

Shifting Experiences and Social Meanings of Substance Use among Māori Youth: A Comparative Study

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Introduction: Substance use (tobacco, alcohol, cannabis) among teenagers has decreased over the last two decades in NZ, among all ethnic groups, however rangatahi (adolescent) Māori remain disproportionately impacted by substance-related harm. It is possible that changing social meanings of substances have influenced young people's behaviours, contributing to the overall decline. The aim of our qualitative study was to explore the changing experiences and social meanings of substance use among rangatahi Māori.

Methods: We conducted a comparative thematic analysis to identify themes and changing experiences of substance use over time, comparing two cohorts of rangatahi Māori aged 14-17 years. The first cohort (n = 26) was interviewed between 1999 and 2001; the second (n = 27) was interviewed in 2022.

Key Findings: Experiences and social meanings of substance use shifted considerably. The first cohort associated substance use with peer acceptance or rebellion. Many in the second cohort viewed substance use negatively, linking it to health issues and social exclusion. We also observed shifts in cultural connectedness of these rangatahi, where the first cohort talked about being disconnected from their Māori identity; whereas the second cohort expressed greater cultural and whānau (family) connectedness, which appeared to influence their substance use.

Discussion and Conclusions: Substance use reduced among rangatahi from 2001 to 2022, possibly due to strengthened Māori identity and a shift toward more negative perceptions of substance use. Substance use may carry different meanings within our Māori communities, possibly impacting the varied rates of substance use among rangatahi.

Implications for Practice or Policy: By addressing these social meanings, we can effectively support the continued decline in substance use among future generations.

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