

Beyond the Buzz: Addressing the Roots of Substance Use

The Students Commission of Canada

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of Canada**

*Centre of Excellence for
Youth Engagement*



**La commission
des élèves du
Canada**

*Le centre d'excellence pour
l'engagement des jeunes*

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Beyond the Buzz: Creating the Space

Throughout #CanadaWeWant 2026, the Beyond the Buzz theme team facilitated a variety of activities designed to build trust, encourage connection, and support meaningful dialogue among participants. In the early sessions, the team prioritized relationship-building and group dynamics through icebreakers and creative activities. Youth created avatar drawings representing themselves, which helped ease introductions and foster a sense of shared identity. The team also introduced a snowball activity, inviting participants to anonymously share what they needed from the theme team to feel safe(r) during the conference. These reflections were shared randomly within the group, helping establish mutual respect, openness, and trust.

As the conference progressed, the team reused the snowball activity to explore substance misuse observed in participants' daily lives and communities. This method provided a safe, anonymous space for youth to express heavy and personal experiences, while also enabling deeper discussion during round-table sessions. As trust grew, youth engaged more openly and demonstrated vulnerability and support for one another. The team observed strong collaboration and peer support as participants worked together to prepare for the showcase.

To complement these reflective conversations, the Beyond the Buzz team did fun and energizing activities throughout the week, including dance warm-ups, talent show rehearsals, and karaoke. These moments helped balance more emotionally intensive discussions, strengthened relationships, and boosted overall group morale.

Beyond the Buzz Addresses Roots of Substance Use

The Beyond the Buzz group consisted of 22 youth between the ages of 14 and 20 and represented a wide geographic range across Canada, including Ontario, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, the Northwest Territories, and British Columbia. Participants brought diverse cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and varying levels of exposure to substance use. This diversity enriched group discussions and allowed both the team and participants to thoughtfully examine shared experiences alongside important differences, strengthening learning, connection, and mutual understanding within the group.

Throughout the conference, the Beyond the Buzz theme team focused on substance misuse and addictions affecting youth and adults across Canada, with particular attention to **upstream causes and systemic factors**. Participants explored why individuals may turn to substances, discussing unmet individual and community needs and the consequences that arise when those needs are not addressed. The group also examined the role of government at various levels, **engaging in conversations about policy changes and initiatives that could better support Canadians in reducing substance misuse and improving overall well-being**.

Themes: What Did Young People Discuss?

Unmet Needs of Individuals and Communities

The team explored how **unmet needs** at both the individual and community level can contribute to substance use. Participants reviewed Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs alongside the Blackfoot Nation's Circle of Needs and discussed how gaps in meeting these needs can impact well-being and coping strategies. When basic necessities such as consistent access to nutritious food, affordable and stable housing, and free or accessible healthcare are unmet, individuals may turn to substances as a means of coping.

Youth also examined higher-level needs, including **safety, security, belonging, spiritual wellness, and self-esteem**. Participants shared that when people do not feel a sense of belonging within safe, inclusive communities or religious and spiritual spaces, or when they struggle with low confidence and self-worth, substance use is often used to mask or manage these challenges.

“There are many roots to substance use. ex. Child Welfare, loneliness, grief”.

– Youth participant

“I have learned that many people come from different experiences and backgrounds when it comes to substance use, and that stereotypes are not ok.”

– Youth participant

Mental Health Supports and Coping Skills

Mental health emerged as a central and recurring theme throughout discussions. Participants demonstrated a strong understanding of **the relationship between substance use, addiction, and mental well-being**. Youth identified that poor mental health can often lead to substance misuse, while substance misuse in turn can further deteriorate mental health.

The group discussed **systemic gaps in mental health funding**, noting that provincial healthcare systems typically allocate approximately **6 to 7%** of budgets toward mental health services, despite recommendations that **12 to 13%** be dedicated to mental health care. Participants highlighted the **inconsistency in availability, affordability, and accessibility of mental health supports across provinces and territories, reflecting the decentralized nature of Canada's healthcare system**. Experiences varied widely, with some youth reporting better access to services than others.

Youth also emphasized **the lack of education around healthy coping mechanisms for grief, loss, and emotional distress**. Participants agreed that **greater access to mental health education and support** could play a critical role in preventing or reducing reliance on substances.

“It all runs back to the broken system, the government doesn’t have the policies they need in place”

– Youth participant

“No one seems to care about substance abuse problems... Everyone knows about it, but it’s hidden and not spoken about openly.”

