



# HARM REDUCTION POLICY

Adopted by Legislative Council: 2021/04/08

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[Adopted Motion \(Link\)](#)

## Part I. Preamble

### Background

#### **Content Note: sexual violence and death from drug use.**

Harm reduction is both a set of practical strategies and theoretical frameworks, focused on reducing negative repercussions of drug use. It is also a broader movement for social justice founded on a belief in the rights of people who use drugs.<sup>1</sup> Harm reduction is an evidence-based alternative to moralistic, punitive systems that disproportionately, and intentionally<sup>2</sup> harm members of certain social groups<sup>3</sup> including Black and Indigenous people of colour, sex workers, disabled people, LGBTQI+.<sup>4</sup> Punitive approaches breed silence and shame, which are linked to increased drug use and less help-seeking behaviours.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, harm reduction focuses on compassionate education. While harm reduction involves tailoring support to the needs of specific communities and individuals, and thus evades a universal definition, overall it can be summarized under the principles detailed below.<sup>6</sup>

1. Drug use is a part of our world; ignoring or condemning such use is less effective than minimizing their harmful effects.
2. Acknowledgment that some forms of drug use are safer than others.
3. Successful intervention is not necessarily defined by cessation of drug use.
4. Non-judgmental, non-coercive provision of services and resources to people who use drugs and the communities in which they live, in order to assist them in reducing attendant harm.

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<sup>1</sup> This definition is paraphrased from The National Harm Reduction Coalition.

<sup>2</sup> <https://drugpolicy.org/press-release/2016/03/top-adviser-richard-nixon-admitted-war-drugs-was-policy-tool-go-after-anti>

<sup>3</sup> For instance “The War on Drugs” initiated by President Nixon targeted Black and communities of colour at every level of the criminal justice system. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> 2SLGBTQI+ is an acronym for the umbrella of non-heteronormative identities including: two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex.

<sup>5</sup> Ronda Dearing, “On the importance of distinguishing shame from guilt: Relations to problematic alcohol and drug use,” *Addictive Behaviours*, Vol 30, Issue 7, August 2005, pp 1392-1404.

<sup>6</sup> <https://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/>



5. People who use drugs are included in the creation of policies and programs designed to serve them.
6. Affirms people who use drugs (PWUD) themselves as the primary agents of reducing the harms of their drug use and seeks to empower PWUD to share information and support each other in strategies which meet their actual conditions of use.
7. Recognizes that realities of poverty, class, racism, social isolation, past trauma, sex-based discrimination, and other social inequalities affect both people's vulnerability to and capacity for effectively dealing with drug-related harm.
8. Does not attempt to minimize or ignore the real and tragic harm and danger that can be associated with illicit drug use.

At present there is an urgent need for harm reduction in Canada. Canada faces an opioid epidemic that has taken 17,602 lives between January 2016 and June 2020.<sup>7</sup> Top public health officials like Theresa Tam, the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada, have called for increased work based on harm reduction to save lives.<sup>8</sup>

Other Canadian universities have created harm reduction policies, including Acadia and Dalhousie who created the Postsecondary Education Partnership aiming to reduce Alcohol Harms (PEP-AH)<sup>9</sup> and the Dalhousie Alcohol Harm Reduction strategy. Studies have shown that when students at Canadian universities drink, more than half do so excessively. According to the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, "there is considerable evidence that undergraduates who engage in heavy drinking are more likely to be involved in assaults, motor vehicle crashes, and unplanned and unprotected sex." They continue that, "female students are at greater risk of experiencing sexual assaults when drinking heavily."<sup>10,11</sup>

Despite McGill University's current claims to promote harm reduction,<sup>12,13</sup> recent changes to the Code of Community Living, are directly counter to harm reduction principles. Such changes include the policing of how much alcohol students may possess in residence, and mandating that residence employees take detailed records of residents' drug use.<sup>14</sup> Harm reduction approaches at McGill student drinking events have failed survivors of sexual violence.<sup>15</sup> Further, McGill students, like many university students across this country and continent, face high rates of mental health struggles, while simultaneously not receiving adequate support.<sup>16</sup> The Mental Health Commission of Canada shares that, "people living with mental illness are twice as likely as other Canadians to experience

