



#CanadaWeWant #leCanadaquenoussohaitons

NATIONAL YOUTH MOVEMENT | MOUVEMENT NATIONAL DES JEUNES



National Youth Leadership Team (NYLT) Conference Report



**The Students
Commission**
*Centre of Excellence for
Youth Engagement*

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Purpose

This report presents the findings of the National Youth Leadership (NYLT) theme team from the #CanadaWeWant 2021 Virtual Youth Conference. The NYLT is a national advisory group of youth aged 16-22. The NYLT provides direct advice to Health Canada on tobacco, vaping and cannabis. They also engage in year-round activities focused on raising awareness about tobacco, vaping and cannabis. At the 2021 #CanadaWeWant National Youth Conference, 11 inspiring youth participants joined NYLT members to explore substance use among the youth population. The theme team focused on reviewing statistics regarding substance misuse within child and youth populations, access to substances and reviewed resources. The theme team generated recommendations to support youth in their health journey while also focusing on exploring issues that occur in rural, remote and Northern communities in Canada.

Vision for Change – Theme Team Recommendations

Youth participants expressed the need for governments to limit youth's access to substances. All members expressed the lack of constraints to access those substances despite their age. Youth in PEI aged 14–15 explained that they had been exposed to tobacco use by their classmates since they were 12 years old. As a result, the theme team recommended the implementation of strict policies strengthening the restrictions on the access to substances for youth of all ages.

Moreover, another recommendation brought forward by the youth participants was to design specific youth resources for substance use. Whether it is an app, a website, a line to call or even a podcast. Youth expressed the need for important resources to be brought online for greater accessibility across the country.

One recommendation that was important for the youth was their desire to have speakers that have experienced substance use talk to the students. They offered the idea of putting those people on the forefront of harm reduction campaigns. Oftentimes, youth are told to comply without understanding the potential negative impacts of substance use. Likewise, they said they would be much more receptive if they heard about the risks of tobacco, cannabis and vaping from someone who has experienced its harms instead of a parent or teacher that might be biased on the issue. Moreover, they explained that learning about the issue through these trusted adult allies would allow them to talk openly about their use rather than fear punishment.

Youth participants also explained that knowledge on the issue of substance use is limited as they only hear about the risks of tobacco in their environment. The lack of available information is what prompted their recommendations for extensive work to educate youth about the effects of substance use. The procedures of having speakers discuss issues directly related to the course curriculum often takes too much time and limits the scope of their discussions to the school environment.

Furthermore, the youth participants expressed their desire to spread awareness and dismantle the normalization of substance use among teenagers and young adults. They explained how peer pressure and socialization makes it “normal” for youth to use on a regular basis.

Finally, the youth participants recommended focusing on both holding the people who provide substances to youth accountable as well as creating safer spaces where youth are comfortable speaking up and asking for help. In the context of a high school, youth participants suggested these principles could be put into action with more therapists, speakers and guidance which will support teenagers while respecting their confidentiality. Harm reduction methods need to be brought forward instead of shaming youth for adopting behaviors that they are being pressured to participate in.

The 2021 #CanadaWeWant Conference

This year's #CanadaWeWant Youth Conference was a virtual gathering that took place March 1-8 2021 (adapted for the social limitations of COVID-19). Over the week, 10 young people and adult allies from coast to coast to coast came together online to share their experiences, concerns, ideas and hopes for the #CanadaWeWant and the #CanadaWeNeed.

At the beginning of the conference, youth participants were invited to choose a theme team that interested them. They then worked in small groups through the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement's (CEYE) Young Decision Makers process. Some explored their topics quite broadly, discussing the issues and challenges that young people face and identifying possible solutions. Other teams were tasked with working directly on specific questions or on various creative products and deliverables that were brought to them by different organizations or government departments who were eager to hear directly from the youth. By the end of the week, all theme teams arrived at a set of recommendations that would help achieve the #CanadaWeWant. These recommendations were presented at the virtual National Showcase Event hosted by RBC's Future Launch Strategy to an audience of community stakeholders, policy makers and decision makers. All teams also created a theme team report, such as this one, to present their process and contextualize their recommendations.