– Youth participant

Disproportionate Effects: Colonialism, Generational Trauma, and Residential Schools

The team acknowledged and discussed **the disproportionate impacts of colonialism on Indigenous peoples and communities in Canada**. Participants identified ongoing trauma stemming from residential schools, forced assimilation, displacement, racism, discrimination,

and the systemic erasure of Indigenous cultures and identities. These harms have compounded across generations, contributing to cycles of grief, loss, and disconnection.

Youth recognized that **meaningful truth and reconciliation efforts remain ongoing and incomplete**, leaving many individuals and communities to navigate extensive trauma with insufficient support. Participants noted that, in this context, substance use is often adopted as a coping tool, leading to harmful and unsustainable relationships with substances. The discussion emphasized **the need for culturally grounded healing, systemic accountability, and long-term support to address these inequities.**

“Colonialism is embedded in our society.”

– Youth participant

“Substance abuse is caused by plenty of different factors.”

– Youth participant

Empathy and Humanity

Empathy and a shared sense of humanity were central themes throughout the week. Youth consistently emphasized the importance of perspective-taking and recognizing the complex emotions that surround substance use, both for individuals using and those close to them.

Participants frequently returned to the idea that ***“two things can exist at the same time.”*** Youth engaged in difficult but necessary conversations about the harms and impacts of substance use, while also acknowledging care, compassion, and love for people who use substances. They held space for conflicting emotions, such as anger and empathy, frustration and understanding, and explored the complicated realities of supporting and loving someone who struggles with substance use.

Through these discussions, youth demonstrated a strong commitment to **approaching substance use with compassion rather than judgment**. This theme highlighted the importance of human-centered responses that recognize lived experiences, complexity, and dignity, reinforcing the need for approaches rooted in **empathy and care**.

“Substance abuse is all around me – my mom, my sister, my friends. It’s hard to get away from.”

– Youth participant

“I have learned that many people come from different experiences and backgrounds when it comes to substance use, and that stereotypes are not ok.”

– Youth participant

Products: Memory Boards, Maps

Memory Board

Originally created at **#CanadaWeWant 2025**, the Memory Board is a memorial poster where participants are invited to add the names of individuals they have lost due to substance use. At **#CWW 2026**, the Beyond the Buzz team reintroduced the board and invited youth to continue contributing to it. This product serves as a meaningful acknowledgment of the deeply personal connections many participants have to substance use, whether directly or indirectly. The Memory Board is intended to remain a living, ongoing product across future conferences, honouring lives lost while reinforcing the collective responsibility to address substance-related harms within our communities.

Human Sculpture of Needs

One youth participant took the initiative to plan and develop a video that visually represents the unmet needs often underlying substance use. This human sculpture highlighted experiences such as loneliness and social isolation, grief and untreated mental health challenges, intergenerational trauma, limited access to resources, education gaps, and a lack of healthy coping mechanisms. Through movement and visual storytelling, this product humanized complex systemic issues and created an accessible, emotionally resonant way for audiences to understand the root causes of substance use.

Interconnectedness Map

After identifying key root causes contributing to substance use, the group collaboratively created an Interconnectedness Map. Youth worked together to connect individual, community, and systemic needs, illustrating how these factors overlap and reinforce one another. The final product visually demonstrated the complexity of substance use and highlighted that no single cause exists in isolation. This map helped shift conversations toward holistic, upstream solutions rather than individual blame.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

Utilize federal and Crown land to create permanent, year-round, low-barrier housing and safe designated living areas (including sanctioned tent communities where needed) that provide **on-site addiction counselling, healthcare, and mental health supports**. Housing solutions must protect people from displacement while supporting recovery and dignity.

Recommendation 2:

Increase healthcare spending on mental health and addiction care to at least 12–13% of total health budgets, in line with international standards. This funding should include:

- Competitive wages for healthcare workers
- Financial support for students entering healthcare professions
- Expanded hospital-based addiction and mental health programs

Canada cannot fix the addiction crisis without first fixing the healthcare system.

Recommendation 3:

Commit to Truth and Reconciliation through action, not statements. **Provide free, long-term, culturally safe, and Indigenous-led mental health and addiction supports within Indigenous communities.** Address intergenerational trauma caused by residential schools by funding prevention, healing, and recovery programs designed and led by Indigenous peoples.

Recommendation 4:

Develop a national, 24/7, anonymous support system (app and toll-free line) accessible across all of Canada. This platform should allow people experiencing substance use challenges to:

- Seek immediate guidance and emotional support
- Access local and national resources
- Connect with peer supports or sponsors

Support must be easy to access, judgment-free, and available anytime.

