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Candid answers on alcohol, drug and gambling behaviour: AADAC youth survey results to guide programs

Edmonton...The Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC) has released findings from a recent province-wide survey. *The Alberta Youth Experience Survey 2002* measured substance use and gambling activity among youth in grades 7-12. The survey also examined key risk and protective factors associated with substance and gambling involvement.

The survey shows that current Alberta adolescent substance use and gambling participation follows typical North American patterns but is lower, in most cases, than in the other Canadian jurisdictions of Ontario and Nova Scotia. The research confirms that positive relationships with friends, family and school are key protective factors influencing Alberta youth to lead healthier lives, free from substance and gambling abuse.

“We see rates that are consistent with other provinces concerning involvement with alcohol, tobacco, other drugs and gambling. We also see patterns that illustrate environments such as the home and community play a significant protective role in a child’s life,” said Art Dyer, AADAC’s research manager.

While over half of adolescents (56%) drank alcohol at least once in the past 12 months, most adolescents did not smoke, use marijuana and other drugs, nor did they gamble in the year before taking the survey. A minority of adolescents used marijuana (27%), smoked cigarettes (16%), used magic mushrooms or mescaline (10%), played Scratch Tabs (31%), played cards for money with friends (23%) bet on sports with friends (21%) or played bingo (9.5%). In all cases except for the use of inhalants, adolescents in grades 10-12 were more likely to use substances or gamble than were adolescents in grades 7-9. Inhalant use was more common among adolescents in grades 7-9 (8%) than among adolescents in grades 10-12 (4%).

A question frequently asked is: “are alcohol, drug and gambling problems among Alberta youth getting better or worse?” This initial Alberta Youth Experience Survey establishes a benchmark of current, relevant Alberta data. Future editions of the survey will allow AADAC to answer the question about trends with considerable accuracy.

“AADAC’s goal was to establish a solid point of reference in support of program development. We are committed to providing parents, schools and communities with accurate information in order to help kids grow up healthy,” Dyer added.

The survey also investigated a variety of factors, which may have an association with alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and gambling involvement. These were separated into “risk” and “protective” categories such as: individual characteristics, community support and peer and family relationships. The top protective factors were parental monitoring, good social skills, availability of and participation in positive social activities, and good school marks. The top risk factors included age of user, peer risk behaviours, family history of use, family discord and school disconnection.

Dyer emphasized, “We are confident that the results will have significant value for those involved with youth.” Surveys were completed anonymously and neither the consultant conducting the research nor AADAC are aware of the names of any student who participated. Results have been compiled for large geographic areas and groups to further ensure confidentiality. As well, the project was approved by an independent ethical review board prior to its commencement.

Representatives from Alberta Government departments and school boards guided this project. The research design was based on the Ontario Student Drug Use Survey, which has been conducted every other year since 1968.

“Other government departments, schools and community agencies and organizations associated with Alberta youth will also use the findings of this study to reaffirm or redesign programming responses in support of young Albertans and their families,” Dyer concluded.

The survey results affirm the strength-based approach employed in AADAC’s prevention and treatment programs. AADAC, in collaboration with Alberta Learning and other stakeholders, is also responding by introducing a comprehensive new school strategy with a focus on grades 4,7,9 and 11, and the development of new curriculum-aligned classroom resources. Resources for grades 4,7 and 9 are now available; grade 11 resources will be ready in fall 2003.

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For further information, contact:

Art Dyer, Manager – Research
AADAC
Phone: (780) 422-1249

Korey Cherneski, Communications
AADAC
Phone: (780) 415-1227

Gordon Ronning, Communications
AADAC
Phone: (780) 427-6704

To call toll-free from anywhere in Alberta: 310-0000

Note to Editors:

A technical report containing the survey results is available at www.aadac.com