

Youth drivers survey first step to preventing youth from driving under cannabis influence

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While young people may be aware of the dangers of drinking and driving, a recent study by a Western Ph.D. student shows there's work to be done to educate them on the risks of driving under the influence of

cannabis (DUIC).

Despite growing evidence that DUIC increases the risk of collisions, the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction reports youth ages 15 to 25 are more than twice as likely to drive under the influence of cannabis than older Canadians. Yet little is known about the determinants driving the behaviour.

Robert Colonna, BHSc,'17, MSC,'19, a second year Ph.D. student in [health promotion](#), is working to change that, studying the factors causing youth to drive high to help inform effective prevention and intervention efforts.

Colonna began studying the area while starting his master's degree in 2017, one year before Canada legalized recreational marijuana. His early work laid the foundation for his current Ph.D. research and a nationally funded study.

As a member of occupational therapy professor Liliana Alvarez's i-Mobile Driving Research Lab, Colonna first became interested in cannabis use and [road safety](#) by observing the culture around him and knowing people who drove impaired.

"It had me wondering why people use cannabis and drive," Colonna said. "With it becoming legalized in 2018, it was the perfect opportunity to explore the reasons and the risks."

First of its kind

Phase one of Colonna's master's research involved designing the Youth Cannabis and Driving Survey, which was recently published in the *Journal of Safety Research*, a joint publication of the U.S. National Safety Council. Colonna's survey was the first its kind, focusing

specifically on Ontario youth drivers (aged 18-24) and cannabis.

"Most surveys focus on tobacco and alcohol use among the general population, without a focus on cannabis or cannabis-impaired driving, but this survey was unique and designed with analysis in mind, and really crafted specifically toward youth driving high and the factors predicting that behaviour," Colonna said.

Colonna recruited participants through Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, and with help from large organizations such as Parachute Canada and Young Drivers of Canada.

Phase two of the project involved focus groups, where youth spoke candidly about driving under the influence of cannabis.

Determinants of driving high

Colonna found past cannabis use and DUIC intention and experiences, knowledge and credulity of the law, attitudes toward DUIC and social control all to be determinants in driving high.

"If people have driven under the influence of cannabis in the past, they are at a greater risk of doing so in the future," Colonna said. "Those who perceive they wouldn't receive penalties and those who think it's not wrong to drive high are at a greater risk of doing it, and youth who think there's a low risk of getting in an accident show a greater chance of driving high in the future."

Sobering results

Colonna's sample showed 70 percent of the respondents used cannabis, and reported previously driving under the influence of cannabis.

Research coming out of the U.S. shows similar results.

However, Colonna was most struck by the fact that, "[youth](#) were really unaware of the risks of driving high—both legally and in terms of collisions and the danger it poses to themselves or others."

Going national

Colonna said response from the survey and focus groups help illustrate the need for more research and preventative efforts to reduce the number of current cannabis users driving high, and prevent new cannabis users from driving high in the future.

His study laid the foundation for a Canadian Health Institute Research (CHIR) grant to fund a nationwide survey, targeting provinces where there's higher risk for cannabis-impaired driving.

"That will provide us with a lot more data to build effective preventative efforts," Colonna said.

As part of his Ph.D. candidacy exam, Colonna is currently doing a rapid review of different interventions used in the past to identify characteristics that might have importance in driving high intervention. He is also conducting a Delphi study, where experts in impaired driving are ranking those characteristics and identifying which ones to develop as an intervention strategy. Young cannabis users are being asked to do the same, to see how their opinions contrast with those of the experts and build mobile technology interventions based on that.

The potential implications and applications are exciting for Colonna, who is most interested in prevention, harm reduction and public safety.

"We need to educate people and use better messaging to promote safe

cannabis use. I think studies like these are going to help inform those efforts."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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