

We're all victims of substance abuse: High property-crime rates are a direct result of failure to treat addictions

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Somebody tried to break into my car this spring, hammering a screwdriver into the lock and then tugging enthusiastically on the front passenger window.

I count myself another victim of our drug policy. The attempted crime took place on a lovely residential street across from Government House, where Lt.-Gov. Iona Campagnolo lives.

In Victoria, according to police, 90 per cent of property crimes are committed by people hunting for drug money. That's almost 25 crimes a day, mostly petty offences like the assault on my aging Honda. But the cost is still high. The bill for fixing my car was almost \$400. And what's the damage done when peoples' sense of security is undermined by small crimes?

Those kinds of things weren't even included in the latest, most complete report on the costs of substance abuse in B.C. But the report still found that the abuse of drugs, alcohol and tobacco cost every British Columbian more than \$1,400 last year. The study by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse was the first attempt in a decade to calculate the costs of drug, alcohol and tobacco use.

It found substance abuse cost Canada \$39.8 billion in 2002 -- about \$6 billion more than the B.C. government spends on everything, from health care to policing.

Behind the numbers, there's a terrible human cost. Lives destroyed, families broken. For most of us, there's a moral obligation to help people in trouble -- and drug abusers are surely in trouble.

Even without the moral component, dealing with the problem makes economic sense. Reduce substance abuse and you reap huge benefits.

The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse study, based on 2002 data, found illegal drugs created direct and indirect costs of \$8.2 billion; alcohol abuse \$14.6 billion; and tobacco abuse \$17 billion. Abuse cost \$24.3 billion in lost productivity; \$8.8 billion in health-care costs; and \$5.4 billion in law-enforcement costs.

And that doesn't include the costs of crime or the effect on communities of having downtowns crowded with the addicted and desperate.

It's such a waste, of lives and of money. Substance abuse won't go away. But any success in helping people to end or reduce their abuse will pay great benefits.

Look at the numbers. B.C. has done relatively well in terms of tobacco abuse. We have the fourth lowest per-capita cost among provinces at \$563 a year. But Ontario has the lowest cost. If we could match that province, tobacco-related costs in B.C. would fall by \$250 million a year.

Illegal drugs cost B.C. significantly more per capita than any other province. Again, bringing costs in line with Ontario -- which is in the middle of the pack nationally -- would result in a \$505-million saving. Alcohol abuse costs B.C. \$536 per capita, second-highest among the provinces. Again, matching Ontario would a \$393-million improvement.

So without any breakthrough or miraculous cure, simply by doing as well as Ontario, we'd save \$1.1 billion in substance costs.

We know what to do, starting with ensuring that people can get treatment. (That doesn't happen now; if an addict calls and says she is ready to detox, she'll almost always be told to call back in a week to see if a space is available.) But we choose not to do it.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper refuses to support **safe-injection** sites even though the evidence shows Vancouver's centre has saved lives, made the community safer and resulted in more addicts entering treatment. B.C. Attorney General Wally Oppal says a Victoria drug court -- which would give offenders help in cleaning up -- would be great, but isn't a priority. And treatment is still terribly limited.

Our current approach has failed. Substance abuse costs society more now than it did a decade ago, the study found.

But still we fumble on, unwilling to do make the investments in prevention, treatment and harm reduction that would save lives and billions of dollars.

Footnote: The Alberta Alcohol and Drug Addiction Commission had a response to the national study available on its website within five weeks of its release. The commission, with a 50-year history of leading the provincial government's addiction efforts, would be a good model for B.C. The national study is available at www.ccsa.ca.

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Illustration:

- Photo: Wally Oppal: Drug courts needed

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