

Canadian Addiction Survey 2004 Alberta Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC)

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We would like to thank the partners involved in the Canadian Addiction Survey (CAS). The survey is a collaborative undertaking sponsored by Health Canada, the Canadian Executive Council on Addictions (CECA) [consisting of the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA), the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC), the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM), the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), Prince Edward Island Provincial Health Services Authority and the Kaiser Foundation], the Centre for Addictions Research of BC (CARBC), and the provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and British Columbia.

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Errata: Canadian Addiction Survey 2004

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The CAS included a brief six-item screener to measure problematic drug use. The screener, the ASSIST, was developed by the World Health Organization.

An error was recently found in one symptom (represented by two items: CNAS5 and ASSIS5) of the ASSIST scale. Properly stated, the question is "Have you ever tried [AND FAILED] to control, cut down or stop using cannabis, marijuana or hashish {or other drugs}. The phrase "and failed" was not asked of respondents. This error, in turn, affects the following derived variables: ASISTCAN, ASISTCN3, ASISTCN2, ASISTIL and ASISTIL3.

NOTE: A small study to assess the impact of the missing "and failed" phrase suggested that estimates with the missing phrase underestimate the standard ASSIST item, but total scores and their cutoffs do not differ significantly between the two versions. This error should not affect estimates of subgroup differences (i.e., sex, age and regional differences). Caution and warning should be used in making direct comparisons with other studies using the ASSIST.

For further information, please go to www.ccsa.ca.

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Executive Summary

As discussed in the detailed report of findings from the Canadian Addiction Survey (Adlaf, Begin, & Sawka, 2005, p. 7), "timely and relevant data are prerequisites for effective health and social policy and programming and for the monitoring of established health and social objectives." Before the 2004 Canadian Addiction Survey (CAS), only two national surveys had focused on alcohol and other drug use in Canada: the National Alcohol and Other Drugs Survey (NADS) in 1989 (Eliany, Giesbrecht, & Nelson, 1990) and the Canada's Alcohol and Other Drugs Survey (CADS) in 1994 (MacNeil & Webster, 1997). It is further noted that, "Current information about prevalence rates, trends, and changes from the CAS will fill a critical gap in population surveillance of alcohol and other drug use and will assist decision-makers in federal and provincial addictions agencies to allocate financial and human resources where they are most needed" (Adlaf et al., 2005, p. 7).

To date, two reports have been published based on the CAS: (1) *Canadian Addiction Survey (CAS): A National Survey of Canadians' Use of Alcohol and Other Drugs: Prevalence of Use and Related Harms: Detailed Report* (Adlaf et al., 2005) and (2) *Canadian Addiction Survey (CAS): A National Survey of Canadians' Use of Alcohol and Other Drugs: Prevalence of Use and Related Harms: Highlights* (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse [CCSA], 2004a).

The purpose of this report is to focus on the 2004 CAS results for the subsample of Albertan respondents, including information on the prevalence of alcohol and illicit drug use, trends in the prevalence of substance use, patterns of substance use, risk and harm associated with substance use, and community attitudes and beliefs regarding substance use issues. The report will help AADAC staff and other health professionals in Alberta understand the current state of substance use in Alberta. It will also inform decision-making related to prevention and treatment programming.

Method

Interviews for the 2004 Canadian Addiction Survey were conducted by the research firm Jolicoeur et Associés between December 2003 and April 2004. A total of 13,909 Canadians completed the Canadian Addiction Survey. This report focuses on the subsample of 2,401 Albertans surveyed. The questionnaire consisted of over 400 questionnaire items pertaining to the use of alcohol and illicit drugs, life harm associated with such use and the level of risk demonstrated by such use. Additionally, subsets of the sample (approximately 800 Albertans) were asked about their attitudes and opinions regarding alcohol and other drug use including opinions on various policy issues, cannabis use for medicinal purposes, and substance use and driving. The questionnaire items and descriptions of most of the derived variables can be found in the national detailed report and *Microdata eGuide* (Adlaf et al., 2005; CCSA, 2004b). Estimates of the number of Albertans are based on population figures from the