<sup>7</sup> <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/substance-related-harms/opioids-stimulants/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/news/2019/06/statement-from-the-co-chairs-of-the-special-advisory-committee-on-the-epidemic-of-opioid-overdoses-on-updated-data-related-to-the-opioid-crisis.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/campuslife/studentsservices/healthandwellness/PEPAH.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/campuslife/studentsservices/healthandwellness/PEPAH.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> White, A., & Hingson, R. (2014). The burden of alcohol use: excessive alcohol consumption and related consequences among college students. *Alcohol Research: Current Reviews*, 35(2), 201–218.

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.mcgill.ca/senate/files/senate/04b\\_senate\\_question\\_re\\_harm\\_reduction\\_and\\_substance\\_use.pdf](https://www.mcgill.ca/senate/files/senate/04b_senate_question_re_harm_reduction_and_substance_use.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.mcgill.ca/shhs/about>

<sup>14</sup> <http://bullandbearmcgill.com/changes-to-mcgill-residences-harm-reduction-drug-policy/>

<sup>15</sup> Anonymous, "untoldmcgill", *Instagram*.

<sup>16</sup> <http://bullandbearmcgill.com/a-mental-health-pandemic/>



problematic substance use ... [and] account for nearly one-third of inpatient mental health admissions.”<sup>17</sup>

McGill has its own history of punitive approaches to drug policies on campus. In the 2008 - 2009 academic year Michael Porritt of McGill Residences proposed a no tolerance approach to drugs and alcohol. Of 80 Floor Fellows, 77 signed off on a letter sent to the Deputy Provost of Student Life and Learning to outline concerns about policy changes which moved away from harm reduction.<sup>18</sup> In recent years, McGill students have issued numerous calls for an increase of harm reduction practices to address substance use on campus.<sup>19</sup> Namely, non judgemental education and material support.<sup>20</sup>

## 1. Interpretation

This Policy serves to challenge norms that have perpetuated hazardous drug consumption patterns on campus. Reduce binge drinking and other high risk drinking behaviours on and off campus, especially at events run in partnership or under direct leadership of the SSMU.

Furthemore, this Policy should be applied in a manner that promotes non-judgmental education and conversation on campus that aligns with the aforementioned principles of harm reduction, increases the likelihood of students using harm reduction strategies when using drugs and alcohol and encourages efforts to build capacity at the community level for effective interventions.

## Part II. Definitions

- a) **“Association of McGill University Support Employees”** or **“AMUSE”** refers to the Union representing non-academic support staff at McGill who perform work considered temporary or seasonal, including Floor Fellows;
- b) **“Decriminalization”** refers to the process by which criminal penalties for a given act are relaxed or lessened. This is contrasted with legalization, which removes all or most legal penalties.
- c) **“Floor Fellow”** refers to an upper-year student, employed by McGill University to live in a given student residence building and act as a resource for first-year students;
- d) **“Greek Letter Organizations”** or **“GLOs”** are social organizations at colleges and universities, including Fraternities and Sororities, that make up Greek life on campus;
- e) **“Harm”** describes the negative consequences that can result from any level of substance use or misuse. These can include, but are not limited to, physical, legal, and social consequences. Harm reduction, simply put, seeks to minimize these consequences.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/what-we-do/mental-health-and-substance-use>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.mcgilltribune.com/news/social-work-strike-is-the-latest-in-labour-movements-on-campus-120518/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.mcgilltribune.com/opinion/harm-reduction-in-residences-can-save-lives11102020/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.mcgilltribune.com/opinion/toward-a-harm-reduction-approach-to-drugs-180220/>



- f) **“Safer sex”** refers to practices intended to lower risks associated with sexual activity while recognizing that no type of sex with a partner can be guaranteed to be completely safe. Safer sex supplies can include, but are not limited to, barriers like condoms or dental dams, pre or post-exposure prophylactics, and birth control.
- g) **“Substance/drug use and misuse”** are terms used to describe the recreational use of both legal and illegal substances like drugs and alcohol. These terms capture a continuum of behaviours, healthy or unhealthy, and are used rather than “addiction” which carries societal stigma;

## Part III. Mandate

### 2. Advocacy

Whenever possible, advocacy as outlined in this Policy will be undertaken in bilateral collaboration with the Association of McGill University Support Employees (AMUSE), as represented by the AMUSE Vice-President (Floor Fellow).

