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## NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General  
BC Coroners Service

### **Nearly 500 British Columbians lost to toxic illicit drugs in first three months of 2021**

VICTORIA – As the province’s public health emergency regarding substance related harms enters its sixth year, the BC Coroners Service reports that toxic illicit drugs have claimed the lives of 158 British Columbians in March 2021.

This raises the total number of deaths in the province for the year to 498.

“Once again, we are reminded of the incredible toll that the toxic drug emergency is having on communities throughout our province,” said Lisa Lapointe, chief coroner, BC Coroners Service. “The illicit drug supply in British Columbia is volatile and unpredictable, and anyone using a substance from this unregulated market is vulnerable to serious injury or death.”

The 158 deaths represent a 41% increase over the 112 deaths recorded in March 2020 and ties the previous high for March established in 2018. For the third consecutive month, more than five British Columbians lost their lives to illicit drugs every day, and the yearly total to date surpassed the previous high of 401 deaths recorded between January and March 2017. The provincewide death rate for 2021 stands at 38.3 per 100,000 residents.

As in previous months, the drug supply continues to be volatile in terms of variability and toxicity. Carfentanil was detected in 18 deaths in March, bringing the total number of carfentanil-related deaths in 2021 to 48. For comparison, carfentanil was detected in 65 deaths between January and December 2020. Additionally, the detection rate of benzodiazepines has increased from 15% of samples in July 2020 to 51% of samples in February 2021.

“There are no simple solutions to the toxic drug crisis this province is experiencing,” Lapointe said. “Problematic substance use is widespread throughout our province, and evidence-based strategies, such as supervised consumption and drug-checking services, prescription alternatives and accessible and meaningful treatment and recovery options, are essential to reduce the death and suffering.”

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

- The number of illicit drug toxicity deaths in March 2021 was about 5.1 deaths per day.
- In 2021, 69% of those dying were aged 30 to 59.
- Males accounted for 80% of deaths in 2021.
- By health authority, the highest death rates in 2021 are in Northern Health (57 deaths per 100,000 individuals) and Vancouver Coastal Health (45 per 100,000).
- No deaths have been reported at supervised consumption or drug overdose prevention sites.

**Learn More:**

Illicit drug overdose death report (data is current to March 31, 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 is current to Feb. 28, 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/1609977106OOyN2HFTIkYYKxfbZi8XL6s1NfTIH0ejSYqQnt.pdf>

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