



The Overdose and Toxic Drug Crisis in 2021

December 2021

Background

BC's Overdose and Toxic Drug Crisis continues to claim thousands of lives of British Columbians and has only accelerated since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the BC Coroners Service recent [Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths in BC report](#), 2021 has been the deadliest year on record and October 2021 has been the deadliest single month on record since the declaration of the crisis in 2016.ⁱ From January to October, there have been 1782 lives lost, 201 of which were in the month of October.ⁱⁱ With two months of data left to collect in 2021, it is clear the rates of overdose and toxic drug deaths only continue to increase, and immediate action is required to better address this health emergency.

The number of drug toxicity deaths in October equate to approximately 6.5 lives lost each day.ⁱⁱⁱ Of these deaths, approximately 71% of the individuals were between the ages of 30 and 59 and 15% were under the age of 30 (including 23 deaths to date this year of minors under the age of 19).^{iv} The cumulative number of deaths in the first nine months of 2021 represents a 24% increase over the same period of time in the previous year.^v

Unfortunately, some of the public health measures implemented to help slow the transmission of COVID-19 inadvertently hindered some harm reduction practices. For example, 55% of drug toxicity deaths so far in 2021 have occurred in private residences, and 15% have occurred outside in locations such as parks and vehicles.^{vi} Coupled with a toxic drug supply, these dual public health emergencies have led to an increasingly complex public health approach which has had to balance harm reduction with COVID-19 safety protocols, many of which have led to a higher incidence of people using drugs at home or alone. Notably, no deaths have been reported at any supervised consumption or overdose prevention sites in BC to date this year.^{vii} Furthermore, the Overdose and Toxic Drug Crisis in BC does not elicit the same attention as the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a long-standing culture of stigma surrounding substance use that prevents many individuals from trusting the system enough to seek care. Antiquated drug laws, and marginalization of those who use drugs only serves to fuel stigma. It is a well-established fact that criminalization of people who use drugs does not in fact protect against harms, but rather fuels stigma and creates more barriers to care.^{viii} While there is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic requires a concerted and focused effort to stop the spread of the deadly virus, so too does the Overdose and Toxic Drug Crisis.

NNPBC supports a multi-faceted harm reduction approach including safe supply, the wide use and distribution of naloxone kits, supervised consumption sites, overdose prevention sites, increased funding for community action, greater access to treatment for those who seek it, and decriminalization. NNPBC commends the [BC provincial government for the request for federal exemption to decriminalize personal possession of drugs](#). As part of NNPBC's approach, we advocated for expanded prescriptive authority, allowing RNs and RPNs in the province to prescribe safe alternatives to street drugs. The Provincial Health Office later issued an order expanding prescriptive authority to include RNs and RPNs, recognizing that safer supply is an effective harm reduction strategy to help mitigate the impacts of the Overdose and Toxic Drug Crisis. Harm reduction measures are fundamental in eliminating stigma and bringing adequate attention to BC's Overdose and Toxic Drug Crisis, which in turn can mitigate the impacts of this health emergency and prevent 2022 and the years ahead from being as devastating as 2021. There is no more time to waste, lives depend on it.

Key Messages

- With 1782 deaths in the first ten months of the year, 2021 has been the deadliest year of the Overdose Crisis since its declaration in 2016.
- There were 201 deaths in October 2021, making it the single deadliest month on record for toxic drug deaths.



- The cumulative number of deaths so far in 2021 represents a 24% increase over the same period in 2020.
- Some of the public health measures instituted for the COVID-19 pandemic have inadvertently hindered some harm reduction practices.
- Stigma is a large factor in preventing the Overdose and Toxic Drug Crisis from receiving the same attention as the COVID-19 pandemic.
- NNPBC supports all harm reduction approaches including safe supply and decriminalization.
- NNPBC supports BC's request for federal exemption to decriminalize personal possession of drugs.

Further Reading/Resources

- [BC Request for Federal Exemption to Decriminalize Personal Possession](#)
- [Safe Supply](#)
- [De-Stigmatizing Language](#)
- [Stigma & the Opioid Crisis](#)
- [NNPBC & HRNA Call for the Decriminalization of People Who Use Drugs in BC](#)
- [BC Coroners Service: Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths in BC, Jan 1, 2011-Oct 31, 2021](#)
- [What does my professional association do?](#)

ⁱ BC Coroners Service. 'More than 1500 lives lost to toxic illicit drugs in first nine months of 2021.' November 9, 2021. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/news/bccs-september-2021-reporting.pdf>;

Mangione, Kendra and Hasegawa, Regan. CTV. '2021 is now B.C.'s deadliest year in the opioid crisis, with 2 months of data left to collect.' December 9, 2021. <https://bc.ctvnews.ca/2021-is-now-b-c-s-deadliest-year-in-the-opioid-crisis-with-2-months-of-data-left-to-collect-1.5700104>

ⁱⁱ BC Coroners Service. 'Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths in BC Report, January 1, 2011-October 31, 2021.' December 9, 2021. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/illicit-drug.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ BC Coroners Service. 'Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths in BC – October 31, 2021.'

^{iv} Ibid

^v BC Coroners Service. 'More than 1500 lives lost in first nine months of 2021.'

^{vi} BC Coroners Service. 'Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths in BC – October 31, 2021.'

^{vii} Ibid

^{viii} Kroeker, Tess and Gagnon, Marilou. 'Nurses and Nurse Practitioners of British Columbia (NNPBC) and the Harm Reduction Nurses Association (HRNA) call for the decriminalization of people who use drugs in B.C.' August 8, 2019. <https://nnpbc.com/pdfs/media/press-releases/PR-HRNA-NNPBC-Statement.pdf>