

A qualitative research study exploring how young people perceive and experience substance use services in British Columbia, Canada

Ms. Roxanne Turuba (Canada), Ms. Anurada Amarasekera (Canada), Ms. Amanda Madeleine Howard (Canada), Mrs. Corinne Tallon (Canada), Dr. Kirsten Marchand (Canada), Dr. Skye Barbic (Canada)

Introduction

Substance use among youth is troublesome given the increasing risk of harms associated. Although youth have different treatment needs compared to adults, evidence-based services and treatments have been largely designed based on adult studies and lack validation from youth. Even though substance use services are largely underutilized among youth, few studies have explored young people's help-seeking behaviours to address substance use concerns.

Objectives

To address this gap, this qualitative research study explored how youth perceive and experience substance use services in British Columbia (BC), Canada.

Approach/Methods

We applied youth participatory action research (YPAR) methods by partnering with 14 youth with lived/living experience of substance use from across the BC to inform the research process and materials. Three advisory members were hired as youth research assistants to support further research activities including data collection, analysis, and the dissemination of the findings. An initial focus group (n=3) and qualitative interviews (n=27) were conducted with youth (ages 12-24) who have lived and/or living experience of substance use (alcohol, cannabis, and/or illicit substances) and live in BC. The discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using an inductive approach.

Results

Young people's perceptions and experiences revolved around 3 main themes specific to the phase of service interaction they described: Prevention/Early intervention, where youth described feeling unworthy of support; Service accessibility, where youth encountered many barriers to finding relevant substance use services and information; and Service delivery, where youth highlighted the importance of meeting them where they are at, including supporting those with milder treatment needs by employing a holistic approach.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest a clear need to prioritize substance use prevention and early interventions specifically targeting youth. The lack of integration and capacity among service providers to provide substance use services

implies that youth with milder treatment needs often do not have access to adequate support to address concerns before they are in crisis. These findings call for a more integrated youth-centred approach to address the multifarious concerns linked to young people's substance use and service outcomes and experiences. Involving youth and peers with lived and/or living experience in co-designing and co-delivering such programs is crucial to ensure their relevance and credibility among youth.