2001 Census of Canada by Statistics Canada (Alberta population 15 years and older, 2,348,839).

Highlights of findings

Alcohol use

- 93.6% of Albertans sampled reported the use of alcohol during their lifetime (see Figure 1). This corresponds to an estimated 2.2 million Albertans over the age of 15.
- 79.5% of Albertans sampled reported the use of alcohol during the year prior to the survey (see Figure 1). This corresponds to an estimated 1.9 million Albertans over the age of 15.
- The reported prevalence of past-year alcohol use was highest in 1989 at 81.9% and decreased quite substantially in the 1994 study to 76.6%. The current study reveals a prevalence in between those from previous years at 79.5%.
- The likelihood of using alcohol during the year preceding the survey was higher among those Albertans who were young, were male, had completed at least high school, and were in the high-income¹ range.
- The average age of first alcohol use for Albertans was 17.2 years: 41.5% had had their first drink between 15 and 17 years of age and 21.6% had done so between 18 and 19 years of age.
- One in three lifetime drinkers (that is, those having used alcohol at any time in their lives) in Alberta reported also using cannabis during their lifetime and one in five had also used an illicit drug other than cannabis during their lifetime. Among past-year drinkers, 14.7% had used cannabis in the previous year and 3.7% had used cannabis and another illicit drug.
- Most past-year drinkers in Alberta (38.7%) had used alcohol monthly or less than monthly during the previous year; 39.4% drank at least once a week and 4.3% drank daily.
- On average, Albertans usually consumed three drinks per occasion. About one in five drinkers in Alberta reported usually consuming five or more drinks per occasion.
- Half of past-year drinkers in Alberta usually consumed less than five drinks per occasion and drank less than weekly (see Table 1). About one in 10 drinkers in Alberta consumed five or more drinks per occasion on a weekly basis or more. This pattern of consumption (defined in Table 1 as "heavy-

¹ Low income: less than \$20,000 per year with one to two persons in the household or less than \$30,000 with three or more persons

Middle income: \$20,000 to \$59,000 per year with one to two persons in the household or \$30,000 to \$79,000 with three or more persons

High income: \$60,000 or more with one to two persons in the household or \$80,000 or more with three or more persons

frequent" drinking) was higher among males and people without a post-secondary degree, and decreased with age.

- 7.9% of Albertans reported producing their own beer or wine during the year preceding the survey.

TABLE 1: Drinking Status of Albertans (Aged 15 Years and Up) and Pattern of Drinking Among Past-Year Drinkers

Lifetime Abstainers	6.4%	Never had alcohol beyond sips or tastes
Former Drinkers	14.1%	Drank sometimes during their lives but not during the 12 months preceding the survey
Current Drinkers	79.5%	Drank during the 12 months preceding the survey
Current Drinkers		
Light-Infrequent	51.1%	Current drinkers who drink less often than once a week (usually fewer than five drinks when alcohol is used)
Light-Frequent	29.5%	Current drinkers who drink once a week or more (usually fewer than five drinks when alcohol is used)
Heavy-Infrequent	9.5%	Current drinkers who drink less often than once a week (usually five drinks or more when alcohol is used)
Heavy-Frequent	9.9%	Current drinkers who drink once a week or more (usually five drinks or more when alcohol is used)

FIGURE 1: Albertans (Aged 15 Years and Up) Reporting the Use of Alcohol, Cannabis and Other Illicit Drugs at Least Once During Their Lifetime or the Past Year

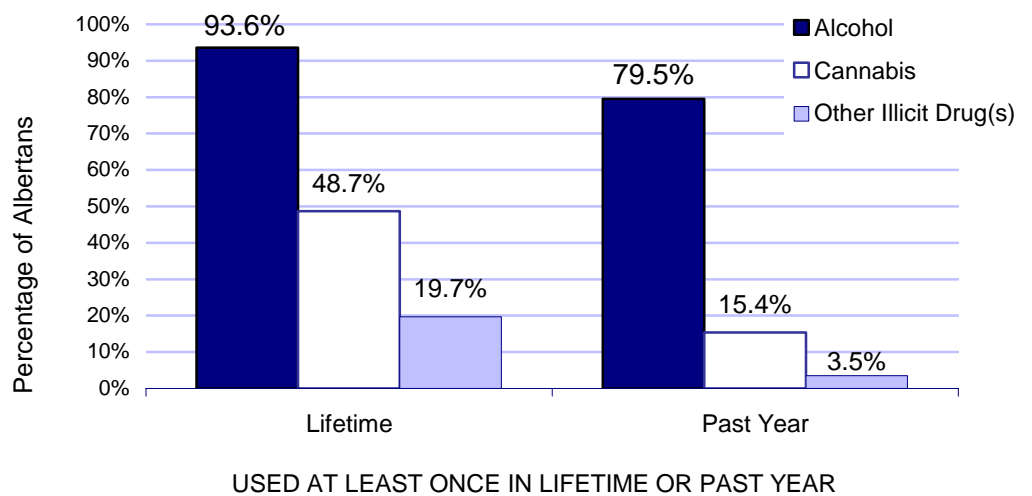
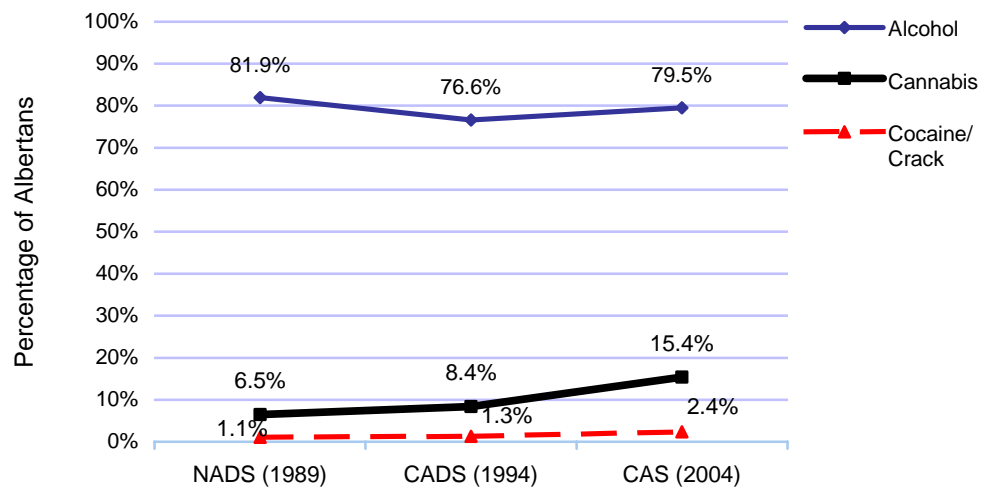


