences

While the present survey did not ask questions about convictions, previous data obtained by Health and Welfare show that in 1985, 22,510 convictions were handed down for cannabis possession or trafficking, 2,218 for cocaine, 256 for heroin and 1,557 for hallucinogens.

Between 1980 and 1985, a decrease was noted in the number of charges related to cannabis, whereas the number of charges for cocaine-related offences increased. Figure 2 shows the rate of drug-related convictions per 100,000 people in Canada. The rate of 23 convictions per 100,000 in 1982 rose steadily to 32 convictions per 100,000 by 1986 and remained stable in the following year.

Figure 2

Figure 2
Rate of Drug-Related Convictions in
Canada Per 100,000 Population



Note: Cannabis-related convictions are not included in this figure.

Source: Health and Welfare Canada, Bureau of Dangerous Drugs, Health Protection Branch, Narcotics, Controlled and Restricted Drug Statistics 1987 and 1988

The Health and Welfare National Alcohol and Other Drugs Survey is intended to inform policy and program development throughout Canada, stimulate discussion and promote future research. While the survey provides a societal overview of drug use in Canada, this knowledge base also builds on our understanding of substance abuse within an offender population. See "A Profile of Drug Offenders" in Research in Brief for information on substance abusers in Canadian penitentiaries.

Health and Welfare Canada (1990). *National Alcohol and Other Drugs Survey (1989): Highlights Report.*