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## NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General  
BC Coroners Service

### **Toxic-drug supply claims nearly 2,300 lives in 2022: BC Coroners Service**

VICTORIA – As the province’s drug toxicity public health emergency continues into its eighth year, at least 2,272 British Columbians lost their lives to toxic drugs in 2022.

“British Columbians across the province are continuing to experience tremendous harm and loss as a result of the province’s toxic illicit drug supply,” said Lisa Lapointe, chief coroner. “Our province continues to lose an average of six lives every day, and many more people experience serious health consequences as a result of the unpredictable, unregulated drug supply. Death due to drug toxicity remains the leading cause of unnatural death in British Columbia, and is second only to cancers in terms of years of life lost.”

The number of deaths being investigated by the BC Coroners Service in 2022 is the second-largest total ever in a calendar year, and only 34 fewer than the 2,306 deaths reported to the agency in 2021. Toxic drugs were responsible for an average of 189 deaths per month in 2022, or 6.2 lost lives each and every day. The final number for 2022 will almost certainly increase as investigations are completed and final causes of death are established.

No area of British Columbia has been spared from the devastation caused by the toxic-drug supply. While the Vancouver Centre-North Local Health Authority (which includes the city’s Downtown Eastside area) recorded the largest number of deaths in 2022 (319), that total accounts for only 14% of the number of lives lost. And although the provincewide rate of death declined slightly to 42.7 per 100,000 residents, record high rates were recorded in Northern Health (59.5), Interior Health (46) and Island Health (43.6). Vancouver, Greater Victoria, Kamloops, Kelowna, Prince George and Nanaimo were among the townships recording more illicit drug-related deaths in 2022 than in any previous year.

At least 11,171 deaths have been attributed to the illicit drug toxicity since the public health emergency was first declared in April 2016.

“The reality is that these deaths are preventable,” Lapointe said. “Toxicology data confirms that the drug supply in British Columbia is increasingly volatile and life-threatening. The Standing Committee on Health and two BC Coroners Service death review panels are in agreement that we must rapidly increase access to a safer supply of substances, while at the same time, building out a robust system of evidence-based care. Those dying are our family members, neighbours, friends and colleagues. Urgent action is required to reduce the significant risks that tens of thousands of British Columbians are currently facing.”

Additional key preliminary findings are below. Data is subject to change as additional toxicology results are received:

- In 2022, 70% of those dying were aged 30 to 59, and 79% were male.

- The townships reporting the highest number of illicit drug toxicity deaths in 2022 were Vancouver, Surrey and Greater Victoria.
- By health authority in 2022, the highest number of illicit drug toxicity deaths were in Fraser and Vancouver Coastal Health Authorities (680 and 637 deaths, respectively), making up 58% of all such deaths during 2022.
- By Health Service Delivery Area in 2022, the highest rates were in Vancouver, Northwest, Northern Interior, Thompson Cariboo and Fraser East.
- By Local Health Area in 2022, the highest rates were in Vancouver – Centre North, Terrace, Merritt, Hope and Prince George.
- There was one reported death at an overdose prevention site in 2022.
- Analysis of post-mortem toxicology results shows no indication that prescribed safe supply is contributing to illicit drug deaths regionally or provincially.

#### **Quotes:**

##### **Dr. Nel Wieman, acting chief medical officer, First Nations Health Authority –**

“First Nations people continue to be disproportionately impacted by the ongoing toxic drug crisis in British Columbia. Given that we are nearing the end of the seventh year of a provincewide state of emergency on illicit toxic drugs, it is difficult to accept that more First Nations people in B.C. have died from illicit toxic drug poisonings than from COVID-19. While there is no doubt that this tragic outcome is due in part to First Nations people experiencing stereotyping, racism and discrimination in many different forms, it also leads one to consider whether or not this pressing issue is receiving the level of priority it deserves. While we support the government’s recent steps toward decriminalization, it is abundantly clear that there is still much more that can and must be done. The lives of First Nations people in B.C. depend on it!”

##### **Dr. Paxton Bach, co-medical director, British Columbia Centre on Substance Use –**

“These figures reflect the overwhelming number of human stories that we as physicians are seeing on a daily basis. There is no industry, no socio-economic class, no geographic region in the province that is not being touched by this crisis, and for each of these deaths there are 10 more people suffering other life-altering consequences due to non-fatal overdose events. This has gone on for too long, and demands the urgent and co-ordinated response from all sectors that such a crisis deserved from the beginning.”

#### **Learn More:**

Illicit drug overdose death report (Data to Jan. 31, 2023):

<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 (Data to Jan. 31, 2023):

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

Note: The Illicit drug overdose death report is updated monthly. The Illicit drug toxicity: Type of drug data report is updated quarterly.

BC Coroners Service Death Review Panel: A Review of Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths:

[https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/death-review-panel/review\\_of\\_illicit\\_drug\\_toxicity\\_deaths\\_2022.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/death-review-panel/review_of_illicit_drug_toxicity_deaths_2022.pdf)

BC Centre for Disease Control Knowledge update on hydromorphone and illicit drug toxicity deaths:

[http://www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Statistics%20and%20Research/Statistics%20and%20Reports/Overdose/2021.09.15\\_Knowledge%20Update\\_Hydromorphone%20and%20drug%20toxicity%20deaths.pdf](http://www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Statistics%20and%20Research/Statistics%20and%20Reports/Overdose/2021.09.15_Knowledge%20Update_Hydromorphone%20and%20drug%20toxicity%20deaths.pdf)

Knowledge update on hydromorphone and illicit drug toxicity deaths:

[http://www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Statistics%20and%20Research/Statistics%20and%20Reports/Overdose/2021.09.15\\_Knowledge%20Update\\_Hydromorphone%20and%20drug%20toxicity%20deaths.pdf](http://www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Statistics%20and%20Research/Statistics%20and%20Reports/Overdose/2021.09.15_Knowledge%20Update_Hydromorphone%20and%20drug%20toxicity%20deaths.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>

BC Centre for Disease Control factsheet on etizolam:

<https://towardtheheart.com/assets/uploads/1609802595WXFJmRP6tu1qI04J8t6BzV>

**Contact:**

Ryan Panton  
Manager of Strategic Communications and  
Media Relations  
BC Coroners Service  
236 478-1582

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