FIGURE 2: Trends in the Past-Year Use of Alcohol, Cannabis and Cocaine Among Albertans (Aged 15 Years and Up)



Alcohol problems

- About one out of five past-year drinkers in Alberta scored in the high-risk range of the AUDIT scale² (suggesting harmful drinking or potential dependence). This corresponds to an estimated 360,000 Albertans. Males were more likely to score in the high-risk range. Females, older Albertans, those who are married or widowed, and those with a complete post-secondary education were less likely to score in the high-risk range.
- Almost 29% of lifetime drinkers in Alberta reported experiencing harm to at least one life area as a result of their drinking during their lifetime, and almost 10% of those who used alcohol in the year preceding the survey experienced harm related to alcohol over that time. Harmful effects on physical health and friendships or social life were the types of alcohol-related harm that past-year drinkers most commonly reported experiencing in the year preceding the survey (see Figure 3).
- The more frequently a person drank, the more likely they were to report alcohol-related harm. Females were less likely than males to report alcohol-related harm during the preceding year unless the female drank at the same frequency as the male, in which case the two sexes were equally likely to report harm. The likelihood of reporting harm was significantly lower for those who were married or widowed, and decreased with age.
- About one-third of Albertans over the age of 18 reported experiencing harm associated with someone else's use of alcohol during the year preceding the survey. Respondents indicating such harm were more likely to be in

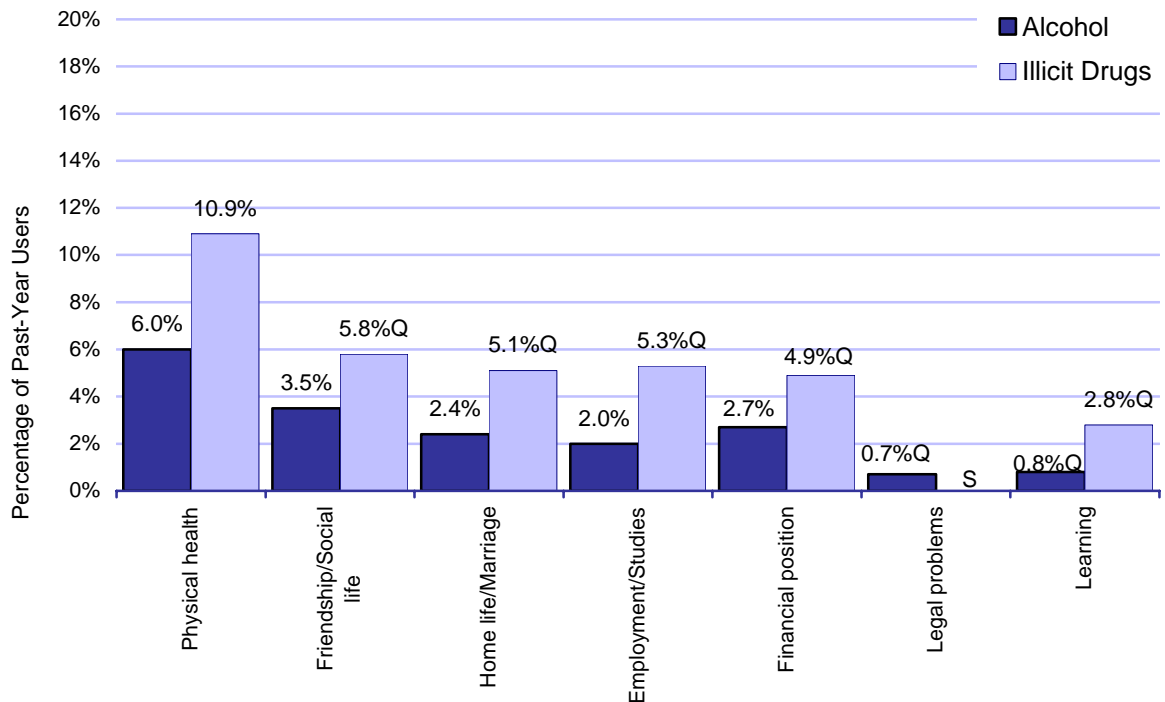
² The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) is a 10-item questionnaire used to identify high risk for harmful drinking or potential dependence (Babor, Higgins-Biddle, Saunders, & Monteiro, 2001).

the low-income range and less likely to be married or widowed. Likelihood of experiencing harm associated with someone else's use of alcohol decreased with age.

