

Quicknote #1: Five community risk factors for substance abuse in Hinton, Alberta

Beyond Boredom: Contributing Factors To Substance Abuse in Hinton, Alberta

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Introduction

Contrary to popular opinion, the causes of substance abuse in Hinton, and other resource-based communities, are not simply because people are bored and have too much money. In fact, recent research suggests that one of the main causes of substance abuse in Hinton is a lack of healthy social connections among family and community members. This is because a lack of healthy social connections may cause residents to feel isolated and unfulfilled, and thus more susceptible to developing an *unhealthy* attachment to alcohol and drugs.



“Humans are born with the need for relationships.
When relations are broken, their lives are missing something.”

- Research participant

In a recent Foothills Model Forest report called *Beyond Boredom: Contributing Factors to Substance Abuse in Hinton, Alberta*, researchers explored social and economic factors that contribute to alcohol and drug abuse. This Quicknote highlights five community risk factors associated with substance abuse and calls for a broader dialogue on issues of community sustainability.

Five community risk factors

What is it about the community of Hinton that limits healthy social connections? This study revealed five main features of the community that may be decreasing the level of social cohesion and facilitating a path towards alcohol and drug abuse. These five community risk factors are: 1) multiple, divergent sectors, 2) high income, 3) shift work, 4) transience, and 5) a union environment.

Multiple, divergent sectors

Hinton has multiple, divergent sectors – some high-paying (natural resource sectors), and others offering relatively low pay (service sector). This type of economic structure contributes to substance abuse in two ways. First, it has created a social structure characterized by growing income disparity and tightly-knit social groups, which has in turn decreased the overall level of social cohesion within the community. Rigid social groups in Hinton, for example, are based on sector employed and income levels. As one research participant stated, “The mill folks only hang out with the mill folks, and the mine folks hang out with the mine folks.” Second, within these two groups – the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ – money may create stress, though for different reasons. High income residents may feel stressed as they try to ‘keep up with the Joneses’ and

accumulate mounting debt, while low income residents may feel frustrated as they struggle with the high cost of living and remain excluded from certain social activities. Limited social connections and financial stress may cause feelings of isolation and hopelessness, leaving individuals vulnerable to substance abuse.

High income

The high income earned by people who work at the mill and mine has been a defining feature of Hinton for decades. Despite this prosperity, life in a “money town” can be problematic. First, the lure of earning a high income upon or before completing high school causes many young people to forego a post-secondary education for jobs at the mill and mine, or, more recently, in oil and gas. These individuals may never explore other opportunities, feel unfulfilled, and carry on with their high school drinking and drug use patterns well into their 20s, 30s, 40s, etc. Second, for high income earners, having a lot of money may fuel a desire to earn more money. This, in turn, drives people to work more and more hours, or cash in their unused vacation time, which consequently means less and less time with family and friends. As a result, family relationships, parenting, and other social relations suffer. This lack of fulfillment, social connection, and positive role modeling may lead children and adults to fill the void with alcohol or drugs.



Transience

Because of its resource-based nature and boom and bust cycles, over the years, Hinton has experienced a relatively high population turnover. Transience is a significant risk factor for substance abuse for a number of reasons. First, transient workers tend not to develop social connections within the community due to their short-term stay. As a result, transient workers may become isolated, lonely, and prone to misusing alcohol or drugs, either alone or with

a work group (i.e. a drinking network or subculture). Second, the large influx of transient oil and gas workers is very stressful for permanent residents as they experience the social disruption of longer line-ups, strangers, increased traffic, noise, etc. Residents may then turn to drinking or using drugs to relieve this stress. Third, drug trafficking becomes easier in a community where people regularly come and go.

Shift work

Past research has linked shift work, or “toxic work schedules,” to cardiovascular disease, hypertension, gastrointestinal disorders and mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression. This study found that shift work may also cause individuals to abuse substances to help them keep pace with their “work hard, play hard” mentality – with some substances “pumping you up so that you can continue to perform and do the job” and others as a “way

of relaxation.” In addition, a four-on and four-off work schedule may disrupt family routines (i.e., family dinners) and limit the amount of time families spend together, isolating the shift worker as well as the non-shift working spouse. Parenting, particularly in double income shift-working families, can also be severely limited, leaving children with an unstructured home life. A lack of family time and structure, as well as social isolation, may make children and adults susceptible to alcohol and drug abuse.

Union environment and a “culture of entitlement”

According to research participants, the union environment associated with Hinton’s major employers has given way to a so-called “culture of entitlement” among some workers. Research participants defined culture of entitlement as when people come to expect certain things (i.e., services, benefits) instead of thinking of these things as a privilege. This feeling of entitlement could put people at risk when it comes to alcohol and drugs because if people feel entitled to things then they may feel that there are “no consequences” to their actions (which may include deviant behaviour) and thus, they cannot become addicted to alcohol or drugs. It may also create an expectation that social agencies within the community, and not individuals themselves, are responsible for solving the community’s problems.

Conclusion

As illustrated above, substance abuse in Hinton is deeply rooted in family, work, and community life. As the root causes of substance abuse are multi-faceted, addressing the issue requires a broader dialogue and the development of holistic, well-integrated solutions, now and into the future. If left unchecked, substance abuse will continue to place downward pressure on community sustainability, decreasing human capacities, limiting healthy social connections, and affecting future generations.



For the full project report, *Beyond Boredom: Contributing factors to substance abuse in Hinton, Alberta*, see: <http://www.fmf.ca/publications.html#SocialScience>.

This Quicknote is one in a series of three.

For a summary of how the oil and gas boom has affected Hinton residents, Quicknote 2: *Boom times in Hinton, Alberta: The benefits and challenges of a changing economy*, will be available in March 2007.

For a summary of the solutions which emerged from this report, Quicknote 3: *Breaking unhealthy traditions: Community solutions to substance abuse in Hinton, Alberta*, will be available in May 2007.