

Drug abuse 'a medical issue,' poll shows

Two-thirds of Canadians favour prevention, treatment programs over tougher law enforcement, national poll shows

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OTTAWA -- Two-thirds of Canadians believe the federal government, which has promised a tough new National Drug Strategy, should treat drug abuse as a medical problem requiring more prevention and treatment programs, according to a new national poll provided exclusively Monday to The Vancouver Sun.

But a clear majority of the remaining one-third of Canadians who favour a police crackdown on drug abuse are Conservative supporters, according to the new survey of just under 3,000 Canadians by Innovative Research Group Inc.

The survey was made public on the same day a group of West Coast medical experts slammed Prime Minister Stephen Harper's plan to introduce a tough new National Drug Strategy.

The Tory government has promised to put more emphasis on enforcement and less on so-called "harm reduction" approaches like Vancouver's supervised injection site for addicts.

Innovative spokesman Greg Lyle said the results may explain why Harper's Tories are advocating the law-and-order approach while questioning scientific studies praising harm reduction efforts.

"This is an issue where the Conservative world goes one way, the rest of the world goes another," Lyle said.

Harper, according to Lyle, would risk alienating his own support base if he backed the former Liberal policy that put more emphasis on harm reduction measures like injection sites and needle exchanges.

"Within the Tory base, [government support for] harm reduction would be



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problematic," said Lyle. "But in the broader public, that approach is where people are moving."

The on-line poll, which was launched Jan. 8 and concluded Monday, found 65 per cent of respondents agreed with the proposition that governments should treat the use of illegal drugs "as an illness and focus on prevention and treatment for addicts."

The remaining 35 per cent supported the assertion that Ottawa should treat illicit drug use "as a crime and [therefore] get tough on enforcement of drug laws among addicts."

British Columbians' views were in line with the national mood, with 66 per cent in favour of the softer approach and 34 per cent advocating law-and-order measures.

Ontarians (67 per cent viewing addiction as a medical problem) and Quebecers (65 per cent) were also in tune with the majority view, whereas Albertans (61 per cent) and Atlantic Canadians (56 per cent) were least likely to view the issue this way.

The poll found that 55 per cent of current Tory supporters back the get-tough approach, compared to 45 per cent of Conservative backers who believe addiction is a medical issue.

Roughly three-quarters of the supporters of other parties believe addiction is largely a medical matter.

Lyle said the results show the issue is a good one for opposition parties and problematic for Harper as the prime minister tries to solidify and expand his coalition into a possible majority government. He noted that a significant 45 per-cent minority of Tory backers see addiction as a medical matter.

"This is a great opposition issue because it divides the Tories but unites the opposition."

The survey of 2,938 adult Canadians is considered accurate to within 1.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, according to Innovative, a polling and research firm based in Toronto and Vancouver.

The error margin for the B.C. sample, which involved 382 respondents, is five points.

A study released Monday by the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, an agency partly funded by the provincial government, argued that the government is already spending a disproportionate amount of money on unproven enforcement measures.

"The proposed Americanization of the drug strategy towards entrenching a heavy-handed approach that relies on law enforcement will be a disaster," said report co-author Dr. Thomas Kerr in a statement.

"It is as if the federal government is willing to ignore a mountain of science to pursue an ideological agenda."

The Canadian Police Association, representing rank-and-file police officers

across Canada, and the RCMP have both criticized harm reduction policies.

Health Minister Tony Clement, who visited the Vancouver injection site earlier this month, announced on Sept. 1, 2006 that the government was rejecting a requested 3 1/2-year extension of the facility's licence. Instead, he said he would allow Insite to keep its doors open until the end of this year, pending further research, and said no more injection sites would be allowed elsewhere in Canada.

"Do safe injection sites contribute to lowering drug use and fighting addiction? Right now the only thing the research to date has proven conclusively is drug addicts need more help to get off drugs," Clement said at the time.

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