Although the vast majority of Albertans drinks alcoholic beverages, most do so in quantities and frequencies that are not harmful. That said, about one in 10 drinkers consumes five drinks or more at least weekly, one in five drinkers scores in the high-risk range of the AUDIT scale (suggesting harmful drinking or potential dependence), and almost one-third of drinkers will experience at least one type of alcohol-related harm (most likely in the areas of physical health and/or friendships and social life) over the course of their lives. The reported prevalence of past-year alcohol use was highest in 1989 at 81.9% and decreased quite substantially in the 1994 study to 76.6%. The 2004 study reveals a prevalence in between those figures, at 79.5%.

Demographic characteristics can be used to make predictions about alcohol use behaviour and related harm. For example, males are more likely to use alcohol and to use it at harmful levels. Additionally, the use of alcohol and the experience of related harm is generally lower for older Albertans, those who are married or widowed, and those who have a complete post-secondary education.

FIGURE 3: Past-Year Users in Alberta (Aged 15 Years and Up) Reporting Harm to Life Areas During the Past 12 Months Resulting From Their Alcohol or Drug Use



Q: Qualified release because of high sampling variability.

S: Estimate suppressed because of unacceptable high sampling variability.

Illicit drug use

- 48.7% of Albertans sampled reported the use of cannabis at least once during their lifetime. This corresponds to an estimated 1.1 million Albertans over the age of 15.
- 19.7% of Albertans sampled reported the use of an illicit drug other than cannabis during their lifetime. This corresponds to an estimated 460,000 Albertans. The illicit drugs (other than cannabis) most likely to have been used were cocaine/crack and hallucinogens, both used by 12.3% of Albertans at least once during their lifetime. "Speed" (amphetamines) was used at least once during their lives by 6.1% of the population; ecstasy by 5.1%; and heroin, steroids and solvents by less than 2%.
- 15.4% of Albertans sampled (corresponding to an estimated 360,000 Albertans) reported the use of cannabis at least once in the year preceding the survey and 3.5% of Albertans sampled reported the past-year use of an illicit drug other than cannabis (corresponding to an estimated 82,000 Albertans). Cocaine/crack was the drug other than cannabis most commonly used in the preceding year. Less than 1%³ of Alberta respondents reported the past-year use of hallucinogens, ecstasy, speed or steroids, and no respondents reported the past-year use of heroin or solvents.
- The likelihood of reporting the use of illicit drugs during the preceding year was higher among those who were male or living common-law or separated/divorced. The likelihood decreased with age. Those without a complete post-secondary education were more likely to report the past-year use of cannabis.
- The proportion of Albertans over 15 years of age reporting the past-year use of cannabis has increased from 6.5% in 1989 to 15.4% in 2004. The reported use of cocaine/crack has also increased from 1.1% in 1989 to 2.4% in the current study.
- 6.1% of Albertans sampled reported using speed at some point during their lifetime.
- Most users of cannabis, hallucinogens and speed began use at between 15 and 19 years of age; users of cocaine and ecstasy tended to have begun use in their twenties.
- The majority (60%) of lifetime illicit drug users in Alberta had used only cannabis during their lifetime; 38% of lifetime illicit drug users had used both cannabis and at least one other illicit drug. Similarly, 78% of past-year illicit drug users had used only cannabis in the preceding year, whereas 19% had used both cannabis and at least one other illicit drug.

³ Qualified release because of high sampling variability

- One in five past-year cannabis users in Alberta reportedly had not used the substance at all during the three months preceding the survey; 39.4% had used it monthly or less than monthly; 22.5% used weekly and 18.7% used daily or almost daily.
- 37.4% of Albertans who used an illicit drug other than cannabis during the year prior to the survey had not used the substance during the three months prior to the survey, and 49.6% used less than monthly.
- 36.3% of Albertans who reported the past-year use of cannabis said they had intentionally used it to treat a medical condition, with the majority reporting "pain" as the reason.

Illicit drug use problems

- 77.9% of respondents who reported the use of cannabis during the previous three months scored in the moderate or high risk ranges of the ASSIST scale⁴ (suggesting the need for intervention). Of users of illicit drugs other than cannabis, 62.4% scored in the moderate or high risk ranges.
- 26.1% of lifetime illicit drug users reported experiencing harm to at least one life area as a result of their illicit drug use at some point during their lifetime, and 18.4% of past-year users experienced such harm during the year preceding the survey. The most common types of harm associated with illicit drug use were in the areas of physical health and friendships or social life.