Dream Tree

The Dream Tree is a tool that is used to synthesize young people's ideas into a youth-friendly logic model for a given topic. When building a Dream Tree, the roots represent the foundation: the inputs, resources and values that are needed to work towards a goal. The trunk of the tree represents the activities that are needed, while the leaves are the outputs and indicators highlighting what we will see as a result of the activities. The fruit represents the desired outcomes (the dream!). The visual below represents the Dream Tree that the theme team worked on.

#CANADA WE WANT



Fruit: the change we want to see (our dream)

- More outreach and education for more rural communities because major cities have more access than other regions.
- People understanding that drugs are harmful, changing the narrative.

Leaves: outputs & indicators (how we know it's working)

- Attitudes and change in how people are acting.
- Check attendances, see how they are doing.
- Possible change in friend groups.
- Youth are able to intervene and educate others on substance usage
- Having hundreds of youths engaging in workshops across the country (shows their interest in the issue)

Trunk: activities (what we need to do)

- People visiting rural communities in-need, giving presentations and offering one-on-one sessions.
- More social media presence, more posts about the dangers, having more spaces to share those resources.
- More networks and supports to be created.
- Bring more youth into schools.
- Share information on the risks of vaping and tobacco use.
- Incorporate substance use into the curriculum.
- Influencer impact through social media (makes a bigger impact than adults/teachers).
- Podcasts that are attractive to youth; relatable stories.
- Contact school boards to have them share our message to students

Leaves: outputs & indicators (how we know it's working)

- School attendance increase.
- Student grades improving.
- Decrease in substance usage (getting closer to 5% by 2035)
- New policies are implemented to limit and reduce harm of substance usage ex: ban on flavors
- Increase in positive attitudes towards harm reduction methods for youth (tracked through social media)

ROOTS: INPUTS (RESOURCES) AND VALUES

- Harm reduction kits being given out, having former users speak to people.
- Counsellors, more resources, having younger people intervene.
- Hiring staff who are Indigenous and/or of color to reach out to youth who belong in minority groups since they are disproportionately affected
- Include former users in discussion about substance usage and harm reduction
- Training of staff and teachers from a harm reduction approach (inclusive manner)

Summary of Discussions

The theme team tracked the major parts of their process each day of the conference. Their team was made up of 11 participants aged 16-25 from across Canada. The theme team sessions involved discussions on substance use among young people. The NYLT theme team discussed facts around substance use and young people in Canada based on demographics, ethnicity, usage characteristics and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on use.

Studying the Issue

The theme team ensured that for their first day of the conference they were well-prepared with information on youth substance use. As an activity, youth were given the opportunity to share relevant information that they were aware of in regard to vaping, smoking and substance misuse. Through this, the theme team learned that Saskatchewan's youth are using at high rates due to easier access: eight percent of youth are smoking regularly, vape juice flavors are being banned in some provinces, and much more (Government of Canada).

Discussing the Issue

The theme team participated in a data party to bring together results from a survey they conducted with individuals across Canada. The survey explored individual substance use, the effects of the pandemic on substance use, the prevalence of vaping/tobacco in school, and the differences in substance use across different elements of diversity, ages, genders, and living situations. The theme team then opened up a discussion to receive participant comments about what they learned in the data party. Youth participants were able to share personal experiences on how substance misuse can be found within their communities, schools, and peer groups. The sessions and data party took place on an online platform where youth participants could communicate and discuss their theme topic.

The theme team participated in a mural activity where they asked youth what issues they noticed about substance use. They then had youth categorize the issues and come up with potential resources. The youth addressed that Prince Edward Island (PEI), in particular, faces issues with access to substances. For example, youth believed that they could easily stumble upon people who use and will also pressure them into using. The theme team also discussed possible solutions, which included better education, the normalization of substance use, discussions of health risks, and face-to-face interventions. Youth participants also highlighted the presence of younger influencers as a potential solution to youth substance use. They believed that youth would be more likely to take information seriously if it was shared by youth with similar experiences as opposed to parents, adults, and teachers presenting this information in a lecture format. Using the mural activity¹ got other youth involved in the conference to be more hands on with understanding and stopping youth substance use.

