



Life in Recovery from Addiction in Canada

The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA), together with the National Recovery Advisory Committee, conducted the first Canadian survey of people in recovery from addiction to alcohol and drugs. This survey provides a wealth of information about recovery in Canada that can inform healthcare providers, decision makers and the public as they work towards building a system of care and a society that supports the principles of recovery and celebrates recovery.

Key Messages

- Recovery is positive, achievable and sustainable.
- Recovery brings positive citizenship — engagement with family, friends, the community and the workforce. The vast majority of individuals in recovery describe a positive quality of life.
- Individuals use many different pathways in their recovery journey, including professional treatment services, informal supports and mutual-support groups.
- Many individuals experience challenges and barriers starting their recovery journey, including problems accessing services, financial barriers with privately funded treatment services and facilities, and more. However, fewer individuals experience barriers to sustaining recovery.

Why Does this Matter?

Addiction is a complex health and social issue that affects Canadians, causing harm to individuals, families and communities. Costs related to addiction and substance use are rising in Canada.^{1,2} For example, hospitalizing people with substance use disorders cost \$267 million in 2011, an increase of 22% from \$219 million in 2006.² However, recovery from addiction is possible when people have access to quality, evidence-informed services and supports.

What Did We Do?

CCSA is working with partners to change the conversation about addiction. We must move away from stigma towards compassion, understanding and celebration of the fact that people can and do recover from addiction. As part of this work, CCSA, together with leaders from the Canadian recovery community that form the National Recovery Advisory Committee, and with other experts, conducted the first nationwide survey of people in recovery from addiction to alcohol and drugs. The Canadian survey is

1 Rehm, J., Baliunas, D., Brochu, S., Fischer, B., Gnam, W., Patra, J., . . . Taylor, B. (2006). *The costs of substance abuse in Canada 2002*. Ottawa, Ont.: Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction.

2 Young, M.M., & Jesseman, R.J. (2014). *The impact of substance use disorders on hospital use*. Ottawa, Ont.: Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction.



based on previous Life in Recovery (LIR) surveys conducted in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. However, it is the first LIR survey to ask people about stigma and barriers to starting their journey of recovery and sustaining recovery.

The Canadian LIR study used an online survey that was available from April 18, 2016, to June 1, 2016. CCSA distributed the survey link to partners, stakeholders and other organizations in their network, which in turn shared the survey link with their networks of individuals in recovery.

“I recognized that drugs and alcohol had become more important than my family and the people I loved.”

The Canadian LIR survey results provide a detailed description of the experiences and lives of individuals in recovery, including information about their substance use and experiences during active addiction, the services and supports they used and how they are doing in different areas of life such as work, health and family.

Findings from this survey can inform healthcare providers, decision makers and the public about the types of resources and supports that can help people along their journey of recovery and the system-related challenges and barriers that stand in the way.

What Did We Find?

The Canadian LIR survey report details the findings from this survey and provides a wealth of information about the lives and experiences of people in recovery. A total of 855 people, who identified themselves as being in recovery from addiction, completed the survey. These people were 18 to 85 years of age, with an average age of 47 years; 45.7% identified themselves as male, 53.0% as female, and 1.3% as other. The following are key findings from the survey results:

Substance Use and Active Addiction

- Participants were young when they used substances for the first time (median age of 13 years) and when they first reported having an addiction (median age of 18 years). These ages did not differ by gender.
- Alcohol was the most commonly used substance, and the substance that participants preferred the most. A total of 93.3% of participants reported using alcohol during active addiction and 50.5% reported that alcohol was their preferred substance.

“Finding treatment during my youth when I needed it the most was next to impossible and my family couldn't afford a private treatment centre.”

Life in Recovery

- The majority of participants defined recovery as including abstinence, improved health, social connections and functioning, and higher quality of life.
- 90.7% reported their quality of life as either excellent, very good or good.
- 51.2% achieved recovery without experiencing a single relapse.

Journey of Recovery

- Participants reported that the most important reasons for starting their recovery journey were quality of life (69.1%), mental or emotional health (68.0%), marital, family or other relationships (64.9%), and physical health (45.5%).



