



NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
2021PSSG0030-000528
March 24, 2021

Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
BC Coroners Service

Deaths caused by toxic illicit drug supply continue to surge

VICTORIA – Figures released by the British Columbia Coroners Service identify 155 suspected illicit drug toxicity deaths in February, the 11th consecutive month in which the province has recorded more than 100 lives lost.

“The number of deaths due to toxic illicit drugs in February highlights the ongoing critical risk to public health and safety from the illicit drug market,” said Lisa Lapointe, B.C.’s chief coroner. “I extend my sincere sympathy to everyone who has lost a beloved family member or friend to substance use. The continued tragic and unprecedented rate of death in B.C. highlights the urgent need for a multi-faceted, evidence-based and accessible system of care for those experiencing problematic substance use.”

The total number of deaths is the largest ever recorded in the month of February and an increase of 107% over the total number of deaths recorded in February 2020. The average of 5.5 lives lost each day makes February the second consecutive month in which the average number of daily deaths was above 5. The 1,724 deaths recorded in 2020 work out to an average of 4.7 deaths a day.

Also of note, 15% of the lives lost in 2021 were people 60 years of age and older and 40% were over age 50. These increasing numbers continue a trend that has been observed in older age cohorts over the last several years.

Increased variability and toxicity in the drug supply continues to significantly contribute to the overall number of suspected deaths. Carfentanil, a more lethal analogue of fentanyl, was detected in 18 of the 155 deaths (12%), an increase from the January total of 14, the largest monthly figure recorded since April 2019.

“This data emphasizes the alarming increase in the toxicity of the illicit drug supply throughout B.C.,” Lapointe said. “Across the province, the risk of serious harm or death is very real for anyone using a substance purchased from the illicit market. Decisive action is urgently needed to ensure an accessible, regulated safe supply and to provide people with the supervised consumption, treatment and recovery services they need.”

Additional key preliminary findings are below. Data are subject to change:

- A total of 329 illicit drug toxicity deaths were reported in the first two months of 2021.
- B.C.’s total overall death rate in 2021 is 38 deaths per 100,000 individuals.
- 81% of the deaths in 2021 were male.
- The communities experiencing the highest number of illicit drug toxicity deaths in 2021 are Vancouver, Surrey and Victoria.
- By health authority in 2021, the highest number of illicit drug toxicity deaths were in

Fraser and Vancouver Coastal Health Authorities (116 and 90 deaths, respectively), making up 63% of all such deaths during this period.

- By health authority in 2021, the highest death rates were in Northern Health (58 deaths per 100,000 individuals) and Vancouver Coastal Health (44 per 100,000 individuals).
- By health service delivery area in 2021, the highest death rates were in northeast, Vancouver, northwest, northern Interior and Thompson Cariboo.

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>

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/1609977106OOyN2HFTIkYYKxfbZi8XL6s1NfTIHl0ejSYqQnt.pdf>

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