¹ See Annex I

Deciding the Issue

Youth participants identified key themes on Day 6 of the conference. Below is a summary of these themes:

1. Access to substance is very easy.
2. Communities that are remote do not have the necessary education for youth about substance use.
3. Peer pressure pushes students to use substances and the ones who are peer pressuring others also have the access (so it becomes a loop of more and more students joining).
4. Substances are becoming more affordable.
5. Normalization of substances is occurring.
6. Youth don't have the resources needed to quit (made for adults, don't have the support systems needed, and not enough resources).
7. People who sell substances to kids are not held accountable for their actions.
8. Youth don't feel comfortable enough to come out and speak (they are too afraid of getting in trouble).

"My school in Quebec never shared the risks of vaping."

– Youth Participant

Informing Decision Makers

The National Youth Leadership Team covered many topics that were of importance to them. They specifically focused on getting more education to rural and remote communities because bigger cities have more access to education on substance use and prevention than other areas do. They also wanted to help youth to understand how harmful substances are for them, ensure that youth are educated on the potential health risks that come with using, and change the narrative of substance use. It was important for them that there is proper support and guidance for youth that are users because most of the resources about substance use is specifically directed towards adults. They believe that both adults and youth who have struggled with substance use or abuse should talk to youth to help them avoid using. They also believe that making substances less accessible is crucial because currently many substances are very easily accessible to youth.

"I think many people in my age group use substances to be more popular."

- Youth Participant

"If I had a friend tell me the risks, it would impact me more than hearing a parent or teacher teaching me the health risks associated to it."

– Youth Participant

"Youth are intelligent, aware and capable of asking for help. They just want to be heard."

Issues Surrounding Access & Resources

Access:

- Too easily accessible
- Peer Pressure
- High levels of peer influence

Resources:

- Not enough resources to help with substance misuse.
- Youth are too anxious to discuss their addiction.
- Need for a better and longer curriculum.
- Social media presence – having a beneficial influencer on more youth platforms.
- Change the narrative/stereotypes surrounding substance abuse to make youth feel more comfortable reaching out.
- Discussion of health risks.

KEY POINTS:

- Youth gained new learning from their experiences on the theme team, as well as the ability to share facts regarding vaping to educate their fellow youth participants.
- Youth recognize that substances are too easily accessible to their age group, and that peer pressure to start using is prevalent within youth.
- Get more education to rural and remote communities who lack resources.
- Peer pressure pushes students to use substances and the ones who are peer pressuring others also have the access.
- Substance use is being normalized.
- Youth need to feel more comfortable with opening up and saying that they need help.
- There needs to be more resources for youth rather than adults.

Guiding Lenses

The #CanadaWeWant Conference uses four guiding lenses to explore conference topics and to frame recommendations. These lenses were selected based on recurring themes that emerged during previous youth conferences and encourage young people to take an intersectional approach to understanding and tackling their topic area. The four guiding lenses are:

1. Rural and Remote Experience
2. Addressing Structural Racism
3. Truth Leading to Reconciliation
4. Children's Rights

The following summarizes young people's experiences and reflections related to exploring their topic area through these lenses.

Rural, Remote and Northern Communities

Rural, remote and Northern Communities often experience higher levels of poverty and access to resources is challenging. The youth participants in rural areas of PEI corroborated this point by explaining how their local communities struggled more because of their geographical location. The youth participants explained that their access to resources was limited as well as the support needed in their daily life for family, school, and community environment.

Youth participants felt that there were many issues related to access of substances in their areas. Some of the issues discussed among the theme team included how substances are too easily accessible to youth and how they can easily stumble upon people who will push them into starting to use. It was agreed that there are not enough resources to help youth manage substance use in Canada and that the issue is even more pressing in rural, remote and Northern areas.

