



NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
2020PSSG0071-002113
Dec. 21, 2020

Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
BC Coroners Service

Drug toxicity deaths continue to surpass records in B.C.

VICTORIA – In the midst of dual public health emergencies, the BC Coroners Service continues to urge extreme caution due to the increasingly toxic illicit drug supply in British Columbia.

The BC Coroners Service reports 153 suspected drug toxicity deaths in November 2020, an 89% increase over November 2019 (81), and a 7% decrease over the number of deaths in October 2020 (164). The latest data is equal to five people per day losing their lives to illicit drug overdoses.

“Tragically, as we reach the end of 2020, our province is facing a record-breaking year for lives lost due to a toxic illicit drug supply,” said Lisa Lapointe, chief coroner. “In the five years of this public health emergency, more than 6,500 families have experienced the grief and sadness of losing a loved one to the challenging medical condition of drug addiction. I extend my sincere condolences to all of those grieving a family member, friend or colleague due to this disease.”

There have been 1,548 illicit drug deaths to date in 2020 in B.C., and the number of deaths in each health authority is at or near the highest ever monthly totals. Toxicology results suggest a greater number of cases with extreme fentanyl concentrations from April to November 2020 compared with previous months.

“The impacts of COVID-19 have been deadly for those experiencing problematic substance use,” Lapointe said. “Ensuring access to critical harm reduction measures including naloxone, supervised consumption sites, overdose prevention sites and drug checking services are essential if we want to prevent future deaths. Providing those with substance use disorder access to pharmaceutical alternatives will be of immense benefit to reduce the harms and suffering resulting from the ‘for-profit’ illicit drug market. Additionally, as recommended by coroners’ inquest juries and death review panels, an accessible, evidence-based and accountable treatment and recovery system is desperately needed to support those seeking these supports on their path to wellness.”

Key preliminary findings of these drug death reports follow. Data are subject to change:

- In November 2020, there were 153 suspected illicit drug toxicity deaths. This represents an 89% increase over the number of deaths in November 2019 (81) and a 7% decrease over the number of deaths in October 2020 (164).
- The number of illicit drug toxicity deaths in November 2020 equals about 5.1 deaths per day.
- In 2020, 70% of those dying were aged 30 to 59. Males have accounted for 81% of deaths in 2020 to date.
- The townships experiencing the highest number of illicit drug toxicity deaths in 2020 are

Vancouver, Surrey and Victoria.

- Illicit drug toxicity death rates in males continued to increase in November 2020 while female rates have declined from October (see Figure 4, p. 8).
- Illicit drug toxicity death rates among individuals aged 19 to 59 have been trending downward over several months. However, rates among those aged 60 and over have been trending upward. Rates among those under 18 remain low (see Figure 6, p. 10).
- Island Health illicit drug toxicity death rates have been trending downward over the past several months. However, all other health authority rates remain high (see Figure 7, p. 13).
- Fentanyl or its analogues have continued to be detected in over 80% of illicit drug toxicity deaths in 2020. Cocaine and methamphetamine are the next most commonly detected drugs.
- In 2020, 55% of illicit drug toxicity deaths have occurred in private residences.
- No deaths have been reported at supervised consumption or drug overdose prevention sites.

Learn More:

Illicit drug overdose death report:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/illicit-drug.pdf>

Fentanyl-detected death report:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/fentanyl-detected-overdose.pdf>

Toward the Heart: <http://www.towardtheheart.com>

Stop Overdose BC: <https://www.stopoverdose.gov.bc.ca>

BC Centre on Substance Use: <http://www.bccsu.ca>

Risk mitigation prescribing guidelines in the context of dual public health emergencies:

<https://www.bccsu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Risk-Mitigation-in-the-Context-of-Dual-Public-Health-Emergencies-v1.5.pdf>

Lifeguard app:

<http://www.phsa.ca/about/news-stories/news-releases/2020-news/new-lifeguard-app-launched-to-help-prevent-overdoses>

BC Centre for Disease Control overdose response indicators:

<http://www.bccdc.ca/health-professionals/data-reports/overdose-response-indicators>

Contact:

BC Coroners Service

Media Relations

CoronerMedia@gov.bc.ca

778 676 2703

Connect with the Province of B.C. at: news.gov.bc.ca/connect