Almost half of Albertans have tried cannabis at least once in their lifetime and three in 20 Albertans have used it during the past year. Almost half of those who have used cannabis in the past year use the drug weekly or more, with about one in five using the drug daily or almost daily. The vast majority, about 80%, scores in the moderate to high risk ranges of the ASSIST scale (suggesting the need for intervention).

About one in five Albertans has tried an illicit drug other than cannabis over the course of a lifetime, but only 3.5% have used such a drug in the past year. Most past-year users (87%) use illicit drugs other than cannabis on a monthly basis or less and the majority (63%) scores in the moderate to high risk ranges of the ASSIST scale (suggesting the need for intervention). The proportion of Albertans over 15 years of age reporting the past-year use of cannabis has increased from 6.5% in 1989 to 15.4% in 2004. The reported use of cocaine/crack has also increased from 1.1% in 1989 to 2.4% in the current study.

About one-quarter of illicit drug users (cannabis included) will experience at least one type of drug-related harm over the course of their lives and, as with

⁴ The World Health Organization (WHO) Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST) was used to separately estimate the need for intervention associated with cannabis use and the need associated with use of illicit drugs other than cannabis (WHO ASSIST Working Group, 2002).

alcohol, most likely in the areas of physical health and/or friendships and social life.

Demographic characteristics can be used to make predictions about illicit drug use behaviour and related harm. For example, males are more likely to use illicit drugs, as are those who do not have a complete post-secondary education and those who live common-law or are separated. Conversely, the likelihood of having used illicit drugs is lower for older Albertans, as is the likelihood of having experienced harm from illicit drug use.

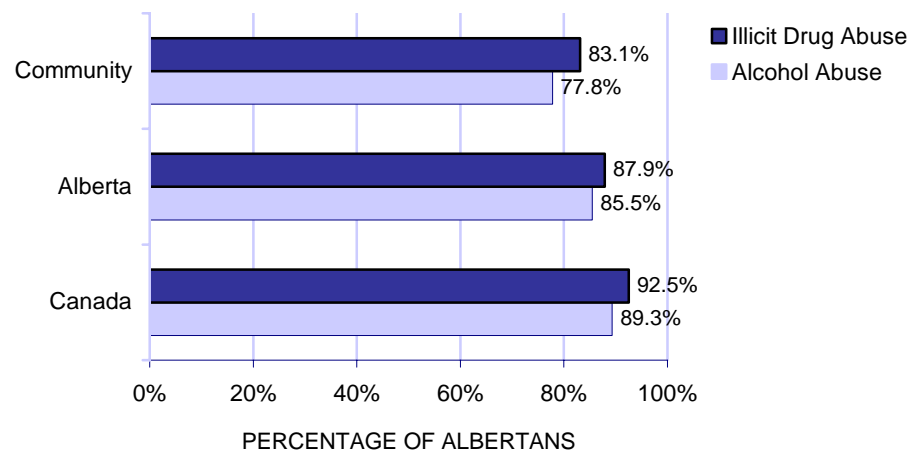
Public opinion about alcohol and illicit drug abuse

- As shown in Figure 4, Albertans generally viewed alcohol abuse and illicit drug abuse as serious issues whether considering it in Canada, in Alberta, or in their own community. In particular, females were more likely to view alcohol abuse and illicit drug abuse as serious in Alberta and in their own communities.
- Albertans generally supported existing alcohol policy and initiatives (see Figure 5). For example, almost two-thirds (62.7%) of Albertans agreed that the provincial government was right in closing all government-run liquor stores and allowing privately run stores to sell alcohol. Most Albertans (97.1%) agreed with random police spot-checks to catch drinking drivers.
- Albertans were split in opinion on a few alcohol policy options and initiatives (see Figure 5). Just over half (56.7%) disagreed with prohibiting TV alcohol advertising and just under half (43.3%) agreed that government should prohibit wine, liquor and beer advertising on TV. About half (48.7%) of Albertans thought the legal drinking age of 18 should remain the same and about half (45.7%) thought it should be raised.
- There was strong support for prevention and treatment. The vast majority (80.4%) of Albertans thought prevention and treatment are the best way to address the drug issue in Canada; only about one-fifth (19.6%) thought law enforcement and incarceration are the best approach.
- When asked about four policy programs for illicit drug abuse (methadone maintenance, needle exchange, harm reduction strategies, and drug treatment courts), respondents were most familiar with needle exchange programs, with most (84.8%) reporting that they had heard about them. Over two-thirds of all respondents supported each of the four policy programs.
- Albertans generally favoured drug treatment and harm reduction efforts as well as legal action against illicit drug abuse. As shown in Figure 6, there was substantial agreement for programs offering clean needles or drug kits (76.7%) and health programs to reduce harm without requiring users to stop consuming illicit drugs (61.5%). One notable exception is that there was considerable disagreement with providing night shelters for people who are homeless without requiring users to stop consuming alcohol and illicit

drugs (62.5%). There was also very strong agreement for government pursuing legal action against sellers of illicit drugs (96%) and against illicit drug users (80%).

