

Dr Vernon White, Senator and Dr John Coyne



**Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement  
inquiry into public communication campaigns targeting drug and  
substance abuse**

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*This submission does not reflect the Australian Strategic Policy Institute perspective. It is the opinion of Dr Vernon White, Senator/International Fellow and Dr John Coyne, Head of the Strategic Policing and Law Enforcement Program, ASPI.*

1. On 16 October 2019, the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement (PJCLE) commenced an inquiry into public communications campaigns targeting demand for drugs and substance abuse, with particular reference to:
  - a. the efficacy of different approaches to such campaigns, including:
    1. 'shock advertising', informational campaigns and the use of social marketing;
    2. the use of campaigns aimed at various audiences, including, but not limited to, children at an age before they would typically become illicit drug users, Indigenous communities and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse groups; and
    3. international approaches;
  - b. research and evaluation methods used to plan, implement and assess the effects of such campaigns;
  - c. identifying best practice approaches to designing and implementing campaigns, including social media, digital channels and traditional advertising, to guide Australia's approach to drug demand reduction;
  - d. the efficacy of the current and past National Drug Strategy in achieving demand reduction through public communications campaigns; and
  - e. any related matter.

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## Introduction

Since 2015 the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) has been researching drug addiction and alternative approaches to combatting drug addiction in Australia, drawing on both domestic and non-domestic best and current practices.

In 2015 ASPI brought forward a report on Crystal Methamphetamine (ICE), identifying the issues the ICE epidemic presented to Australians. We considered the high level of serious drug abuse and addiction gripping Australians, the traditional and non-traditional efforts to combat drug abuse and the performance of law enforcement including available resources. In looking at the 'Australian' environment we considered the impact that law enforcement was having on the 'supply' of illicit and illegal drugs but as importantly the opportunity to impact on the 'demand' side, targeting addictions and drug abuse as a health problem that required more than law enforcement, to be successful.

Specifically, in that special report we targeted three areas of concentration that could have the desired outcomes of combatting drug trafficking and supporting the health concerns surrounding drug addiction (in essence, supply and demand):

- Integration. Drug strategies have a better chance of being successful when each of its initiatives are integrated into a strategically focussed harm reduction strategy;
- Innovation. Education, health and enforcement stakeholder should be free from the limitations of wholly quantitative performance measures; and
- Disruption. Initiatives to tackle the ice problem should be focussed towards the disruption of problems rather than the treatment of symptoms of the problem.

In preparing for this enquiry, our focus has been on the areas of integration and innovation but in doing so also emphasise that integrated planning will allow for greater potential for success. These two areas are clearly within the inquiry that has been announced by the PJCLE.

## 2. Public communication campaigns

As noted in the inquiry notice the expectation is that we would consider *areas of public communications campaigns targeting demand for drugs and substance abuse*. And that we would pay particular attention to an approach for such campaigns.

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In our work in 2015, and in subsequent work, we have tried to raise attention to the targeting of drug abuse and addictions from a demand reduction perspective. We have identified and acknowledge that law enforcement alone cannot have the impact expected by Australians. In fact, we agree with senior law enforcement officials and Government ministers who have clearly identified that we cannot *arrest our way out* of this problem.

### 3. Ottawa's Support Treatment Education Prevention (STEP) Project

As we raised in 2015, Canada's STEP project offers a best practice model for public communication campaigns targeting drug and substance abuse. Both writers are deeply familiar with the program in Ottawa, Canada with Dr. White having worked with the program since its inception where he continues to sit as a board member.

In 2007, United Way Ottawa, together with 11 other partners, launched project STEP to work collaboratively to address the need for the support, treatment, education and prevention of substance use issues among youth in our community. In essence, the STEP project in Ottawa was started when the police, schools, public health and the United Way as well as service providers (addictions and mental health) collaborated and built a system to engage youth and deliver a relevant strategy. The program allows for an immediate response to immediate issues, a problem with traditional drug strategies.

At its outset, project STEP had two areas of focus: the development of residential treatment facilities for youth and school-based prevention and intervention. Before project STEP, there were no residential facilities in Ottawa to help youth deal with serious substance use issues. In 2012, the project STEP partnership raised \$3M to build two residential facilities providing treatment and counselling for youth with addictions on a 24/7 basis.

Although a key component of any strategy, the provision of residential addictions treatment, our focus in this document is the school-based programming so the following may assist in this regard.

Since its inception in 2008 the STEP program has been on a steady and successful path to increasing drug awareness with youth, school based and non-school based. This increased awareness generated through multiple channels that include public education, peer to peer engagement, professional counselling, awareness campaigns (dangers of drugs) and family/parental education and counselling.

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### *School based initiatives*

In Ottawa STEP developed a school-based initiative which is seen as a multi-sector community partnership, funded by the Champlain LHIN (Provincial Government Health Department), Ottawa Public Health (City of Ottawa), the four Ottawa school boards and United Way Ottawa. The program is delivered in partnership with four school boards and five service partners allowing the schools to be connected to the appropriate service partners. For example, a Francophone school would be connected to a service partner who can provide in that language requirement.

Project STEP's Support, Education, and Prevention activities take place within the high school environment. For most youth, this means access to counsellors through their mainstream (publicly funded) high school. For some it means accessing the program through non-mainstream schools hosted by community-based organisations, which offer high school programming as a part of their supports to vulnerable youth.

