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## NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release  
2021PSSG0074-001701  
Aug. 31, 2021

Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General  
BC Coroners Service

### **More than 1,000 British Columbians lost to toxic illicit drugs in first half of 2021**

VICTORIA – At least 1,011 lives were lost to suspected illicit drug toxicity in B.C. between January and June 2021, according to data released by the BC Coroners Service.

“The deaths of more than 1,000 British Columbians in the first six months of 2021 is a tragic reminder that the toxic illicit drug supply remains a significant ongoing threat to public health and safety in communities throughout our province,” said Lisa Lapointe, chief coroner, BC Coroners Service. “The data released today highlights the immensity of this public health emergency and the need for a wide-scale response. This includes removing barriers to safe supply, ensuring timely access to evidence-based affordable treatment and providing those experiencing problematic substance use with compassionate and viable options to reduce risks and save lives.”

In June, 159 British Columbians died as a result of drug toxicity, the ninth consecutive month in which at least 150 British Columbians died as a result of the toxic drug supply. The total number of lives lost between January and June is the highest recorded in the first six months of a calendar year. Drug toxicity is now the leading cause of death in B.C. for those aged 19 to 39 and is second in terms of reducing total potential years of life.

As with previous months, the illicit drug supply in B.C. is both variable and increasingly toxic, with extreme fentanyl concentrations and carfentanil showing up more frequently in toxicology testing. Post-mortem testing shows that fentanyl continues to be the substance involved in most drug-toxicity deaths – 85% in the first six months of 2021. Cocaine, methamphetamine and etizolam are also present in significant numbers of deaths. Data confirms, as it has throughout this public health emergency, that illicit substances are driving this health crisis. Prescribed safe supply is not playing a role in the ongoing drug-toxicity crisis.

“Today is International Overdose Awareness Day; a day in which we remember and mourn the family members, friends and neighbours we’ve lost to drug toxicity,” Lapointe said. “To the thousands of B.C. families grieving the loss of a beloved family member, I extend my heartfelt condolences and my hope that the stories you’ve shared will continue to influence positive change. Those who died mattered and their loss is felt deeply, and we must continue to urge those in positions of influence across our province and the country to move to urgently implement measures to prevent more unnecessary suffering and death.”

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

- 71% of those who died as a result of suspected drug toxicity in 2021 were aged between 30 and 59, and 80% were male.

- By health authority in 2021, the highest number of illicit drug-toxicity deaths were in Fraser and Vancouver Coastal Health (342 and 283 deaths), making up 62% of all such deaths during this period.
  - The highest rates of death were in Vancouver Coastal Health (46 deaths per 100,000 individuals) and Northern Health (45 per 100,000). Overall, the rate in B.C. is 39 deaths per 100,000 individuals.
- Deaths due to drug toxicity remain the leading cause of unnatural death in BC.

#### Quotes:

#### **Brian Twaites, advanced care paramedic and paramedic specialist, who has attended to thousands of overdoses in a 35-year career –**

“Paramedics across B.C. have been responding to an exponential increase in overdoses this year, and there appears no end in sight to this health crisis. This is someone’s best friend. This is someone’s dad. This is someone’s kid. Every time this happens, the loss is devastating.”

#### **Leslie McBain, co-founder, Moms Stop the Harm –**

"Innocent people of all ages, every community, every race, every socioeconomic stratum are dying of toxic drugs in B.C. and across Canada. There are viable solutions to actually stop the deaths. We must push the governments to immediately implement a safe regulated supply of the drugs people need. We must stop the preventable deaths of our loved ones."

#### Learn More:

Illicit drug overdose death report (data to June 30, 2021):

<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 June 30, 2021):

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

BC Centre for Disease Control fact sheet on etizolam:

<https://towardtheheart.com/assets/uploads/1609977106OOyN2HFTIkYYKxfbZi8XL6s1NfTIHIOejSYqQnt.pdf>

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