



NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
2021PSSG0010-000246
Feb. 11, 2021

Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
BC Coroners Service

More than 1,700 lives lost in 2020 due to toxic illicit drugs

VICTORIA – As the five-year anniversary of the province’s illicit drug toxicity public health emergency approaches, the BC Coroners Service reports 2020 was B.C.’s worst year yet in terms of number of lives lost due to the effects of toxic illicit drugs.

There were 1,716 deaths due to illicit drugs in 2020 in B.C., representing a 74% increase over the number of deaths recorded in 2019 (984). The number of illicit drug toxicity deaths in 2020 equates to about 4.7 deaths per day, which is two deaths per day higher than in 2019 (2.7).

The toxic illicit drug supply in British Columbia has claimed more lives than motor-vehicle crashes, homicides, suicides and prescription-drug related deaths combined.

“The impacts of COVID-19 highlighted the immensely precarious situation of those experiencing problematic substance use in our province” said Lisa Lapointe, chief coroner. “Decades of criminalization, an increasingly toxic illicit drug market and the lack of timely access to evidence-based treatment and recovery services have resulted in the loss of thousands of lives in B.C. It’s clear that urgent change is needed to prevent future deaths and the resulting grief and loss so many families and communities have experienced across our province.”

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

- There were 152 suspected illicit drug toxicity deaths in December 2020. This is a 130% increase over the number of deaths in December 2019 (66) and a 4% decrease from the number of deaths that occurred in November 2020 (158).
- There were 1,716 deaths due to illicit drug toxicity in 2020. This is a 74% increase over the number of deaths recorded in 2019 (984).
- In 2020, 69% of those dying were aged 30 to 59, and males accounted for 81% of deaths.
- The communities that experienced the highest number of illicit drug toxicity deaths in 2020 were Vancouver, Surrey and Victoria.
- Fentanyl or its analogues continued to be detected in more than 80% of illicit drug toxicity deaths in 2020. Cocaine and methamphetamine were the next most commonly detected drugs.
- In 2020, 84% of illicit drug toxicity deaths occurred inside (56% in private residences and 28% in other residences including social and supportive housing, single-residence occupancies, shelters, and hotels and other indoor locations) and 14% occurred outside in vehicles, sidewalks, streets, parks, etc.
- Illicit drug toxicity death rates among individuals aged 19-59 has been trending downwards over several months, while rates among persons aged 60 and up have been trending upwards. Rates among those aged 0-18 remain low.

- Island Health illicit drug toxicity death rates trended downwards over the past several months in 2020; however, all other health authority rates remained high.
- No deaths have been reported at supervised consumption or drug overdose prevention sites.

Quotes:

Leslie McBain, executive director and co-founder, Moms Stop the Harm –

“There is no other disorder or condition besides substance use disorder in which we force people to access the medicine they require on a street corner and manufactured by the minions of organized crime.”

Mike Serr, chief constable, Abbotsford Police Department –

“The deaths from the opioid crisis and toxic drug supply are devastating, and while B.C. police agencies will continue enforcement efforts to combat organized crime and those who import, produce and distribute highly toxic drugs on our streets, we need to fundamentally change the way we are addressing this public health emergency. We need to turn our minds and efforts on how we support persons who use these deadly street drugs to an integrated health-focused approach that supports individuals, families and communities.”

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>

Illicit drug toxicity – type of drug data report:

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

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