

Characterizing patterns of substance use among youth accessing integrated youth services for mental health and substance use in Canada

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Introduction

Substance use among youth (ages 12-24 years) is a global health priority. Substance use initiation peaks during adolescence, interferes with key developmental milestones, and increases the risk of health and social harms. Youth substance use patterns are influenced by current social norms and substance availability, thus it is crucial to continuously monitor their substance use patterns. This is essential to inform integrated youth services (IYS), which provide interdisciplinary mental health and substance use interventions in youth-centered environments.

Objectives

This study aims to: (1) characterize substance use patterns among youth (12-24) accessing IYS; and (2) examine the relationship between social determinants of health and harmful substance use patterns.

Approach/Methods

The analytic sample includes n=8341 youth accessing IYS through Foundry in British Columbia (Canada) who completed self-reported questions regarding current substance use, including substance type: alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, illicit substances. Latent class analysis will be used to identify groups with similar patterns of substance use, their prevalence, and the characteristics that indicate group membership. Explanatory variable selection will be guided by the social determinants of health (e.g., gender, socio-economic status, social support, physical environment) and model selection will be based on empirical criteria and interpretability.

Results

The mean age of youth in the analytic sample was 20.02 (standard deviation=3.49), and 57% self-identified as a woman (33% man; 9% gender diverse; 1% preferred not to answer). Sixty percent of youth were current students, with high school being the highest level of education completed for 30% of youth, and 40% currently engaged in paid employment. Regular/daily use of alcohol, cannabis, and tobacco was reported by 6%, 22%, and 21% of youth, respectively. The most frequently reported illicit substance types currently used were hallucinogens (5%), cocaine (4%), sedatives (4%), painkillers (3%), and ecstasy (3%). Latent class analyses are in progress and will report the number and typology of latent classes (e.g., 'harmful polysubstance use class' may denote youth with high probability of using all substance types), the probabilities of latent class membership and the regression effects of social determinants of health on latent class membership.

Conclusion

This study will identify current patterns of youth substance use and the factors associated with harmful substance use patterns. These findings are critical to inform strategies for substance use interventions, including prevention, early intervention, and treatment, that could be applied across the growing network of international IYS settings.

