

Drug Abuse among Immigrant Youth in Canada

Qin Wei

Abstract—There has been an increased number of immigrants arriving in Canada and a concurrent rise in the number of immigrant youth suffering from drug abuse. Immigrant youths' drug abuse has become a significant social and public health concern for researchers. This paper explores the nature of immigrant youths' drug abuse by examining the factors influencing the onset of substance misuse, the barriers that discourage youth to seek out treatment, and how to resolve addictions amidst immigrant youth. Findings demonstrate that diminished parental supervision, acculturation challenges, peer conformity, discrimination, and ethnic marginalization are all significant factors influencing youth to use drugs as an outlet for their pain, while culturally incompetent care and fear of family and culture-based addiction stigma act as barriers discouraging youth from seeking out addiction support. To resolve addiction challenges amidst immigrant youth, future research should focus on promoting and implementing culturally sensitive practices and psychoeducational initiatives into immigrant communities and within public health policies.

Keywords—Approaches, barriers, drug abuse, Canada, immigrant youth.

I. INTRODUCTION

WITH an increasing number of immigrants arriving into Canada, drug abuse among immigrant youth has aroused public health concerns. In 2018, Canada legalized marijuana; one might presume that people in general, especially young people who are avid users of marijuana may celebrate this new legislation as a way of not having their marijuana usage legally hindered. Despite the fact that young people often regard drug usage as a normal experience of adolescent years, research consistently documents the health implications that result from drug abuse, in addition to other diminished functioning of healthy social development, thought patterns, and reaction speeds [1]. Approximately one in five Canadians aged 15 years and older will experience a problem with drug abuse in their lifetime [2]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, drug abuse became rampant amongst immigrant youth resulting in a growing number of immigrant youth with damaged physical and mental health. Chadi and Belanger explain that drug abuse makes youth more susceptible to contracting the COVID-19 virus due to drug abuse weakening respiratory and cardiovascular health and therefore increasing the risk of one's immune and physical health system in general becoming compromised [3]. Through a scoping review, Li et al. used a family-based perspective exploring immigrant youth substance use prevention programs [4]. The authors suggest an increase in immigrant parents' awareness and knowledge on drug abuse with simultaneous promotion of anti-drug abuse initiatives in policy for preventative measures against drug abuse for

immigrant youth. The Government of Canada evaluates the national anti-drug strategies and their report demonstrates the high economic, tax, health and social costs drug abuse causes for youth, their families, communities and the greater societal system [5].

This paper examines the factors influencing the onset of substance abuse amongst immigrant youth in addition to the barriers preventing youth from retrieving support for their addictions. It also discusses drug abuse prevention at different levels in society. It concludes with additional suggestions related to other strategies necessary to resolve addictions amidst immigrant youth.

II. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE ONSET OF DRUG ABUSE

Addictive behaviors can be traced back to the adolescent stage and into the early adult years [6]. Although first-generation immigrant youth drug abuse is generally lower than in subsequent generations, the possibility of the development of addiction appears to increase with greater acculturation [7]. For immigrant youth, it appears that the factors that influence the onset of drug addiction are absent parental supervision, ethnic dislocation, marginalization and racism, and peer influence.

Absence in Parental Supervision

Immigrant youth often lack support and supervision from their parents due to their parents having to prioritize their family's basic survival needs such as housing and employment, as they attempt to settle into their new country [7]. Attempting to survive in a new country is exhausting and time-consuming, leading immigrant youths' parents to become physically and emotionally distant from their children and naturally neglecting their children's emotional and psychological needs. Without parental teaching, supervision or awareness, the risk of drug abuse among immigrant youth increases significantly. Simultaneously, different sociocultural stressors including becoming accustomed to a new language, cultural shock and employment repositioning often overwhelm immigrant parents [8]. Indeed, migration begets a myriad of stressors that may trigger immigrant parents to develop complex medical conditions such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [9]. When facing these pressures and health challenges, parents are likely to displace their negative emotions onto their children, or worse yet, abuse them verbally or physically. This situation may push immigrant youth towards drug abuse.

Ethnic Dislocation

While their parents are confronting their own struggles in acculturating to their new environment, so are the immigrant

Qin Wei is with University of Toronto, Canada (e-mail: qin.wei@mail.utoronto.ca).

youth as they face ethnic dislocation. In fact, immigrant youth are faced with the same challenges encountered by their parents. Dislocation often comes from a challenge in finding belonging in one's native culture and adjusting to one's new country's culture [7]. Without effective acculturation, immigrant youth may lose their feeling of belonging anywhere. They may feel that they do not belong to either culture. Suffering from ethnic dislocation and the loss of cultural identity, they may feel confused, frustrated and lost. It is an internally conflictual feeling being caught between two different cultures and attempting to still feel connected to one's native culture while, in many respects, being rejected by the new country's culture. Drug abuse can become a desired, but maladaptive coping behavior in order to cope with this feeling of cultural alienation [9].