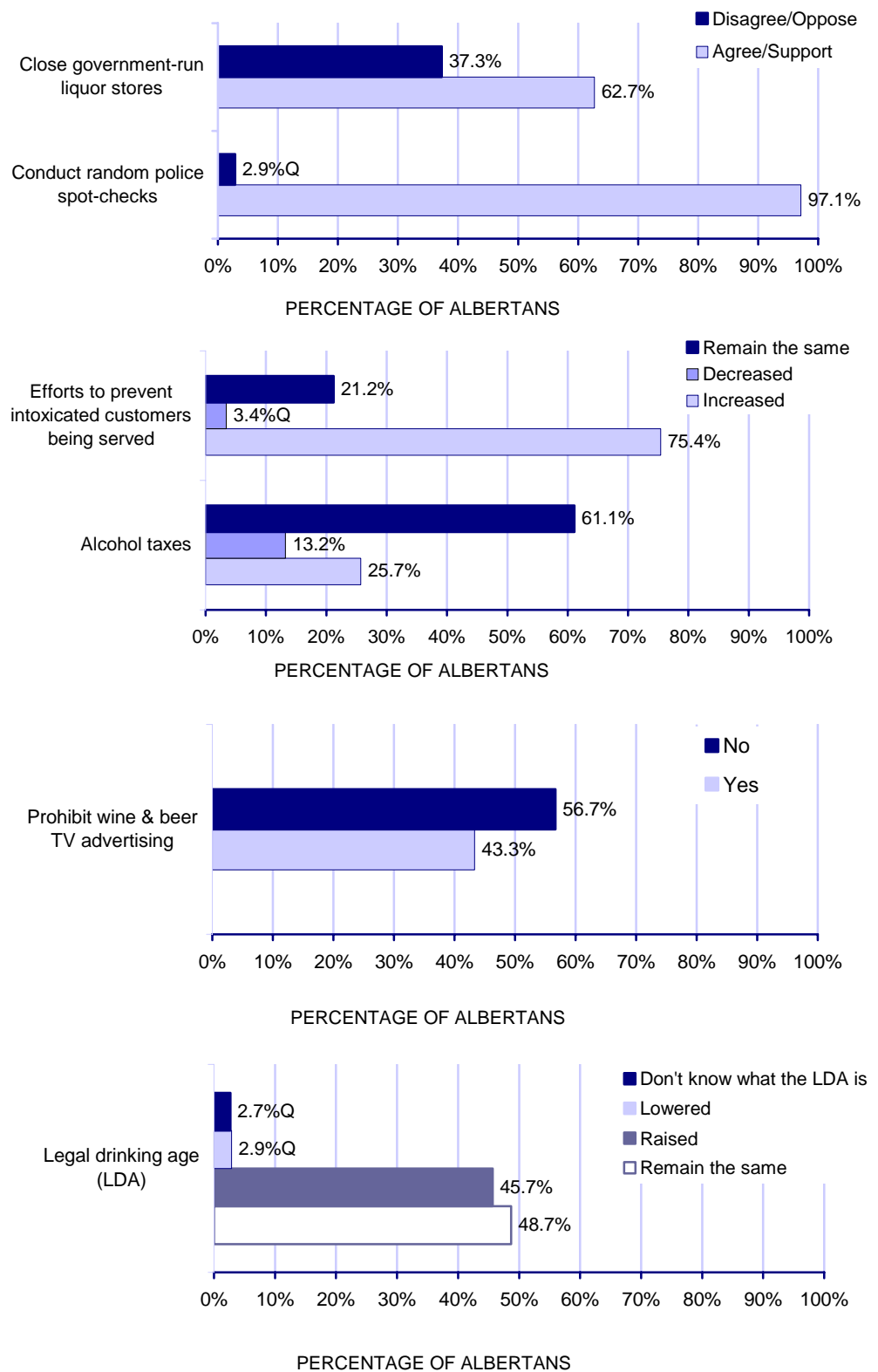
- Albertans were almost evenly divided on the question of whether possessing small amounts of cannabis should be illegal, with the proportion favouring keeping it illegal (52.6%) being a bit higher than that indicating it should not be illegal (47.4%).
- Three-quarters (74.6%) of Albertans reported that they had heard about the Government of Canada's proposed legislation to change the penalty for possession of 15 grams or less of cannabis from a criminal sanction to a fine only (see Figure 7). Of all respondents, just over half of Albertans (58.4%) indicated they supported such a change in legislation.

