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Statistics Canada says Nova Scotians feeling less healthy

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The number of Nova Scotians who don't feel very healthy appears to be on the rise.

In a 2018 Statistics Canada community health survey, 128,000 people characterized their health as fair or poor, compared to 116,000 in the previous year. And the number of Nova Scotians who felt they were in very good or excellent health dropped from 494,300 to 474,000.

Meanwhile the number of Nova Scotians who described their mental health as fair or poor increased in 2018.

Those stats don't surprise to clinical psychologist Dr. Simon Sherry. He attributes our health problems to lifestyle factors and the province's mishandling of health policy.

"I think more so than many other provinces, Nova Scotians engage in health-compromising behaviours such as excessive cannabis use or excessive alcohol use. In some ways, Nova Scotians love life a bit too much," said Sherry, who's also a professor and director of clinical training at Dalhousie University

Sherry pointed to standardized surveys of hospitalization rates and binge drinking behaviours that indicate Nova Scotia has "an entrenched problem" with alcohol.

As for cannabis, the psychologist said Nova Scotia is at an interesting turning point given legalization. "We could go down a path to the same way we treat alcohol, which is for the most part is to accept, encourage and promote it," he said. Or we could treat cannabis much like cigarettes, "where we're going to actively discourage it, we're going to heavily tax it, we're going to look at it through the lens of health promotion."

Sherry, who has previously criticized provincial health policies and programs, particularly around mental health, isn't holding his breath on that second option.

"Our province hasn't looked at cannabis, gambling and alcohol through the health promotion lens," he said. "They've looked at it through the lens of generating income."

The Health Department passed along a request for comment to the Finance and Treasury Department, which is responsible for gaming and the Nova Scotia Liquor Corporation.

"Decisions the province makes around alcohol, cannabis, and gaming are always framed around social responsibility," said departmental spokesman Gary Andrea in an email.

"And our approach to these items does not differ from that of other provinces. Social responsibility is at the core of the work of the Nova Scotia Liquor Corporation and the Nova Scotia Gaming Corporation do – this includes ensuring all federal and provincial regulations are followed, promoting safe choices, and training staff so information is available to customers at point-of-sale and service can be denied when required.

Regarding cannabis, he said health and safety is the province's No. 1 priority.

"The decisions we've made and the laws we have in place aim to ensure the sale of cannabis is tightly regulated. The province has also invested in public education and awareness efforts that promote safe choices. Per federal law, there is no promotion of cannabis."

While we may be feeling more unhealthy, perhaps surprisingly, fewer Nova Scotians told StatCan they're under a lot of stress this time around. (There's a drop in national numbers as well).

In 2017, 150,200 Nova Scotians said their life stress was "most days quite a bit or extremely stressful." The most recent number dipped to 141,500.

"When you talk about stress of the sort that's being reported on here, you're talking about one key aspect of stress, and this is perceived stress," Sherry noted. "And perceiving yourself to be hassled and overloaded and burdened is the important part of stress. But it's only the cognitive part of stress, the part of stress that occurs in terms of what you think and what you feel. It's only one indicator."

The other one is the physical markers in the body such as elevated cortisol and adrenaline levels, he said. If unchecked, this kind of natural stress response can lead to serious problems with your heart, digestive tract and other body systems.