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Street drug use waning in Metro

But researchers say size of problem among youths rules out complacency

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TORONTO – Drug use among the youths who frequent the streets of Metro is declining but, compared with the consumption by young people still in school, it remains very high, according to responses to a new survey.

Although statistics suggest that drug-awareness programs are having some impact in the fight against drug abuse, the third annual report of the Metro Toronto Research Group on Drug Use, released yesterday, warns against complacency.

"We've only made a dent in the problem," reports Drug Use in Metro Toronto.

The data were prepared by a coalition of 10 agencies and organizations, among them the Addiction Research Foundation, Metro Toronto Police and the Drug Prevention Centre.

Of 217 street youths interviewed in 1992, 31 per cent said they had used cocaine in the past year, down from 64 per cent in 1990. The reported use of heroin among street youths dropped to 4 per cent from

13 percent over the same period.

Among Metro students aged 12 to 19, the use of cocaine dropped 1 per cent to 2.4 per cent in 1991 from 1989, the use of LSD dropped 0.6 per cent to 3.9 per cent, and the use of cannabis dropped 2.4 per cent to 10.1 per cent over the same period, according to the respondents.

(Data for the two study groups – street youth and students – were collected in different periods.)

Mark Taylor, president of the Addiction Research Foundation, told reporters that the number of people who sought help at the ARF for cocaine addiction rose to 21.8 per cent last year from 17.8 per cent in 1991. And the number of clients under 26 years of age seeking treatment for heroin addiction jumped to 5 per cent in 1992 from 1 per cent in 1990.

He also noted that the number of young clients seeking help for problems with hallucinogens rose from 1 per cent in 1991 to 4 per cent last year, the largest increase since 1985.

Although drug use as a whole has declined

among both street youths and students, Ontario's chief coroner Dr. James Young said there has not been a corresponding drop in the number of drug-related deaths.

There were 32 heroin-related deaths reported in Metro in the first nine months of 1992. For all of 1990, the last year for which the report gives complete statistics on drug-related deaths, there were 40 heroin-related deaths. That year a total of 166 drug-related deaths were recorded and included use of cocaine, heroin, marijuana, sedatives, hypnotics and tranquilizers. In 1989, there were 150.

Metro Police Superintendent Leo Campbell told reporters that police are concerned about the proliferation of high-potency marijuana on the streets.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the potency of marijuana was measured at between 0.5 per cent to 3 per cent, but in 1992 police have recorded levels as high as 18 per cent, Supt. Campbell said.

"You can no longer say it's just a soft or mild drug."

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