Figure 4: Public Opinion of Albertans (Aged 15 Years and Up) About the Seriousness of Alcohol and Illicit Drug Abuse in Canada, Alberta, and Their Community



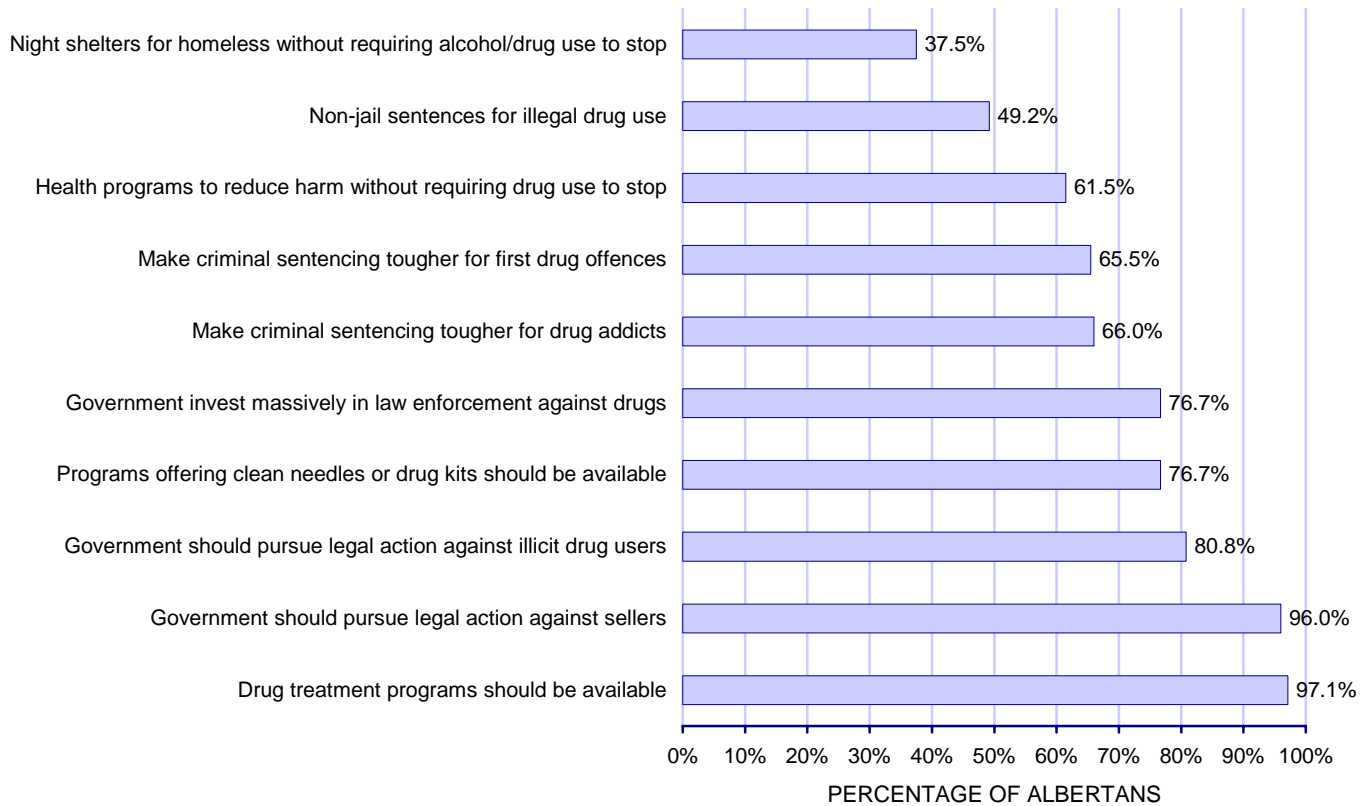
Albertans generally view alcohol abuse and illicit drug abuse as serious issues whether considering it in Canada, in Alberta or in their own community. Overall, there is strong public support for existing alcohol control policies and initiatives, as well as for current drug policy programs and government actions to reduce illicit drug use and consequences of abuse. The results suggest that Albertans would like a strong response to this serious issue and want a range of responses that includes prevention and treatment as well as legal action. Albertans tend to support the status quo on cannabis laws, as reflected in their division of opinions on questions related to cannabis. As well, although there is support for harm reduction in general, there is some disagreement on specific harm reduction efforts.

FIGURE 5: Public Opinion of Albertans (Aged 15 Years and Up) About Alcohol Policy Options and Initiatives



^Q Qualified release because of high sampling variability.

