



# Insights into Veteran and Veteran Family Experiences with Cannabis and Mental Health

VIRTUAL DIALOGUE SERIES  
Executive Summary

## BACKGROUND

In 2022, more than 18,000 Veterans submitted claims involving cannabis for medical purposes through Veterans Affairs Canada's (VAC's) reimbursement policy.<sup>1</sup> By 2026, VAC projects that these annual reimbursements will rise to more than \$300 million.<sup>2</sup> But while cannabis is authorized for various medical conditions, scientific research has yet to fully explore its applications and potential for treating mental health concerns.

Despite the strong interest in the relationship between cannabis use and mental health in the Veteran and Veteran Family community, published research on the topic in Canada is limited, with even less that is specific to Veteran context.

Between May and June 2022, the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families (Atlas Institute) and the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) co-hosted a series of four dialogues about cannabis use and mental health with Veterans, their Family members, and key supporters of that community, which included service providers and academic researchers. The Virtual Dialogue Series sought to hear from stakeholders about Veteran and Veteran Family members' unique needs to identify and address key knowledge gaps and research priorities in this area.

We invite you to read the [full report](#) to review the collection of insights and experiences, which shed light on the complexity of the topic. While there is much yet to learn, we hope it will help shape research and knowledge opportunities moving forward.



Veterans are not a homogeneous group. It is important when recruiting to engage the whole range of Veterans and not just those that put themselves out there. There is not just one perspective and not one Veteran can speak on behalf of all Veterans. As researchers, we need to make sure we have heterogeneity in our studies. ”

– Researcher

1 Veterans Affairs Canada. (2022). *Cannabis for medical purposes*. <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/about-vac/research/research-directorate/publications/reports/cmp>

2 Veterans Affairs Canada. (2022). *Audit of health care benefits—Cannabis for medical purposes*. <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/about-vac/publications-reports/reports/departmental-audit-evaluation/2022-audit-cannabis-for-medical-purposes>

# WHAT WE HEARD

Throughout all four sessions with Veterans, Veteran Family members, service providers, and researchers, seven recurring themes emerged:

## 1. Too little information is available about cannabis use and mental health among Canada's Veteran populations.

Participants across all four groups described a wide variety of cannabis use benefits for Veterans' mental health (based on lived experience), yet easily accessible and reliable information is lacking on the potential benefits and risks of cannabis and appropriate dosages and strains. Though expertise from lived experience is vital to understanding its benefits, the community is looking for more credible research specific to the Canadian Veteran context.

## 2. More research is needed on the effectiveness of cannabis as a treatment for mental health conditions.

Most participants in the Veteran community saw cannabis as an effective tool for treating symptoms of anxiety, PTSD, chronic pain, mood regulation, anger management, and sleep issues. However, more needs to be known about safety, cost, and effectiveness when cannabis is used to treat mental health conditions.

## 3. More training is needed on cannabis use and mental health for health-care professionals who work with Veterans.

Ideally, cannabis education should come through a health-care professional or doctor and take a patient's medical history into account. Yet participants experienced a lack of professional guidance—stemming from a perceived education gap—with many Veterans learning about options for cannabis use through peers and their own personal experience.

## 4. Cannabis use by Veterans continues to be highly stigmatized.

Some Veteran participants described hesitancy about disclosing their cannabis use to Family, friends, and health-care practitioners out of fear of rejection and judgment. Many pointed to layers of stigma that Veterans experience in feeling judged about their mental health concerns and cannabis use. Some researchers indicated that studies investigating the positive impacts of cannabis faced additional barriers when seeking to secure funding and promotion.

## 5. Veterans need more information about the ways cannabis works and interacts with other substances.

To better guide the safer use of cannabis by Veterans, participants said they needed more information on the different cannabinoids and on the impacts of combining cannabis with other medications or substances. A greater understanding of the potential intoxicating effects of certain strains of cannabis and how it interacts with prescription medications and other non-prescription substances must be more readily available.

## 6. Independent, participatory research is needed on cannabis and mental health.

Participants across all sessions described the need for independent studies on cannabis and its impact on Veterans' mental health. Many felt a lack of trust toward studies funded by the cannabis or pharmaceutical industries. Participants also mentioned the importance of participatory research that keeps Veterans and their Family members engaged and committed through the entire process in order to better understand and address their needs.

