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Opinion | Greater public education is needed around high potency cannabis

Do young people and their families understand the health risks?

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Cannabis-using teens are 11 times more likely to develop a psychotic disorder than teens who don't use cannabis, Vaughan Dowie writes.

Richard Vogel/The Associated Press file photo

By Vaughan Dowie

Vaughan Dowie is CEO of Pine River Institute, an Ontario live-in treatment centre for youth struggling with addictive behaviours and other mental health issues.

It's been eight years since Ottawa legalized recreational cannabis use, with a pillar promise to protect youth.

But instead of that we're seeing compelling evidence that we have a problem affecting many young people — a significant increase in psychotic disorders and other worrisome signs in adolescents.

We see the effects at [Pine River Institute's](#) treatment program for young people facing serious mental health and substance use challenges. Other similar programs across Ontario are seeing the same thing.

It's no surprise: this is consistent with scientific studies documenting the impact of high-potency cannabis on the brains of adolescents.

Now is the time for the Ontario government to act to ensure that young people understand the risks that they are running, particularly when using these high potency products.

Many people view cannabis as a benign substance, something that can cause no serious harm. Most don't realize that today's high-potency cannabis products cannot be compared to the cannabis that many older adults remember from their youth.

That joint they knew "back in the day" might have contained three to five per cent THC. Today, licensed retailers sell vape cartridges that can exceed 90 per cent THC. This is not your grandmother's weed; it's an entirely different product with significantly stronger psychoactive qualities and more harmful effects.

Ontario makes a lot of money from cannabis. The province's budget projects \$640 million in revenue from legalized cannabis, derived from taxes and dividends from the [Ontario Cannabis Store](#).

Ironically, the website of the provincially-owned Ontario Cannabis Store even periodically spotlights the most potent types of cannabis that are fuelling the problem in order to promote sales.

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The risks to adolescent health are real, as are the consequences.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada describes psychosis as “a condition where a person loses touch with reality ... People with psychosis might see or hear things that aren’t there (hallucinations) or believe things that aren’t true (delusions).”

Many studies have identified an association between the use of cannabis by young people and an increased risk of psychotic disorders and/or cannabis use disorder. A Canadian study published in *Psychological Medicine* in 2024 estimated that cannabis-using teens are 11 times more likely to develop a psychotic disorder than teens who don’t use cannabis.

That study relied on Ontario data for youth aged 12 to 24, from up to 2018, before the widespread availability in Canada of even more potent products.

Another study published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* earlier this year found a sharp rise overall in the rate of psychotic disorder diagnoses among youth in recent decades, and the researchers point to high-potency cannabis use as a potential factor.

Our brains continue to develop until about age 25, and so adolescence is a crucial time in that process. While young people under 19 cannot legally purchase cannabis products, it should be no surprise they can access them, just as underage teen can get their hands on alcohol.

Knowing that, the surprise lies in the lack of a co-ordinated public education approach. These powerful products can have a profound impact on a youth’s brain, and we know this risk increases with earlier initiation, frequency of use and product potency. But do young people and their families understand the impact and the risk?

The Ontario government must invest in an effective and sustained public education campaign on the dangers of youth cannabis use. This campaign should be just as visible as the efforts undertaken to raise public awareness around seatbelts and impaired driving.

Young people, their caregivers and those who work with adolescents need clear, accessible information about the potential harms associated with high-potency products, so that they understand the risks they are taking by using these products. We have no time to lose.