Marginalization and Racism

Immigrant youth often experience more racism and discrimination than their Canadian-born peers do. These painful experiences may have a direct and negative impact on their psychosocial outcomes [10]. Immigrant youth are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than their Canadian-born peers [11]. Immigrant youth are also at higher risk than their Canadian-born peers of developing depression. Suffering from depression and anxiety increases people's susceptibility of gravitating towards drug addiction in order to cope with this pain. Immigrant youth may believe that drug abuse will relieve their depression. Some of them are eager to escape troubling thoughts by increasing the amount of drugs they consume.

Peer Influence

Peer influence may be a significant reason facilitating immigrant youths' drug abuse. Studies show that the younger a person is, the more likely they are to develop an addiction [12]. Young people require love, care and support. When they fail to receive these from their family, peer groups become the most readily available source of support. In fact, peers play a significant role in the growth and maturing of young people. Young people, especially at the adolescent stage, are in the phase of self-realization and are at a stage where their friends' opinions are significant factors influencing their self-perception. Recreational drug use may serve as a way of conforming to peer pressures for some youth. For others, the experience of intoxication may be a part of their natural curiosity surrounding being "high" [13]. Indeed, immigrant youth, like all youth, are just as vulnerable to youth influence as are their Canadian-born peers as a way of fitting into their peer circle [14].

III. IMMIGRANT YOUTH BARRIERS TO ADDICTION THERAPY

Immigrant youth can encounter many barriers when they seek or access care for the addiction therapy. Mental illness and addiction stigma, cultural insensitivity and language barriers are the dominant hindrances discouraging youth from seeking drug treatment.

Immigrant youth's native cultural background may consider drug abuse and addiction therapy shameful. The cultural stigmatization attached to addiction is a major barrier in accepting diagnosis and treatment for immigrant youth. Immigrant youth may feel more stressed and hesitant than their Canadian-born peers towards seeking help for drug abuse problems [14]. For example, immigrant youth who come from China may hide their mental illness and drug related problems because of stigma in Chinese culture. In misunderstanding addiction symptoms and the nature of addictions, immigrant youth or their parents may overlook these signs and mistake them for physical illnesses [15]. Overlooking these symptoms may delay the timely report and treatment of addiction. Contrarily, an Ontarian student drug use and health survey suggests that sometimes stigma plays a positive role as well by way of preventing immigrant youth from indulging in drug use [15].

Cultural Insensitivity

To compound stigma, marginalization and racism that immigrant youth face, some clinicians lack cultural sensitivity, cross-cultural awareness and training skills in working with diverse non-white populations. These are important barriers in immigrant youth's access to addiction therapy and the research supports the imperativeness in developing more culturally appropriate drug prevention programs and policies for immigrant youth in order to address this major health gap [7]. Although national preventive programs suggest the government's determination in addressing addiction among youth, the lack of focus on programs being culturally appropriate suggests that the target audience are those who are identified as White Canadian. Many addiction treatment approaches are not concerned with specific cultural and ethnic backgrounds and are therefore inappropriate for many immigrant youth populations. This leads immigrant youth and families to misunderstand therapeutic practices and negate their significance and thus lose interest or desire in receiving addiction therapy.

Language Barriers

Language differences from English or French in Canada is a barrier to accessing addiction therapy services and resources. Wagner and Waldron state that language is a barrier, which significantly affects mutual communication between immigrant youth and clinicians [16]. Immigrant youth and their parents may not have the necessary English or French linguistic skills to seek or participate in addiction therapy. The programs that are not accessible linguistically create a gap in knowledge for immigrant populations to know about how to treat their addictions and the benefits of receiving addiction support. Language barriers negatively influence immigrant youth and the greater immigrant populations' attitudes about treatment and other opportunities for positive collaboration with clinicians during addiction treatment. Additionally, therapeutic plans and steps remain difficult to implement for clinicians and immigrant youth when they fail to understand one another.

Research consistently notes the benefits of acknowledging and promoting diversity not only culturally but also linguistically as part of Canadian society, especially in the mental health service realm [17]. Ignoring the existence of diversity and lacking the characteristic of immigrant youth will impair the process and outcome of the addiction therapy.

IV. APPROACHES TO ADDRESS DRUG ABUSE AMONG IMMIGRANT YOUTH

Addressing drug abuse among immigrant youth requires collective action and consideration of different aspects of the problem. Action for drug abuse prevention needs to involve various levels of intervention on a micro and macro level.

