

# **Best Practices for Youth Substance Use Infographics:** Environmental Scan & Recommendations

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# About the Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy

The Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy is a coalition of cross-sectoral partner agencies and members of the lived and living experience community, who are working to implement a 4-pillar drug strategy in the municipalities of Wellington County and the City of Guelph. The pillars include prevention, community safety, harm reduction, and treatment & recovery.

# Introduction

Youth substance use is an important public health issue, with young people aged 15-24 more likely to experience mental illness and/or substance use disorders than any other age group (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2025). Posters and infographics are commonly used to share information related to prevention and harm reduction. These are often designed to communicate risks, community resources, and protective behaviours. However, the messages and visuals can shape how youth engage with this information, and in turn, their decisions around substance use. Evidence suggests that prevention- and fear-based messaging alone may not always reflect youth's lived experiences, particularly when it fails to acknowledge the underlying reasons why youth may use substances. This disconnect highlights the need to integrate harm reduction, relatable framing, and non-judgmental messaging. Additionally, visual elements such as colour, layout, and icons should be carefully considered, as they shape how messages are interpreted and can influence engagement and behaviour.

This environmental scan identifies and analyzes youth-focused substance use infographics in Canada and the United States. The purpose is to examine visual and messaging strategies used by public health agencies, government and non-governmental organizations or community services. Specifically, this scan addresses the research question:

**What visual and messaging strategies are used in youth substance use posters in Canada and the United States?**

## *Population, Concept, Context (PPC)*

- Population: Youth and young adults (approximately ages 15–24)
- Concept: Substance use-related infographics
- Context: Public health, government, or NGO materials in Canada and the U.S.

For the purpose of this environmental scan, following the United Nations and World Health Organization's definition, youth are defined as those aged 15-24 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013). Canada and the U.S. were chosen because they face similar challenges related to youth substance use, and many influential campaigns and communication strategies are developed by U.S. organizations.

# Findings

## *Messaging*

Messaging varied across resources and appeared to differ by age group. Resources targeting youth mostly emphasized prevention and risk-based messaging. These resources often highlighted physical and mental health consequences and used fear-based language (Figure 1). Substance use was typically framed as something to be avoided, with emphasis on early identification of risky behaviours for parents and educators.

Things you should know about **alcohol**

Providing you with information to make your own decisions



You have the choice to drink or not drink alcohol. Having more information can help you make decisions. Here's some general information about alcohol and some examples of how alcohol can affect you and others around you:

What is alcohol?

Alcohol is a clear liquid that is produced by fermenting or distilling various fruits, vegetables or grains. It is found in many different beverages. Alcohol is a drug, even though many people don't think of it that way. When people consume alcohol, they may not feel the effects of it right away.

Drinking alcohol can make you feel and act:

- more calm and relaxed
- more talkative and less shy
- reactive and confrontational
- more emotional or depressed.

It can make it harder for you to:

- think clearly
- make decisions
- do various tasks
- control your emotions.



**No matter how often you drink alcohol, it has many short-term and long-term effects on your body.**

Things to know about alcohol



Drinking alcohol poses a greater physical and mental health risk than cannabis and many illegal drugs. It's important to learn more about the substances you put in your body.

Drinking alcohol can affect many areas of your health, including:

- changes in appetite and sleep
- loss of interest in hobbies
- changes in your relationships with family and friends
- increased irritability
- feeling useless, depressed or hopeless, or having low self-esteem
- impacts on your emotional and mental health.

Alcohol can cause issues with:

- friends and family
- school and work
- the law and money.

If you're having trouble reaching out, try to talk or text with a helpline—like Kids Help Phone (1 800 668-6868), or text CONNECT to 686868 to chat with a volunteer crisis responder.

**1 in 4**

About one in 4 people who drink alcohol may develop an addiction. Some people may find it hard to stop drinking, even if they want to.

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Part of the series *Things You Should Know About Mental Health*—developed in collaboration with youth

For more information, please see the resources section of the Game Changers website: [www.camh.ca/GCRResources](http://www.camh.ca/GCRResources)

camh X HUDSON'S BAY FOUNDATION

**Figure 1.** Developed by Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).

In contrast, resources targeting young adults and university students predominantly used a harm reduction lens. Messaging such as “If you use substances...” demonstrated a non-judgmental tone and acknowledged that some people may already be engaging in substance use. These resources offered strategies to reduce harm, rather than focusing solely on abstinence (Figure 2).

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University-focused posters in particular discussed harm reduction in the context of safer nightlife practices, recognizing party culture and providing tips such as staying with a friend, carrying naloxone, avoiding mixing substances, and testing unregulated substances.



**Figure 2.** Postcard developed by the Canadian Foundation for AIDS Research to promote safer substance use practices among youth.