#### 2.1. University Advocacy

It will be the responsibility of the Vice-President (University Affairs), in collaboration with the President, to advocate for the adoption of harm reductive policies and practices by the University. The Vice-President (University Affairs) will, further, advocate for the inclusion of student voices in the drafting and implementation of any policies governing student conduct, including but not limited to the yearly Codes of Community Living.

##### 2.1.1. Research

The Vice-President (University Affairs) will, within one year of the adoption of this Policy, create a contract research position, within the University Affairs portfolio, dedicated to:

- a) Studying the University’s policies and procedures on harm reduction;
- b) Recording the lived experiences of campus residents and the professional experiences of Floor Fellows employed by the University;
- c) Preparing policy recommendations for implementation to promote and facilitate harm reduction on campus and in residences;
- d) Compiling findings into an in-depth report to be used in future advocacy; and
- e) Researching current practices and policies at peer institutions, and within the relevant literature on harm reduction and substance use.



Research will be undertaken with the support and guidance of the Vice-President (University Affairs) who will then advocate to the University for the implementation of any recommendations, in collaboration with the President.

### 2.1.2. Student Wellness

The SSMU recognizes that evidence-based pharmacotherapies are severely under prescribed,<sup>21</sup> particularly when compared with religious and behavioural treatment options like self-help and twelve-step programs.

As such, the Vice-President (University Affairs), in conjunction with the Mental Health Commissioner and Mental Health Advocacy Coordinator, will advocate for the adoption of compassionate and evidence-based treatment for substance use disorders by clinicians employed by the Student Wellness Hub including, but not limited to the Sinclair Method.<sup>22</sup>

The Vice-President (Student Life), alongside the Mental Health Commissioner and Mental Health Advocacy Coordinator, will further advocate for and assist in the establishment of secular and evidence-based support groups and services for students experiencing substance misuse.

## 2.2. Campus Advocacy

It will be the responsibility of the Vice-President (Student Life), in collaboration with the Vice-President (Internal Affairs), to advocate for the implementation of harm reductive practices in all drinking events organized by affiliated and unaffiliated Student Groups.

### 2.2.1. Training

The Vice-President (Student Life) will, within one year of the adoption of this Policy, assemble comprehensive training modules and educational resources on harm reduction, in collaboration with the Mental Health Commissioner, Anti-Violence Coordinators and Equity Commissioners.

Training and educational resources will be provided to any interested student groups by the Vice-President (Student Life). Whenever possible, the Vice-President (Internal Affairs) will ensure that the organizers of drinking events are made aware of the resources and training available to them.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28220511/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/alcalc/article/36/1/2/137995>



## 2.2.2. Greek Life

### **Content Note: mentions of death and sexual assault.**

The SSMU recognizes the role of Greek Letter Organizations in perpetuating and normalizing rape culture and unhealthy drinking and drug culture.<sup>23</sup> Across the continent, Greek Letter Organizations have fostered hazing practices often tied to dangerous drug consumption which have tragic, lethal consequences.<sup>24</sup> As such, the SSMU regrets both its complicity in the harm perpetuated by Greek Letter Organizations, particularly the documented history of sexual violence in McGill fraternities,<sup>25, 26, 27</sup> and its role - or lack thereof - in contributing to a safer space.

It will, thus, be the responsibility of the Vice-President (University Affairs) and Vice-President (Student Life) to advocate for McGill University to join the SSMU in facilitating a safer presence of Greek Letter Organizations on campus.