FIGURE 6: Albertans (Aged 15 Years and Up) Who Agree With Government Actions to Reduce Illicit Drug Use and Consequences of Abuse



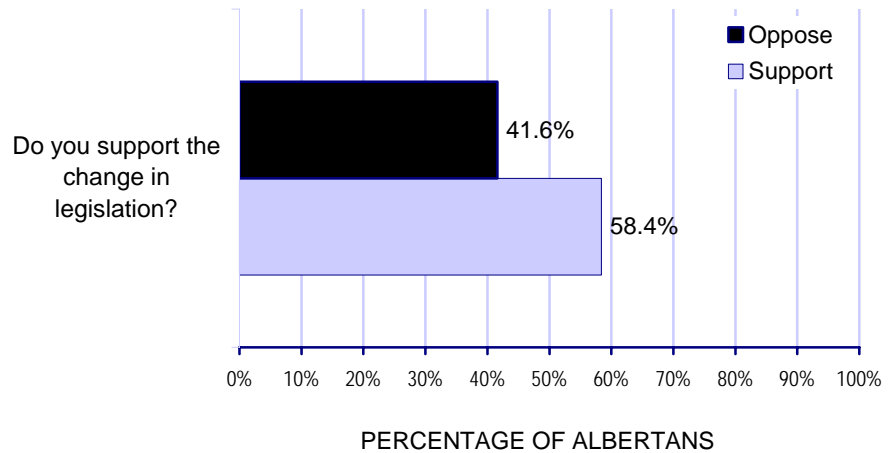
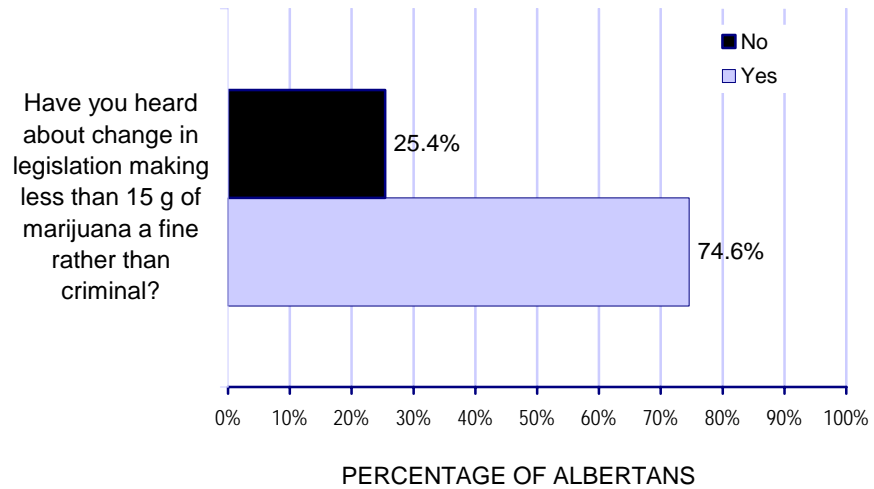
More specifically on alcohol policy, most Albertans think the provincial government was right in closing all government-run liquor stores and allowing privately run stores to sell alcohol. The majority thinks current tax levels should remain the same, favours random police spot-checks to catch drinking drivers, and supports efforts to prevent drunken customers from being served. However, Albertans are split on their views about raising the legal drinking age and whether TV alcohol advertising should be prohibited.

Differences were noted related to gender and drinking status. Females are more likely to think taxes on alcoholic beverages should be increased, and to support an increase in the legal drinking age and the prohibition of alcohol advertising on television. Those who drank in the past 12 months are more likely to think taxes on alcohol, the legal drinking age and efforts to prevent drunken customers from being served should remain the same.

Overall, there is strong support for drug policy programs and government actions to reduce illicit drug use and consequences of abuse. The majority supports methadone maintenance programs, needle exchange programs, harm reduction strategies and drug treatment courts. Knowledge of these options varies, with needle exchange and methadone maintenance programs being

the most known and harm reduction strategies and drug treatment courts being least known. Support for these drug policy programs increases with age and education.

FIGURE 7: Public Opinion of Albertans (Aged 15 Years and Up) About the Legal Status of Cannabis



Albertans are in favour of drug treatment and harm reduction efforts as well as legal action to respond to drug issues. For example, the vast majority agrees with drug treatment programs and with the government pursuing legal action against illicit drug sellers and, to a lesser extent, legal action against drug users. There is public support in general for health programs to reduce harm without requiring alcohol and illicit drug use to stop, but there is equally strong opposition to night shelters for the homeless without requiring alcohol and illicit drug use to stop, which suggests some opposition to harm reduction.

Albertans are split on whether possession of a small amount of cannabis should be illegal. About half of Albertans think possession of a small amount should be illegal and that there should be a penalty. However, most of these Albertans

think the penalty should be a fine. Albertans are split in their views about the proposed legislation being considered by the federal government to change the penalty for possession of 15 grams or less of cannabis from a criminal sanction to a fine only. Just over half of Albertans are in favour. Support for a more liberal cannabis policy is strongest among males and those who have used alcohol or any illicit drugs in the past year.

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Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission
An Agency of the Government of Alberta

For more information, contact your local AADAC office,
call 1-866-33AADAC or visit our website at www.aadac.com