Recommendation 5:

Reform rehabilitation and child welfare systems so that **families are supported, not separated**. Addiction treatment programs should:

- Allow children to visit or stay with caregivers safely during recovery
- Prioritize family-centred healing and reunification
- Recognize that separating families can worsen substance use outcomes

Recovery is stronger when people can hold onto their purpose and their loved ones.

Showcasing Investing Early: In Families, Housing, Health and Help

The Issue

Hello everybody! We are Beyond the Buzz! We are going to share our thoughts on substance abuse within Canada.

You cannot understand addiction without understanding what caused the addiction to arise. Throughout this past week we got the chance to sit in a room with youth from coast to coast where we shared our experiences related to substance abuse and the way it looks within our communities. We have learned that people facing addiction have their personal reasons for abusing substances, including not having the resources needed to help. Many countries spend 8–15% of their health budgets on mental health; however, in Canada, it is only 6–7%.

We want the government to recognize that addiction is a crisis, acknowledge that addicts are people, change how our tax money is allocated to support Canadian citizens directly. We ask for accessible mental health education, support, and services to prevent further harm.

Housing and Health

Those who struggle with addiction often face issues related to Housing and accessing health professionals. Although temporary shelters through the winter are helpful the Canadian government controls approximately 41 percent of the country's land area. In the Canada We Want this land is used to create all year round supports such as designated areas for tents with free addiction counseling and medical care to those who live in the community.

Canada is currently in a healthcare crisis leaving limited professional help regarding addiction. Nurses and doctors need a higher wage, people going through university to help with this crisis should be receiving financial funding. If we do not fix the healthcare system, we cannot fix the addiction crisis.

Intergenerational Trauma, Child Welfare, Free Access Nationwide

Canada's past is also playing a major role. Indigenous peoples make up approximately 10 percent of all overdose deaths in Canada however the Indigenous community only represents about 4 percent of the nation's population. The Indigenous community is still feeling the actions of residential school through negative coping mechanisms passed down. We want to see the government take real accountability and providing professional supports within Indigenous Communities for free. In the Canada we NEED, Indigenous peoples will be thriving.

Resources are hard to find; however, we are hoping to create a national project to providing care to those being impacted by addiction. We would love to see the creation of an app or toll line for people to reach out anonymously to get advice, access resources and find sponsors. Addiction takes a toll on everyone around the person who is abusing a substance. In the Canada We Want there is 24-hour online support accessible nationwide.

This support will also be beneficial for children in the welfare system as many are in care due to their caregivers who are facing addiction. We believe that separating the child from the parents just make the parents more likely to use. Withdrawal is messy and causes you to feel like you have lost your purpose. In the Canada We Want rehabilitation programs welcome the children to visit and even stay. Having the children nearby will allow the parent to remember their purpose and why they need to be sober.

Wrap Up

Addiction in Canada is a crisis; people are struggling and not just the people you see on the street. Addiction needs attention from you as the people of power. We want to see a place

where people can stay and get help without worrying about their tent being teared down, we need programs in hospitals, we need a wage raise for individuals in the field making change, we need the colonization on Indigenous peoples to stop, We need anonymous help lines, we need rehabilitation programs that focus on the family as well as the problem. It is time to wake up Canada; people are dying because it is easier to buy a drug than it is to see a counselor. Change is possible, we just need people to care. Why are we the ones taking initiative? Don't get us wrong, we love having these conversations but why is it that the government is leaving room for it to be a conversation.

Au Canada, la toxicomanie est une crise, les gens souffrent, et pas seulement ceux que vous voyez dans la rue. La toxicomanie a besoin de votre attention, vous qui détenez le pouvoir. Nous voulons voir un endroit où les gens peuvent rester et obtenir de l'aide sans craindre que leur tente soit démolie, nous avons besoin de programmes dans les hôpitaux, de soutien financier, nous avons besoin que la colonisation des peuples autochtones cesse, nous avons besoin de lignes d'aide anonymes, nous avons besoin de programmes de réadaptation qui se concentrent sur la famille. Il est temps de se réveiller, Canada. Des gens meurent parce qu'il est plus facile d'acheter de la drogue que de consulter un psychologue. Le changement est possible, il suffit que les gens s'en soucient.

Notice how we are not here talking about capital gain taxes? We as youth are tired of focus being on people the government deems valuable over people who need the help. When you see someone using drugs you need to be mindful that the user is someone's child. Will you make money in helping this community? Not necessarily but is human life not more important than your rising bank accounts? The Canada We Want supports those facing addiction! Le Canada dont nous avons besoin accorde plus d'importance à la vie qu'à l'argent.