Some resources also used a more informational approach, presenting facts of substances and their potential effects. Other posters aimed to increase knowledge and awareness while also providing tips to reduce harm (Figure 3). Overall, across all age groups, messaging was tailored to the audience (youth vs. young adult) and the intended goal.

## 3 Facts for Young People About Cocaine

Young people (aged 18–25 years) use cocaine more than any other age group. Young people are more at risk of the harms associated with cocaine use. If you are using cocaine or know someone who does, here are some facts to help reduce the risks.

### 1 Know the Risks

#### Health Risks

**Immediate** health risks associated with cocaine use include **accidental drug poisoning which can cause death.**

**Long-term** health risks of prolonged and frequent cocaine use include cardiovascular diseases.

Other risks may depend on how you use cocaine:



If you **snort** cocaine — risk of damage to your nasal cavity and respiratory illnesses



If you **smoke** cocaine — risk of damage to your lungs and worsening respiratory conditions



If you **inject** cocaine — risk of blood borne diseases and infections, like HIV and hepatitis B and C



If you **swallow** cocaine — risk of intestinal illnesses

#### Other Risks

Using cocaine can impair your ability to drive.



### 2 Check your Drugs

The risk of using cocaine with other unexpected toxic drugs is high and has greatly increased in the past five years.

Drug checking can tell you the contents of your drugs to help you make an informed decision about use.

Find out more information on how to check your drugs, contact your local Community Health Center or Public Health Unit near you.

### 3 Be Prepared

#### Pace yourself when using cocaine.

#### Avoid using cocaine with other drugs.

Drugs like alcohol, cannabis, ecstasy (MDMA), and prescription stimulants like Ritalin® mask or increase the effects of cocaine and may increase the likelihood of an adverse reaction.

#### Don't use alone.

The risk of accidental drug poisoning is higher when you use drugs alone. It is best to use cocaine with people you trust, so they can help you if needed.

#### Carry naloxone.

Naloxone reverses accidental drug poisoning from possible opioid contaminants in cocaine.

#### Know your rights.

Call 911 if you suspect accidental drug poisoning. You will **NOT** be charged for having small amounts of drugs on you due to *The Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act*.

#### Plan a safe ride home.

Cocaine-impaired driving is a risk to yourself and others.

Learn more at [ccsa.ca](https://www.ccsa.ca) and check out our resources

[Stimulants: Do Drugs Contain What People Think They Contain?: Results from the Community Urinalysis and Self-Report Project](#)  
[What Do People Who Use Drugs Want and Need? \(Results from the Community Urinalysis and Self-Report Project\)](#)



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**Figure 3.** Infographic developed by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction.

## *Framing*

Framing also varied across youth resources, with several using metaphor-based approaches. Metaphor-based framing uses figurative language to represent substance use or its effects, rather than describing them literally. This makes messaging more memorable and relatable for youth. For example, some posters used dramatic, abstinence-focused metaphors, like “Drugs bring drama” or “Drugs and your body have a toxic relationship,” portraying substance use as a source of conflict (Figure 4). Other resources used metaphors like “Beware of the fake & switch” to highlight the hidden risks of non-prescribed or counterfeit pills.



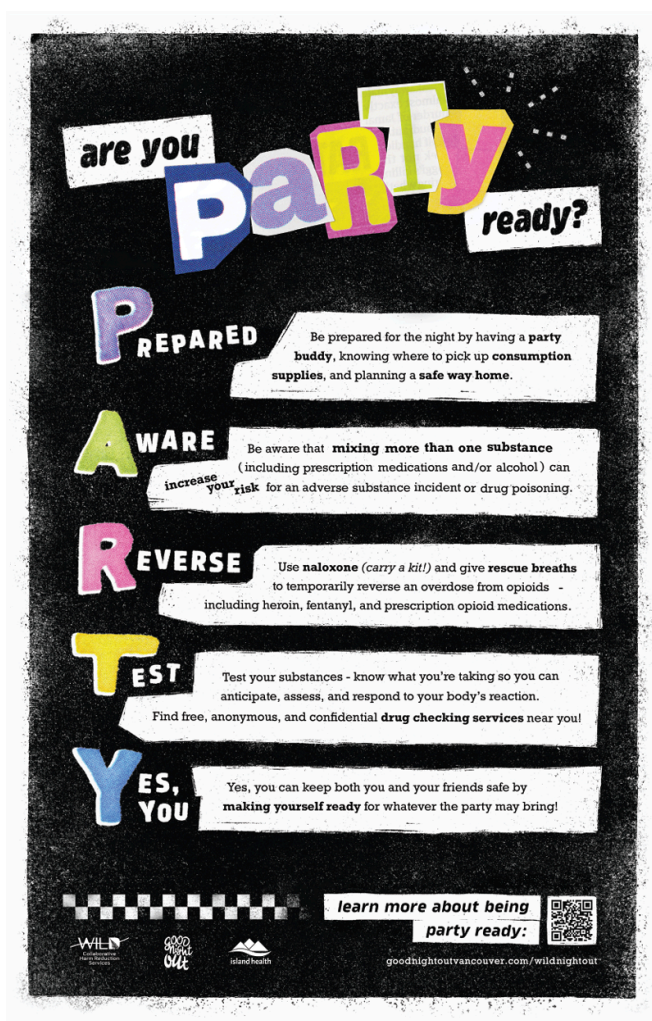
**Figure 2.** Social media post developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Some used empowerment and self-compassion (Figure 2). Phrases such as “be kind to yourself” or “know your personal limit” encourage youth to look after their own well-being and recognize their personal boundaries. Additionally, some resources encouraged young people to look after their friends and prioritize collective safety (Figure 3), whether through the *Good Samaritan Act*<sup>1</sup> or by having a buddy.

