

The ChronicleHerald

Self-isolation during COVID-19 pandemic may contribute to heavier cannabis use, Dalhousie study finds

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August 28, 2020



Dalhousie professor Dr. Simon Sherry says the increase in cannabis use is an unintended consequence of COVID-19 mitigation efforts and it should be addressed by the government. - Ryan Taplin

HALIFAX, N.S. — New research from Dalhousie University has found that, on average, participants who engaged in strict self-isolation at the onset of the pandemic consumed 20 per cent more cannabis compared to those who didn't.

The study was led by doctoral student Sara Bartel and her supervisors Simon Sherry, and Sherry Stewart, who are researchers at the university's department of psychology and neuroscience.

The researchers also found that on average people who consumed cannabis to cope with feelings of depression used 30 per cent more cannabis than those who had other motives.

"The self-isolation phase of the pandemic created conditions very much conducive to the use or misuse of substances," said Sherry.

He added that during that time, many people were dealing with financial stressors, anxiety, and uncertainty on top of feelings of loneliness brought by self-isolation.

"Collectively, these circumstances lend themselves to the use and misuse of ... cannabis," he said.

The study included 70 individuals between the ages of 19 and 25 years old. Participants filled an online survey about their substance use and adherence to self-isolation between March 23 and June 5, after Nova Scotia went into a state of emergency in response to COVID-19.

The researchers defined self-isolation in the study as "staying indoors and completely avoiding contact with other people outside of your home."

Although the province advised everyone to stay home unless there was an essential reason at the onset of the pandemic, research suggests that people in the age group involved in this study are less likely to comply with these measures.

As expected, the study found about half of participants reported fully engaging in voluntary or mandatory self-isolation. Those people used 20 per cent more cannabis than participants who complied with the measures.

"In other words, if you were to follow public health measures in a really strict way and isolate in a disciplined manner, we would suggest from our research that you were more likely to have used cannabis," said Sherry.

Increased use is 'alarming'

Participants were also involved in an ongoing Canadian longitudinal study on substance use where information about their cannabis use was collected about four months before the onset of the pandemic.

Sherry said comparing the data collected before and after the pandemic suggests participants who adhered to self-isolation used more cannabis than they did before the pandemic.

"Our research has the advantage of studying people at two points in time," said Sherry. "This type of research is rare. A lot of our understanding of COVID-19 comes from cross-sectional data that provides a single snapshot of what happened."

The findings are especially noteworthy since Nova Scotia has the highest percentage of cannabis users in Canada. According to Statistics Canada data from late 2019, 27.5 per cent of people surveyed in Nova Scotia used Cannabis at the time.

An overview of retail sales at cannabis stores across Canada between October 2018 and September 2019 showed Nova Scotia had the third highest sales per capita in the country at \$68 average sales per person.

"It's alarming that in the context of already heavy cannabis use, we have a situation where Nova Scotians are using even more cannabis," said Sherry.

The study has limitations including its reliance on the participants to self-report. Sherry said some people may report they were strictly self-isolating because they didn't want to be called out.

"That said, we offered our participants both confidentiality and anonymity and under those conditions you tend to get more truthful reporting."

The participants were predominantly Caucasian young adults and they had to have used both alcohol and cannabis to be included in the study. The small homogenous sample makes it difficult to draw broad conclusions about the larger population.

But the findings still suggest that COVID-19 mitigation efforts are having serious negative unintended consequences, said Sherry.

"There are policy implications that should correspond with that, including greater attention being paid to individuals with mental health problems."

For example, the government should give more support to the mental health crisis line, which has seen a 33 per cent increase in calls on average throughout the pandemic.

"With the second wave of the pandemic predicted to be upon us soon enough, we should be strengthening resources committed to mental health," said Sherry. "And certainly, we need more funding for addiction services."

Nebal Snan is a local journalism initiative reporter, a position funded by the federal government.