Notwithstanding, training and educational resources on harm reduction will be made available to Greek Letter Organizations, provided the organization in question demonstrates a substantive commitment to the adoption and implementation of harm reductive practices.

## 2.3. External Advocacy

The SSMU holds that substance use and misuse are prolific across University campuses. It will, therefore, be the responsibility of the Vice-President (External Affairs) to advocate for the adoption and prioritization of harm reductive principles and practices to other student associations in Canada.

### 2.3.1. Municipal, Provincial, and Federal Advocacy

It will be the responsibility of the Vice-President (External Affairs) to lobby the municipal, provincial, and federal governments for the decriminalization of nonviolent drug offenses and the adoption of liberal, harm reductive drug policies, like those adopted in Switzerland<sup>28</sup> and Portugal.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See example of experience and naming of rape culture within Anonymous, "untoldmcgill", *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDy6oDfZA4/>

<sup>24</sup> Hank Nuwar writes, "there's been a death [resulting from fraternity hazing] every year in either the U.S., Mexico or Canada from 1959 to 2018" <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/hazing-has-long-history-based-on-solidifying-power-status-within-group-experts-1.4208580>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.mcgilldaily.com/2020/04/silencing-survivors/#close-modal>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.mcgilldaily.com/2016/09/thisisnohelping/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://globalnews.ca/news/1683697/former-mcgill-student-said-rape-charges-dropped-in-her-case-too/>

<sup>28</sup> [https://www.beckleyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/paper\\_18.pdf](https://www.beckleyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/paper_18.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> [https://drugpolicy.org/sites/default/files/dpa-drug-decriminalization-portugal-health-human-centered-approach\\_0.pdf](https://drugpolicy.org/sites/default/files/dpa-drug-decriminalization-portugal-health-human-centered-approach_0.pdf)



Furthermore, the Vice-President (External Affairs) will advocate for the promotion of evidence-based behavioural and pharmaceutical treatments for substance use disorders by professional and regulatory organizations including, but not limited to, the Canadian Medical Association and the Québec Medical Association.

## 3. SSMU Operations

### 3.1. Events

All events organized, promoted, or otherwise affiliated with the SSMU will incorporate extensive harm reductive principles. The operationalization of harm reduction will be overseen by the Vice-President (Internal Affairs) in collaboration with the Operations Department, Anti-Violence Coordinators, and Equity Commissioners.

#### 3.1.1. Students' Society Programming Network

This will include, but is not limited to, events organized in part or in full by the Students' Society Programming Network ("SSPN"), with special attention given to ensuring that practices of harm reduction are integrated into Multi-Day Organized Drinking Events ("MDODEs"). As such, the Vice-President (Internal Affairs) will be responsible for organizing and/or administering harm reduction training for the SSPN on a yearly basis.

#### 3.1.2. Clubs & Services

##### 3.1.2.1. Training

In collaboration with the Equity Commissioners, the Vice-President (Student Life) will integrate harm reduction principles and strategies within the Equity training that Clubs and Services receive yearly. The Vice-President (Student Life) will also make available a list of on and off campus resources for Clubs and Services to consult when planning events or initiatives. This list will be updated at least annually by the Vice-President (Student Life) in consultation with other Executives and Staff.

##### 3.1.2.2. Clubs and Services Review

Principles and practices of harm reduction will be considered in the approval of new Clubs and Services and in the review of existing Clubs and Services. This will include, but is not limited to, the implementation of harm reduction practices and alignment with the principles of harm reduction.



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*Located on Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe, traditional territories*

## 4. Accountability

The Office of the Vice-President (Student Life) will be charged with monitoring and overseeing compliance with this Policy and reporting on its implementation to the Legislative Council.

To that effect, the Vice-President (Student Life) will consult regularly with the Officers mandated under this Policy on the implementation of their mandates. These consultations will inform a Report, presented once annually to the Legislative Council by the Vice-President (Student Life).

The Accountability Committee will be notified by the Vice-President (Student Life) should an Officer fail to promptly report on their mandate and will investigate such infractions in line with the Committee's Terms of References.