The theme team mentioned that there should be more research and educational programs on substance use in place for rural, remote and Northern communities. This will allow all children and youth to learn the effects associated with substance use and how to get help when needed. Having programs and educators visit those remote communities may be beneficial so that they are not left behind.

Addressing Structural Racism

During the conference, youth participants noted that Indigenous people as well as racialized groups might suffer more from substance misuse because of the lack of social support that they receive because of structural racism. Indeed, the youth participants discussed how substance use in some remote Indigenous communities was prominent and how they need more resources to tackle the issue.

Youth participants addressed the idea that having people visit those communities in need of support and resources may be helpful. Giving presentations and offering one-on-one sessions to the youth in these communities can promote positive social supports and connections. This is important to the NYLT as youth may not want to talk about substance use with others or feel anxious or scared of being exposed.

Truth Leading to Reconciliation

The truth and reconciliation lens was observed and explored throughout the conference and in the discussions raised by the NYLT theme team. Truth and reconciliation is the process by which the government addresses the oppression experienced by Indigenous people as well as redressing the legacy of residential schools. It includes calls to actions in order to attain an eventual reconciliation.

The theme team noted how Indigenous people were a target group that used substances more than others. There was a dialogue acknowledging that smoking tobacco was more predominant among the group as a result of the treatment they have received from provincial and federal governments. Indeed, the 18th call to action demands recognition of the consequences of governmental policies on Indigenous people as well as a need for more resources to ensure their health. Similarly, the NYLT theme team wished that more resources were available to Indigenous people in order to preserve their health, both physical and mental.

Moreover, when it came to discussing substance use among Indigenous youth, the team realized the intricate link between substance use and the first call to action on child welfare. Indeed, it has been noted that social workers and other authority figures should be well-trained in order to cater to the needs of youth when it comes to substance use. Putting an emphasis on harm reduction as well as having employees in schools and government who are Indigenous and knowledgeable on the issue was discussed by the theme team.

The 6th call to action aimed at reducing education gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada has been a key angle for the discussions explored by youth participants. Indeed, they pointed out how Indigenous youth on reserves and in rural areas did not receive as many tools or resources on substance use. Furthermore, they did not receive the same education on the harms of tobacco or cannabis use in their schools, which would also account for the higher numbers among their group. Thus, the youth participants explained that educating Indigenous youth equally would allow them to better understand the risks of substance use.

Children's Rights

As the conference went by, youth participants primarily looked at their theme through the lens of children's rights. As a matter of fact, the youth who chose the NYLT joined this group because the issue was important to them. Giving a space for youth to speak on issues that are important to them falls under this lens because of the importance attributed to youth's voices in Article 13, which stipulates the importance of freedom of expression as well as the freedom to seek and receive information on issues that are important to youth. Consequently, the existence itself of a space for youth to speak on this issue is related to their rights and the significance of youth voices on concerns that affect them directly.

Additionally, the convention places much emphasis on children's "needs to special safeguards and care", which was emphasized during the conference as youth thought of ways to support harm reduction methods as well as find supplementary resources in order to ensure the safety of children. Indeed, their work as a theme team revolved around finding ways to reduce substance use and improve their lifestyle and living conditions. Consequently, the NYLT theme team's aim to spread awareness on the issue and protect the health of youth who use is directly linked to the convention's principle of "improving the living conditions of children". Not only did youth actively work at finding viable solutions to reduce substance use but the convention's principles of protecting youth were brought forward by the youth themselves. Similarly, the work that has been accomplished by the youth participants is intricately linked to Article 3 of the convention, which states that "all actions concerning children should be focused on preserving their best interests". Here, the participants gave their input in order to ensure that the methods chosen to solve the issue were tailored to their interests.

Conclusion

Throughout the conference the youth participants expressed the importance of our topic and the national youth leadership team. They believe that it is vital to discuss the problems that come of substance use and the different experiences that youth face when they are using substances or when they are at risk of starting these bad habits. This way we can figure out ways to help the youth in recovery and implement prevention plans.

ANNEX I: Mural Activity of NYLT Theme Team

