



Youth Alcohol Use and Its Harms: Case Study in the Community of Sherbrooke

The Postsecondary Education Partnership- Alcohol Harms (PEP-AH) works with post-secondary partners from across Canada to reduce alcohol harms among students through the implementation of evidence-based initiatives and the use of indicators of alcohol harm. Partners from the community of Sherbrooke, Quebec, formed a committee with two PEP-AH members, Bishop's University and the Université de Sherbrooke, to address the harms of alcohol among young people. Local partners shared data from multiple sources including justice, health and public health organizations, Sherbrooke post-secondary schools and municipal government to understand the context of youth alcohol use in Sherbrooke and formulate local interventions.

Key Messages

- The Sherbrooke community came together to address alcohol harms in young people as the issue of excessive alcohol use among youth is not confined to the geographical limits of campuses. Active support from the municipality is needed to reduce alcohol-related harms among youth in general and students in particular.
- Sherbrooke partners representing doctors, police, post-secondary schools and the local hospital came together as equals, establishing Sherbrooke Ville en santé as the lead organization and building common objectives to reduce harms.
- Partners identified local indicators measuring **alcohol** use, the legal and health consequences of drinking, and alcohol availability and affordability to gain a greater understanding of the situation and context of drinking among youth and to establish a baseline.
- Local indicators revealed that drinking among youth, including minors, is common and frequent, that young people were hospitalized for alcohol-related issues on average once every two days, and that alcohol harms occur on specific occasions and times of the year, during specific events and in specific places.
- Sherbrooke partners used local indicators to plan local interventions during high-risk drinking times. Interventions fall into four distinct categories: clinical health services, information and education, community actions and alcohol availability.

Why Does This Matter?

Alcohol causes harm to young people and their communities, especially due to the short-term consequences of drinking. (Harms to self and others include regretful or criminal actions, injuries and, tragically, death.) Students are at elevated risk from alcohol harms. The population of Sherbrooke, Quebec, is made up of 17% students for eight months of the year, making the Sherbrooke community an ideal location for addressing youth alcohol harms. Sherbrooke Ville en santé endorsed a proposal to establish a committee with the mandate to identify and develop



municipal initiatives to support local post-secondary institutions in their efforts to reduce alcohol harms. This committee brought together administrators and students from CEGEPs and universities, representatives from the health professions, public health, the police and the municipality, and experts from the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addictions (CCSA).

The first meeting took place in the fall of 2016. This successful collaboration can help other municipalities in addressing alcohol harms in their communities by pointing to successful factors including a beneficial partnership, ways to study youth alcohol harms in communities using local indicators, and suggesting data-driven ways to address harms locally.

What Did the Sherbrooke Committee Do?

The committee's stated objectives were to understand the extent of the issue (i.e., to identify contexts that particularly encourage excessive drinking), the most common types of harm and whether there were sub-groups more at risk than others. The committee's first task was to identify trends by using community-level indicators including alcohol use (Flynn & Wells, 2014), the legal and health consequences of drinking, and the physical and economic availability of alcohol in the community. These findings informed the planning of local responses.

Sherbrooke

With two universities and four colleges, Sherbrooke is a major student city in Quebec. More than 20% of the population is in school and about 17% is in post-secondary institutions. Close to 15% of the population is between 15 and 24 years old (Sherbrooke Innopole, 2018).

What Did We Find?

Indicators of Alcohol Use

- According to the Quebec Health Survey of High School Students (QSHSS), at least 9 in 10 Sherbrooke youth drink before reaching legal age.
- In Sherbrooke, 68.7% of Grade 9 students, 90.3% of Grade 11 students (minors under the age of 18), and 93.2% of post-secondary students have consumed alcohol in their lifetimes.
- Further, according to the QSHSS, 48.8% of Grade 9 students and 76.3% of Grade 11 students consumed five or more drinks on occasions when they do drink.