## 7. Representing diverse Veteran perspectives is key.

Participants emphasized that the Canadian Veteran population is not homogeneous. While diverse representation can be difficult to achieve, it should be a priority in any discussion or study to ensure that wide-ranging perspectives are considered and represented in the knowledge, resources, and actions being generated. These perspectives include women, francophone, Indigenous, racialized, 2SLGBTQ+, and African, Caribbean, and Black Veterans and Family members.



## Who attended the dialogue series?

We'd like to thank all participants for their time, courage, and vulnerability in sharing their perspectives and experiences with us.

A total of 32 participants contributed to the four distinct dialogue sessions:

- » **Session 1:** Veterans
- » **Session 2:** Veteran Family members
- » **Session 3:** Service providers
- » **Session 4:** Researchers

While the MHCC and the Atlas Institute sought equitable representation among its participants from coast to coast, as noted above, their perspectives do not reflect the full diversity of Veterans, Family members, service providers, and researchers. We recognize and emphasize that this early scoping project lacks important perspectives. To truly understand the scope of knowledge needs and research priorities across Veteran and Veteran Families, further consultations are required.

## KNOWLEDGE NEEDS AND PRIORITIES



### Knowledge needs

- » Positive and negative impacts associated with recreational and medical cannabis use
- » Interactions of cannabis with other substances, including prescribed medications
- » Methods of cannabis use and impacts of the method used
- » Information on various strains of cannabis and different cannabinoids (THC, CBD)
- » Nuanced efficacy (for whom, when, and in what context)
- » The process of accessing medical cannabis for mental health and related conditions
- » The diversity of interactions between cannabis types or strains and mental health concerns, including PTSD, sleep issues, depression and substance use



### Research priorities

- » Research that includes different perspectives and observations from Veterans and Veteran Family members
- » Participatory research that engages diverse Veterans and Veteran Families
- » The efficacy and safety of cannabis to treat mental health conditions, PTSD, sleep disorders, and chronic pain
- » An analysis of dosage and patterns of use
- » An exploration of all potential benefits and harms
- » Cannabis use and impairment
- » The potential of cannabis to replace or reduce prescription medications
- » How cannabis tolerance changes over time and the implication of these changes

# WHAT'S NEXT

The mental health needs of the Veteran and Veteran Families community are complex. We hope the lived and living experience that Veterans, Veteran Families, service providers, and researchers shared will help bridge the knowledge gaps that remain and determine where to invest in new research to create targeted tools and resources centred on Veteran and Veteran Family needs. Participants found the following four considerations essential for addressing research and knowledge gaps:

**1. Based on current experiences of the Veteran and Veteran Family community, cannabis has great potential to replace or reduce some prescription medications for the treatment of mental health problems and illnesses, but more research should be undertaken to verify this.**

To address the lack of evidence-informed information and resources available for Veterans and Veteran Family members, new research needs to be unbiased and objective and include a variety of research methods, including clinical trials and participatory research that meaningfully engages Veterans and Veteran Families.

**2. Health-care professionals need more education and knowledge to adequately advise and support Veterans.**

To address the knowledge gap among practitioners (and among Veterans and Veteran Family members), guidelines on dosage and strain specificity, efficacy, interdependence, and safety need to be developed. In addition, the long-term effects of both the adverse side-effects and positive mental health impacts of cannabis use need to be thoroughly studied.

**3. Research must reflect the complexity and diversity of the Veteran and Veteran Family community.**

Research needs to reflect the diversity of the Veteran community and encompass a broader range of perspectives and backgrounds from Veteran Family members.

**4. More research support will lead to better research.**

Cannabis and mental health research needs greater support structures and financial backing that is independent from cannabis industry and interest groups.



While this Virtual Dialogue Series helped illuminate some priorities, much work is still needed. We urge governments, policy makers, and funding agencies to note the priorities in this report. We also hope that what was generously shared with us will inspire more research on cannabis and its relationship to mental health—not only for individuals but for the broader Veteran and Veteran Family community.

The MHCC and the Atlas Institute are committed to sharing the latest evidence on cannabis and mental health. In partnership with VAC, the MHCC is supporting a number

of [research projects](#) in this area, including six focused on the Veteran population. The Atlas Institute will continue to engage Veterans and Veteran Family members and is looking forward to creating and sharing knowledge products that help address the needs expressed by this community.

**To learn more about the dialogue series, read the [full report](#).**