

How a lot of parents are dealing with homeschooling: by drinking more booze and smoking more dope

“Our brain has prepared us, through millions of years of evolution, to fear coronavirus but not Corona beer,” says Dalhousie researcher, highlighting the long-term health effects of increased alcohol consumption.

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Photo: a still from Sarah Shook’s “Dwight Yoakam” video.

New research suggests mandatory homeschooling during the pandemic led to increased alcohol consumption among Canadian parents.

The finding is outlined in a research paper titled ‘Parenting through a pandemic: Mental health and substance use consequences of mandated homeschooling.’

The paper was recently accepted for publication in the journal ‘Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice.’ Its authors include Dalhousie University researchers Helen Deacon, Sherry Stewart, and Simon Sherry.



“This is a finding that I think would be very resonant with many homeschooling parents (forced to homeschool due to COVID-19),” Sherry, who’s also a practicing clinical psychologist, said in an interview.

“During the pandemic, people who were more or less required to participate in home schooling reported not only drinking more, but drinking more to cope.”

The authors found that depending on the province, city, or even individual school, mandatory homeschooling ushered in by lockdowns often came with minimal support from the educational system. This was while many parents were also struggling with the challenges of working from home.

“There were significantly lower levels of optimism and greater use of cannabis to cope and marginally higher use of alcohol to cope in couples who were vs. were not homeschooling,” the authors note in the abstract. “These levels were higher than pre-pandemic norms.”

Sherry said the finding is another stark reminder that the virus that causes COVID-19 isn’t the only thing we need to fear.

While some parents may have turned to alcohol for its stress or anxiety-reducing properties, he said it’s an ineffective and “risky” way to try and cope.

“We find that people who drink in an effort to cope actually escalate to more problematic patterns of the use of a substance like alcohol,” he said.

One parent told the Halifax Examiner that she found herself turning to alcohol “regularly each night” amid the stresses of trying to juggle working from home and helping her children manage their online school work last year. We’ve agreed not to disclose her name to protect her privacy and that of her children.

“I remembered thinking back to how people used to say ‘you’re going to drive me to drink,’ and thinking that that was me. The pandemic and the stress of everything all at once sort of seemed to drive me to drink wine. A lot of wine,” she recalled. “I knew it wasn’t the best idea but it was what I had at the time. Looking back it wasn’t a good choice. But since they’ve been back to school I scaled way back.”

Almost 50% of Nova Scotians turned to alcohol and cannabis more frequently during lockdown

Sherry has been sounding the alarm about the dangers of increased alcohol consumption during the pandemic since it began. He said the lack of boundaries between work and home life, weekday and weekend, have been “very conducive” to more people drinking more often.

“It’s eroded a lot of the markers we had for where alcohol was and was not appropriate,” he said.

While we instinctively fear viruses and pandemics, Sherry believes we’re losing sight of how longer term lifestyle choices are “major killers” of Canadians. He said this is in part due to what he describes as “evolutionarily shaped blindspots.”

“I think fear and disgust regarding COVID-19 are hardwired into us. But that’s not the case for diseases and problems in the longer term that relate to lifestyle choices... We should fear drinking and smoking at least as much as COVID-19, but we don’t,” Sherry said.

“Our brain has prepared us, through millions of years of evolution, to fear coronavirus but not Corona beer... We have this great fear of COVID-19 occurring, but we casually drink alcohol and smoke cannabis.”

Sherry said his latest research — currently undergoing peer review — found that close to 50% of Nova Scotians reported using alcohol or cannabis more frequently during the lockdown phase of the pandemic. In addition, 30% reported increases in the quantity (amount) of alcohol or cannabis they were consuming.

“That’s quite meaningful. It’s also the case, though, that the majority of people reported that their consumption had gone unchanged,” he said.

“But if you piece together our data with other data available throughout Canada or throughout North America, you can see that there are shifts occurring in terms of a meaningful subset of the population drinking more or using more cannabis.”

Sherry calls this the “COVID-19 paradox,” explaining that people are willing to take extreme measures to protect themselves from the virus while also engaging in behaviours that compromise their health and shorten their lives. He said alcohol disrupts the immune system and undermines the body’s defences against infection, while cannabis can impair immune system functioning and also impact lung health.

“During a pandemic that is known to involve a virus that attacks your lungs it seems ill-advised to be putting numerous burning chemicals and fine particles into your lungs,” he said.

“Along the same lines, alcohol is an enormously serious problem in Canada. We lose an estimated 18,000 people per year due to alcohol attributable death. That’s a staggering number. We also have an estimated 90,000 hospitalizations owing to alcohol every year.”

While COVID-19 garners all the attention because of its immediate impact, Sherry said we've "normalized" illness and death due to alcohol because the negative consequences are often far downstream.

Pandemic drinking could have 'serious downstream consequences'

Sherry said he "absolutely" has grave concerns that increased rates of alcohol consumption during the pandemic will have long lasting repercussions that will negatively impact Nova Scotians going forward.

He said maintaining sobriety amid the stresses, pressures, and ongoing changes of the pandemic puts many people at risk of relapsing. Similarly, he worries that people considered at-risk (drinking in problematic ways) are more at risk of transitioning to a full-blown alcohol use disorder.

"Alcohol is classified in Canada for what you call a Class 1 carcinogen, and so it's carcinogenic at the same level as tobacco and asbestos," Sherry said.

"So if you have a population-wide increase in the consumption of levels of alcohol, that's going to have serious downstream consequences in terms of alcohol attributable hospitalizations and deaths."

Resources for Nova Scotians seeking help with an addiction:

Nova Scotia Health breaks down mental health and addictions services by location and type [here](#)

The province's mental health and addictions team takes calls from people struggling with mental health or addiction concerns Monday to Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at 1-855-922-1122

Nova Scotia post-secondary students can access free, confidential talk or text support through [Good2Talk](#)

The provincial mental health and addictions crisis line is also available 24/7 at 1-888-429-8167