### *Colour and design*

Colour choices and visual composition varied depending on the poster’s audience and purpose. Nightlife-focused materials often used vibrant blues and purples (Figure 5), while softer greens and blues were often used in harm reduction or informational posters, such as Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Developed by Good Night Out, a British Columbia based non-profit.

<sup>1</sup>The *Good Samaritan Act* provides legal protection for those who seek emergency assistance during an overdose. This may include the person experiencing an overdose, or the person who seeks help.

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Many posters used cohesive colour palettes for consistency, and simple, accessible fonts such as Open Sans were commonly used for the body of text. Posters that used creative layouts, attention-grabbing colours with high saturation, or design elements closely tied to the poster's message were generally more visually appealing and engaging, such as Figure 5.

### ***Text***

Text presentation depended on the poster's goal and target audience. Informational posters often used longer blocks of text to provide descriptions of substances and their effects, including physical, mental, and social consequences. In contrast, nightlife- or harm reduction-focused materials tended to use shorter, bulleted, or stepwise text, so messages could be quickly scanned and easily remembered. Text formatting often reflected visual hierarchy, using size, weight, and placement to guide attention to the most important points first. For example, Figure 2 increases the font size for headings like "Know the risks" and "Check your drugs," while Figure 3 bolds terms like "naloxone" and "consumption supplies" and uses a stepwise layout to guide readers through safe practices. Other posters use similar techniques to organize the layout and increase comprehension. Across all materials, language was accessible with minimal jargon and stigmatizing language. Most infographics did not use the general term "substance use," instead referring directly to specific drugs, like "cocaine," "alcohol," or "vapes." Overall, text formatting and structure were tied to the intended purpose: whether to inform, caution, or guide safer practices.

### ***Images and icons***

Images were contextually relevant. Icons were often used to highlight key points or safety tips. Many posters depicted images of alcohol, pills, cannabis, vapes, or needles. Visuals were usually organized into clear sections that matched the layout of the text, helping make the information easier to follow. Several posters also included links or QR codes to additional resources. Overall, the imagery supported the tone and purpose of each poster, whether focused on prevention, harm reduction, or providing general information.

# Discussion

Overall, infographics used harm reduction, prevention, or informational messaging depending on the target audience and intended goal. Youth-focused (versus young adult) infographics mostly relied on abstinence- and fear-based messaging; however, research suggests this often does not align with youths' lived experiences (Hashemi & Vogel, 2024). Hashemi and Vogel (2024) reported that youth often observe peers using substances and see a mismatch between prevention messaging and the relatively lower-risk behaviours that occur. They also expressed fear about possible dangers, like alcohol poisoning, without guidance beyond the simple message of "just don't do it" that often occurs in prevention-focused infographics or campaigns and puts youth at risk (Hashemi & Vogel, 2024).

Another reason for this disconnect is that many posters do not address why youth may choose to use substances in the first place. The CCSA, based on youth feedback, recommends identifying the "why" when addressing substance use with youth (Wood, 2025). Youth may use substances for a variety of reasons, such as curiosity, coping with stress, or mental health challenges (Wood, 2025). When these motivations are not addressed, prevention messaging may feel disconnected from youths' lived experiences (Wood, 2025). Messaging that reflects youths' realities is more credible and engaging and should combine harm reduction and prevention messaging while acknowledging these underlying motivations to create a more comprehensive approach (Hashemi & Vogel, 2024; Heward et al., 2024; Winer et al., 2022). Considering this, CCSA's poster (Figure 3) reflects several of these recommendations.

Beyond the overall messaging, the framing of content also shapes how youth interpret substance use. Metaphors, for instance, can increase message appeal and engagement, particularly when communicating abstract health concepts.