Youth Alcohol Hospitalizations

- The sample consisted of youth aged 12 to 24 years with an average age of 20 years for both males and females.
- Between 2012 and 2017, a hospital visit for an alcohol-related medical emergency happened every two days for a total of 842 emergency visits over the study period.
- Alcohol harms spike during specific times of the year, including Fête du Lac (local Sherbrooke celebration), Quebec national holiday, orientation week and Halloween.
- Of the hospitalized youth, 75% had consumed high alcohol content drinks (liquor or mixed drinks with liquor), 25% were admitted with a triage code 1 or 2, meaning their lives were in danger, and 57% had complications such as coma, head injuries, or hypothermia.
- Parents and friends were contacted only 59% of the time, only 40% were offered a follow up and only 52% were offered counselling in the emergency room (ER).



Alcohol-related Crime

- Between 2012 and 2017, 9.4% of youth (aged 12–24) admitted to hospital for an emergency related to alcohol were accompanied by police officers when they arrived at the hospital.
- Drawing on data from the Ministère de la sécurité, assaults remained fairly stable between 2006 and 2014 reaching 112 per year in 2015 (down from 163 in 2014). The number of assaults vary with the time of year with peaks at the beginning of summer, in June and in September and October.
- According to data from the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, in 2015 there were 36.6 incidents of mischief per 10,000 residents in Sherbrooke, with possibly close to half of mischief suspects being under the age of 18.
- Within the four areas of the city most frequented by young people for drinking, data from the Service de police de la Ville de Sherbrooke show that from the start of 2015 to November 2017, 489 disorderly conduct tickets were issued to young people aged 16 to 24 at the time of the event.

Availability and Pricing

- In Sherbrooke there are 350 outlets for the sale of alcohol, including grocery stores, convenience stores, restaurants, bars, breweries, taverns and clubs, in addition to seven outlets of the Société des alcools du Québec.
- While the project was underway, beverages like Four Loko and FCKD UP, with 11.9% alcohol content, were popular among youth and sold in 568-mL cans for about \$3.50. This price means that these beverages were available at \$0.83 per standard alcohol unit, while the reference price recommended by researchers who study alcohol is \$1.71 per standard unit (National Alcohol Strategy Advisory Committee, 2015).

How Is Sherbrooke Addressing Alcohol Harms?

Sherbrooke partners are using local indicators to identify high-priority targets for effective harm-reduction initiatives. A review of the practice usually followed for alcohol-related visits by young people to the hospital showed an opportunity to follow up more effectively in clinical settings. The ER data and other indicators showed that alcohol harms cluster around specific events and areas within the city, leading committee members to consider how better to intervene to minimize harms at these events and in these areas. The planned next steps in Sherbrooke are to implement key interventions in clinical health services, information and education, to provide community safe support spaces and to encourage microbreweries to make lower alcohol drinks available at events. The community-level indicators collected by the project will help determine the success of these planned interventions.

Clinical Health Services

- Establish a procedure ensuring that each young person visiting the ER for severe alcohol intoxication receives a brief intervention based on motivational interview techniques to screen for potential problematic use
- Refer youth who are hospitalized for follow up with addictions staff, referring complex cases to a psychologist.
- Create a more effective safety net around youth by offering counselling about the importance of contacting friends and family.



Information and Education

- Develop an online or mobile application that gives individualized feedback to young people about their drinking, including ideas for protective behavioural strategies such as the pacing of drinks, drinking non-alcoholic beverages between alcoholic drinks and consuming food while drinking alcohol.
- Inform parents and community members of the potential for harm from consuming drinks with higher alcohol content.

Community Safe Support Space

- Fête du Lac des Nations, Quebec national holiday, Halloween, orientation and other occasions have produced greater harms at locations such as downtown bars and celebration sites, leading the committee to consider mobile safe support spaces to offer youth who have drunk too much a friendly place to sit, catch their breath, drink water and have something to eat.

Availability of Lower Alcohol Drinks from Local Microbreweries

- Research shows that students consuming lower alcohol beer (3.8% vs. 5.2%) are not often able to tell the difference between the taste of the two types of beer and report enjoying themselves equally (Segal & Stockwell, 2009). Committee members will study the possibility of challenging local microbrewers to develop a beer with a 3.5% alcohol limit as part of a contest to win exclusive rights to sell beer during targeted events.

Where Can You Learn More?

Find the full report and more information about PEP-AH at pepah.ca and on [PEP-AH Resources page](#). See all current PEP-AH members from across Canada at the [PEP-AH Members page](#).

References

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