It is helpful for immigrant youth to practice assertive skills and other coping behaviors against drug abuse. For example, immigrant youth need to learn how to counter the negative influence of peers. However, this does not mean they need to isolate themselves from society. They still need to connect with their peers and communities and integrate into society. In addition, it is important for immigrant youth to improve communication with family to decrease stressors and obtain support. Gaining maturity in managing personal emotions and enhancing problem-solving competence are helpful strategies as well.

Immigrant youth's parents need to play an active role in their children's lives. Part of the treatment options for drug abuse amongst immigrant youth populations needs to involve repairing strained family relationships as family approval and harmony are important for immigrant youth. Rush et al. state that early intervention for mental health problems could effectively prevent addiction [18]. If a positive and healthy relationship is built between immigrant youth and their parents, youth will feel more secure and develop closer connections to their family. They may become stronger and more resilient mentally, potentially reducing the possibility of drug abuse. It is necessary to identify some signs of drug abuse of their children for immigrant parents. Examples of behavioral changes parents need to recognize include school absenteeism, a growing disinterest in family interactions, changes in appetite and sleeping habits, difficulty concentrating, or change in moods and personality [19]. Parents also need to discuss drug abuse and its consequences with their children because appropriate information and communication may prevent problems from arising.

Another preventative method is the need for educational institutions, especially elementary and secondary, to be more active in helping immigrant youth. The school environment is a major area in immigrant youths' lives and is often the realm where drug abuse begins. Schools should play a role in instilling positive values into immigrant youth. Early detecting and problem-solving skills are helpful in reducing the risk of a drug abuse problem developing and deteriorating. Beehler et al. highlight that immigrant youth can benefit from a school-based cultural adjustment and trauma recovery [20]. Research notes that school-based drug abuse prevention programs are helpful in deterring immigrant youth from engaging in drug misuse [21].

Community and clinician professionals in therapist roles

need to consider culturally appropriate paradigms for immigrant youth in their therapeutic approaches. Community leaders could design programs that would offer immigrant youth information about drug use, misuse and abuse and provide direct avenues for accessing community resources. Clinicians also need to take the time to identify protective factors in the immigrant youth's family and community that prevent drug abuse. Harm reduction has been proved as a practical approach to reduce risks and harm associated with drug abuse [22]. More specific ethno-cultural strategies should be considered and pursued considering the well documented benefit of connection to cultural elements being a positive factor against engaging in addictions. Clinicians should become familiar with community resources and connect to local youth specialists. Clinicians do need to take some issues into consideration when treating their immigrant youth clients such as age and capacity as well as other matters including consent and confidentiality. Furthermore, clinicians need to take language barriers into account. Regardless of therapeutic modalities in which they are engaging, an effective therapy plan becomes very problematic if clinicians cannot communicate properly with the immigrant youth and their family.

The government needs to develop and implement more targeted policies that take into account the specific needs of immigrant youth drug abusers. In Canada, there is a drug prevention strategy for Canada's youth and federal government's national anti-drug strategy [23]. Though they provide general guidance for addiction among immigrant youth, it is necessary to find more specific ways to fill the cultural gap. The guidelines and strategies can be effective for immigrant youth only when their specific needs are considered. Caring for Kids New to Canada lists community resources for immigrant and refugee youth and offers guidance to clinicians who serve immigrant youth populations in health promotion strategies [15]. More research, funding and efforts need to be directed in this field. Lastly, anti-racist lenses need to be applied when engaged in policy making as it pertains to drug abuse amongst immigrant youth. Khenti discloses that the war on drug works creates unequal treatment and structural violence against Black Canadian immigrants [24], a statement that might resonate with other racialized immigrant groups. The government must demonstrate a meaningful and concrete leadership and a high level commitment for promoting the change for this significant public health issue [25].

V. CONCLUSION

As a multicultural immigrant country, Canada has the responsibility to care for matters related to drug abuse among immigrant youth. It needs to seek the factors which lead to addiction, identify barriers and promote ethno-cultural approaches at different levels. There are gaps in the current healthcare system as it pertains to addiction and mental health overall for immigrant youth. The implications for social work practice include insights into the roots of many immigrant youths' drug addiction and the importance of culturally relevant addiction treatment, including therapy. The key to reform is to provide culturally competent and diverse services which are

tailored to the community's linguistic and cultural values. Parental support, clinician awareness of complex cultural stigmas and sensitive problem-solving are all crucial to the successful treatment of drug abuse amongst immigrant youth populations in Canada. Not all immigrant youth have the same experience in Canada; however, there is a fundamental similarity of the challenges experienced by many immigrants in adjusting to a new environment.