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According to Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (1980), metaphors structure understanding by mapping complex ideas onto more familiar experiences. For example, portraying substance use as a "toxic relationship," as seen in materials from the CDC, shifts their perception of drugs toward harm and manipulation. In this way, metaphor-based framing can influence whether substance use is understood as a personal flaw or as a health issue, which highlights the importance of language choices. Some campaigns also used established health communication theories to frame and ground their work. For example, CDC materials used the Health Belief Model, which emphasizes perceived risks, benefits, barriers, and cues to action that shape health behaviours (Alyafei & Carr, 2024). Considering health communication theories may strengthen the development of future resources.

Similarly, relational framing, a strategy presenting a message in terms of relationships between people, was used. Some infographics emphasized group accountability by encouraging youth to look out for their friends. Using collective language such as "we" or "us" creates shared responsibility. This matches with research showing that individuals are more likely to adopt protective behaviours when they perceive those behaviours as benefiting people they care about, rather than following abstract rules (Wong-Parodi & Garfin, 2022). Relational framing works particularly well for adolescents because identity development and social connections (i.e. discovering who they are and building peer relationships and belonging) are central to their lives during this stage (Ragelienė, 2016). Thus, encouraging youth to consider the safety of their friends may promote harm-reducing behaviours.

Infographics also used colour to shape how messages were communicated. Harm reduction-focused infographics frequently used softer greens and blues. These colours are associated with calm, low-arousal emotions such as comfort and relaxation (Jonaskaite & Mohr, 2025) and may strengthen the supportive tone of harm reduction messaging.

In contrast, nightlife-focused posters and social media campaigns, such as the CDC, used more saturated colours. Saturated colours are linked to higher-arousal and higher-power emotions, including excitement and intensity, and may resonate better with younger audiences (Jonaskaite & Mohr, 2025). In nightlife settings, this reflects the energy of parties and makes the message feel relevant. In prevention-focused infographics, stronger colour saturation may also increase visual impact and amplify existing fear-based messaging. Overall, these choices likely reinforce the tone of the message and must be considered.

Finally, many infographics used alcohol bottles, pills, cannabis leaves, vapes, or needles. These icons can help people quickly recognize the topic and make abstract concepts more concrete to increase clarity. However, research suggests that these icons can sometimes trigger emotional reactions, particularly for people with lived or living experience, which may elicit unintended thoughts and decisions (Hulsey et al., 2023). Despite these risks, organizations like the CDC, CCSA, and CAMH continue to use such imagery, likely because it effectively communicates the topic to broad audiences.

## *Recommendations*

Below are five recommendations to consider when developing youth-focused substance use resources:

1. **Integrate harm reduction with prevention messaging:** Youth-focused substance use resources should include harm reduction information in addition to prevention messaging. Research shows that abstinence-only approaches may not align with youths' lived experiences and can reduce credibility. Providing practical information about safer behaviours that are actionable, while recognizing risk, can better support youth.
2. **Consider grounding messaging in youths' motivations:** Acknowledge the underlying "why" of substance use (e.g., coping, stress, family). Addressing these motivations may improve relevance and effectiveness and also align with youths' lived experiences.

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3. **Leverage relational and identity-based framing:** Infographics should incorporate inclusive language (“we,” “us”) and emphasize looking out for friends. Framing protective behaviours as ways to care for friends, family, or peers may be more effective than directive messaging alone.
4. **Ground messaging in theory:** Use health communication frameworks (e.g., Health Belief Model, Conceptual Metaphor Theory) to structure messaging.
5. **Use icons, colour, and layout thoughtfully:** Design choices are not neutral. Colour, icons, and visual hierarchy impact message and engagement. Choose wisely based on the purpose and audience.

Implementing these may help improve the relevance and effectiveness of youth-focused substance use resources.

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# Appendix A

## *Methods*

Infographics and posters were identified through a search process completed between February 19 and February 26, 2026. Sources included:

- Google searches using specific keywords
- Government websites (e.g., Government of Canada, CDC)
- NGO websites (e.g., CATIE, Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction [CCSA])

The following search strings were used:

- youth substance use infographic 2020..2026
- youth substance use poster 2020..2026
- youth opioid infographic OR teen opioid infographic 2020..2026
- youth harm reduction infographic 2020..2026
- youth harm reduction poster 2020..2026
- safe nightlife poster OR safe nightlife campaign 2020..2026
- youth cannabis poster OR youth cannabis infographic
- youth alcohol poster OR youth alcohol infographic

For convenience, the first five pages of results were screened for relevance using the PCC framework. A complete list of infographics were collected in an [Excel spreadsheet](#) identifying the date collected, organization, search strategy, number of pages screened, and URL. Further details about the search strategy can be found in the previously mentioned Excel spreadsheet.

Relevant infographics and posters were analyzed for messaging type, framing strategies, colour, design, text, and icons. Patterns were identified and summarized by bullet points first and then synthesized.