In mainstream public-school settings programming is run as a close partnership between the schools and the two core service delivery partners. Students at all 57 high schools in Ottawa, including alternate schools, have access to school-based prevention, education and counselling. Many intermediate and elementary schools (grades 6-8) now also receive education and prevention services.

In addition to services for students and families, the addiction counsellors also provide support for other school-based initiatives, including teacher training and parent events.

### *Non-mainstream settings*

In the non-mainstream settings, counselling services are provided for youth in the community through the following partners:

- Youville Centre provides young single mothers and expectant mothers with a full range of counselling and life skills support through project STEP.
- Operation Come Home (OCH) provides employment and support programs for street-involved and at-risk youth, as well as education through the Rogers Achievement Centre (RAC) alternative school. Addictions and mental health counselling is made available to all OCH youth.
- Working in partnership with the Urban Aboriginal Alternative High School at the Odawa Friendship Centre and Rideau High School, the Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health's Working Hope program provides culturally aligned mental health and addictions-focused programming for First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children, youth and families.

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In 2016 the Opioid crisis hit the City of Ottawa and as STEP was already fully operating it allowed the team of professionals and organisations to put in action a plan to combat the death that was being seen across the country. The STEP program operates as follows:

- Support is provided by bringing together the necessary groups and organisations needed to ensure financial success and the expertise required to ensure relevant program development.
- Treatment is provided through two funded Residential Treatment Programs, The Dave Smith Youth Treatment Centre (DSYTC) provides residential treatment services for English speaking youth in Ottawa. DSYTC programs and services include: comprehensive assessment, up to three months of residential treatment (flexible length of stay), post-residential continuing care and family services (education, counselling, support). Psychiatric support, primary care via nurse practitioners and academic programming are also provided.

Of the youth who accessed residential treatment at DSYTC, 77% had experienced homelessness and 93% had struggled with at least one mental health condition. During the 2016-2017 fiscal year, DSYTC reported:

- 148 youth and 268 caregivers were provided with services.
- The average wait time for treatment was 26 days.
- 44% of clients completed the entire three months of the residential program (the remaining 56% completed various lengths of stay).
- The median length of stay was 53 days.
- 13 clients graduated from high school.
- In total, clients completed 222 high school credits and two post-secondary courses while in treatment.

For francophone youth whose substance abuse and concurrent disorder issues require a more protected environment than a school-based format, Maison Fraternité provides two intensive treatment

### *Impact*

The results of STEP have been quite impactful and year after year the programs see a growth in awareness and engagement from both youth and families.

By the end of the evaluation period, the following outcomes were observed for the sample group of students participating in the school-based counselling program in 2016-17:

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School Year	2007-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
Youth engaged in counselling	650	1,250	1,500	1,600	1,770	1,330	1,420	1,460
Youth participating in prevention and education	3,300	5,000	5,400	6,300	17,100	15,500	12,310	14,100
Parents engaged in counselling	480	650	500	270	320	260	200	220
Parent information sessions	N/A	N/A	N/A	110	140	200	3020	2420

**79%** of youth who reported drug use reduced their frequency of use since participating in the *project step* program.

**91%** of youth achieved academic or employment success.

**81%** of youth felt that the program helped them build or rebuild healthy relationships with their family, partner or their community.

**84%** of youth who participated in the survey reported they had fewer suicidal thoughts.

**2 in 4**



- **2 out of every 4 students** in the sample group were able to reduce or stop using one or more drugs during the evaluation period (less than one school year).

- **Average cannabis use decreased by 71%** (based on frequency and quantity consumed).
- **Students** who were experiencing moderate to severe difficulty upon entering the program showed notable improvements in health and wellbeing (as measured by the BASIS 32 assessment tool).
- **95% of the students** admitted to the counselling program completed the school year.

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#### 4. Conclusion

Project STEP is an award-winning community response that addresses the need for a drug and substance use initiative to help youth in Ottawa. Through project STEP, youth in all 57 of Ottawa's high schools and in three community agencies offering education programs have access to counselling, support, addiction education, and prevention programming.

STEP looked at the need for mental health and addictions counselling as an important ingredient for youth in their battle against addictions and drug/alcohol abuse. In the school-based environment this was key as it directly influences individual success in achieving educational goals.

In the data collected in the Canadian context, 38% of students in grades 7-12 reported using an illicit drug in the previous year, 43% consumed alcohol and 17% reported binge drinking. 11% report non-medical use of prescription opioid pain relievers such as codeine, Percocet, OxyContin, Demerol or Tylenol #3 in the past year. As well, 19% of students reported cannabis use. Although a full 14% of students (grades 7–12) being identified as having a drug use problem, only a small fraction of students have received treatment.

Our research in 2015 (ASPI) identified similar illicit drug use in Australia and importantly failure on the part of government(s) to provide the necessary addiction(s) treatment access as identified in Canada.

It is known that research shows that 85% of adults struggling with addiction began using when they were teenagers. The link between mental health and drug use has been well studied. As an example, people with mental illness are over seven times more likely to use cannabis weekly than people without a mental illness.

Among school-aged children and youth, the need for intervention becomes greater as children advance in school. Generally, drug use is more likely to occur as grade level increases, typically peaking in grade 12 (ages 16-17). In the context of STEP, our priorities corresponded directly to this data collected.

5. We thank the Committee and the Secretary for allowing us to make this submission.