REFERENCES

- [1] HealthLinkBC. Alcohol and drug use in young people. 2021. Available: <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/tp17749>
- [2] Government of Canada. The new Canadian drugs and substances strategy. 2016. Available: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/corporate/transparency/corporate-management-reporting/evaluation/health-canada-statement-national-anti-drug-strategy.html>
- [3] N. Chadi and R. Belanger. "COVID, youth, and substance use: critical messages for youth and families". *Canadian Paediatric Society*. 2020. Available: <https://www.cps.ca/en/blog-blogue/covid-youth-and-substance-use-critical-messages-for-youth-and-families>
- [4] Y. Y. Li, G. Maina, M. Pandey, J. Amoyaw, and Y. Fang. "Exploring family based immigrant youth substance use prevention programmes: a scoping review protocol". *BMJ Open*. 2021. Available: <https://www.doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2020-046766>
- [5] Department of Justice. "National anti-drug strategy. Evaluation". *Government of Canada*. 2021. Available: <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cp-pm/eval/rep-rap/12/nas-sna/p0.html>
- [6] M. Herie and W. J. W. Skinner. (Eds.). *Fundamentals of addictions: A practical guide for counsellors*. Toronto: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. 2014
- [7] D. Korczak. (Ed.). "Substance use and immigrant youth". *Caring for Kids New to Canada*. 2018. Available: <https://www.kidsnewtocanada.ca/mental-health/substance-use>
- [8] A. J. Pumariega and E. Rothe. "Leaving no children or families outside: The challenges of Immigration". *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. 2010, 80(4), pp. 505-515.
- [9] Addiction Center. Addiction and Refugees and immigrants. 2021. Available: <https://www.addictioncenter.com/addiction/refugees-immigrants/>
- [10] E. L. Yearwood, S. Crawford, M. Kell, and N. Moreno. "Immigrant youth at risk for disorders of mood: Recognizing complex dynamics". *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*. 2007, 21(3), pp. 162-171.
- [11] B. Christmas and B. Christmas. "What are we doing to protect newcomer youth in Canada, and help them succeed?". *Journal of Community Safety & Well-being*. 2017, 2(3). Available: <https://journalcswb.ca/index.php/cswb/article/view/52/112>
- [12] H. A. Hamilton, R. E. Mann, and S. Noh. "Adolescent, immigrant generation and stigmatizing attitudes toward drug addiction". *Addiction Research & Theory*. 2011, 19(4), pp. 344-351.
- [13] D. Qamar. Helping immigrant youth say no to drugs. *Canadian Immigrant*. Jan. 30, 2018. Available: <https://canadianimmigrant.ca/living/family-and-relationships/helping-immigrant-youth-say-no-to-drugs>
- [14] Evidence Exchange Network for Mental Health and Addictions. What do teen immigrants say about drug addiction?. 2013. Available: <https://www.eenet.ca/resource/what-do-teen-immigrants-say-about-drug-addiction>
- [15] Caring for Kids New to Canada. *Health promotion*. 2020. Available: <https://www.kidsnewtocanada.ca/health-promotion>
- [16] E. F. Wagner and H. B. Waldron. *Innovations in adolescent substance abuse interventions*. Oxford: Elsevier Science Ltd. 2001.
- [17] K. McKenzie, B. Agic, A. Tuck and M. Antwi, The case for diversity. Mental Health Commission of Canada. 2016. Available: https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/2016-10/case_for_diversity_oct_2016_eng.pdf
- [18] B. Rush, B. Fogg, L. Nadeau, and A. Furlong. *On the integration of mental health and substance use services and systems: Main report*. 2008. Available: <https://ccsa.ca/ccsa/pdf/Main-reportFINALa.pdf>
- [19] Canadian Mental Health Association. (2021). Understanding and finding help for substance use and addictions. Available: <https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/understanding-and-finding-help-for-substance-use-and-addictions/>
- [20] S. Beehler, D. Birman, and R. Campbell. The effectiveness of cultural adjustment and trauma services (CATS): Generating practice-based evidence on a comprehensive, school-based mental health intervention for immigrant youth. *American Journal of community psychology*. 2012, 50, pp. 155-168.
- [21] Government of Canada. *School-based drug abuse prevention: Promising and successful programs*. 2018. Available: <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/scldsd-drgbs/index-en.aspx>
- [22] YMCA. *Youth substance abuse program*. 2020. Available: <https://ymcagta.org/youth-programs/youth-substance-abuse-program>
- [23] Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. (2014). *The Canadian standards for youth substance abuse prevention: An overview*. Retrieved from <https://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2019-05/2014-CCSA-Canadian-Standards-Youth-Substance-Abuse-Prevention-Overview-en.pdf>
- [24] A. Khenti. The Canadian war on drugs: Structural violence and unequal treatment of black Canadians. *International Journal of Drug Policy*. 2014, 25, pp. 190-195.
- [25] M. E. Turpel-Lafond. A review of youth substance use services in B.C. Apr. 2019. Available: https://rcybc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/rcy_reviewyouthsubstance-final.pdf