- Participants used different pathways during their recovery journey. Many participants used a combination of professional treatment services, informal supports and mutual-support groups.
- The most common programs or supports used during their journeys were 12-step mutual-support groups (91.8%) and specialized addiction treatment programs (ranging from 60.6% for residential treatment to 5% for First Nations addiction treatment programs).

Stigma and Barriers to Recovery

- During active addiction, 48.7% experienced stigma or discrimination, compared to 33.2% who had such experiences during recovery.
- While 82.5% of participants experienced barriers to **starting** their journeys, 54.2% did **not** experience barriers to **sustaining** recovery.
- Some participants emphasized the need for more treatment facilities and options, with 47.1% reporting barriers that were specific to accessing treatment in the system.

System barriers to accessing treatment reported by participants
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Long delays for treatment• Lack of professional help for mental health or emotional problems• Cost of recovery services• Lack of programs or supports in their community• Quality of services in their community• Lack of programs or supports that met their cultural needs or were in their preferred language

Life during Active Addiction Compared to Life in Recovery

When comparing life during active addiction to life in recovery, participants experienced improvements in their work, finances, legal issues, family life and health.

“Recovery gives me freedom. It gives me choice. It allows me to follow my dreams. I am no longer chained to my addiction.”



Table 1. Comparison of life experiences during active addiction and during recovery

	Active Addiction	Recovery
Work and Study		
Remain steadily employed	52.6%	79.1%
Frequently miss work or school	60.7%	4.3%
Finances		
Frequently unable to pay your bills	61.2%	17.3%
Pay taxes on time	43.4%	77.4%
Legal Issues		
Get arrested	42.3%	2.3%
Drive under the influence of alcohol or other drugs	80.2%	3.5%
Family Life		
Lose custody of children	10.4%	1.4%
Commit or experience family violence	41.2%	4.9%
Health		
Get regular medical checkups	33.7%	82.8%
Use tobacco products	80.1%	34.2%

Of note is that the positive outcomes of recovery reported in the Canadian LIR survey are similar to those reported in LIR surveys conducted in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom.

What Does this Study Mean for You?

The survey findings show that recovery is achievable and leads to positive citizenship and positive life outcomes. People use different paths in their recovery journey, as shown by the variety of programs and informal supports reported by participants. However, participants also described problems accessing treatment, financial barriers with privately funded treatment services and facilities, stigma and discrimination, and other barriers to recovery.

These findings help us better understand what a system of care that supports recovery ought to look like. For example, such a system would offer a wide range of coordinated treatment, as well as support services in communities. Importantly, those services would be accessible and timely, as long wait times and financial challenges were among the common barriers mentioned by people who completed the survey. The results from the Canadian LIR survey can inform healthcare providers, decision makers and the public as they work toward building an effective system of care and a society that promotes and celebrates recovery.

What Can You Do?

To help support recovery, individuals and organizations can work to reduce stigma associated with addiction and recovery, and barriers to initiating and sustaining recovery. Individuals and organizations can also help by supporting quality programs and services, and reflecting the principles of recovery in their work. Finally, everyone can join the recovery movement in Canada.



CCSA is developing a resource for service providers and decision makers to increase knowledge about the principles of recovery, and the types of policies and practices that can help reduce barriers and create a system of care that supports recovery. This will be a living resource that can be updated as new research or practices become available, or as additional tools are needed. Visit CCSA's website to access this resource and others as they become available. Please contact recovery@ccsa.ca if you are interested in sharing examples of policies, practices or tools that support recovery, or if you have suggestions for new tools or resources that can be developed.

Where Can You Learn More?

The first Canadian LIR survey paints a picture of life in recovery for many in Canada. It demonstrates through personal stories what recovery means and what it looks like in our society and it informs how best to build a recovery-focused system of care. For more information about the results from the survey, see the [full report](#).

Visit CCSA's page on [Addiction Recovery](#) to find out more about the recovery movement in Canada, including our National Commitment to Recovery from Addiction in Canada, and to access other recovery resources as they become available.

ISBN 978-1-77178-411-5

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The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction changes lives by bringing people and knowledge together to reduce the harm of alcohol and other drugs on society. We partner with public, private and non-governmental organizations to improve the health and safety of Canadians.

CCSA activities and products are made possible through a financial contribution from Health Canada. The views of CCSA do not necessarily represent the views of the Government of Canada.