
NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
BC Coroners Service

Toxic drug supply claims more than 7,000 British Columbians since 2016

VICTORIA – Flags are flying at half-mast around the province in recognition of the five-year anniversary of B.C.’s public health emergency for substance-related harms.

During that time, the BC Coroners Service reports illicit drugs have claimed the lives of at least 7,072 British Columbians.

“Today, we remember and grieve the thousands of people who have lost their lives in B.C. due to a toxic illicit drug supply,” said Lisa Lapointe, chief coroner, BC Coroners Service. “I extend my heartfelt condolences to all of those who have lost a beloved family member or friend as a result of the unscrupulous and profit-driven illicit drug market. The tragic loss of these thousands of individuals underlines the urgent need for a substantial shift in our provincial and national response to problematic substance use.”

The public health emergency was first declared by then-provincial health officer, Dr. Perry Kendall, on April 14, 2016. That action marked the first time the provincial health officer served notice to exercise emergency powers under the Public Health Act and made B.C. the first province to take that kind of action in response to deaths due to illicit drug toxicity.

In the following years, despite a number of actions taken at various levels of government, the province has continually set new records for illicit drug toxicity deaths. A new record high was set in 2020, with 1,724 lives lost in B.C. An additional 329 deaths took place in the first two months of 2021.

“While the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us how, as a province and a nation, we can mobilize and achieve incredible things together, it has also revealed a sadder truth – some dangers evoke more community concern than others,” Kendall said. “There is a stark and dreadful contrast in how we as a society have responded to the two public health emergencies. 2021 is the year to stop temporizing and take the necessary steps to put an end to this tragedy.”

While virtually no area of the province has been spared from the opioid crisis, First Nations communities have been particularly impacted. The First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) reports between January and May 2020, 89 First Nations individuals died in B.C. due to illicit drug toxicity – a 93% increase compared to the same period in 2019. During that period, 16% of all drug toxicity deaths in B.C. were Indigenous people, who account for just 3.3% of the province’s population.

“The data underscores the immense toll that illicit drug toxicity is having on the lives of Indigenous people and their communities in B.C.,” said Dr. Shannon McDonald, acting chief medical officer, FNHA. “That the opioid crisis continues to wreak havoc on Indigenous people five years after the B.C. government’s declaration of a public health emergency on opioid use is

a clear indication that there is still much more to be done to resolve this tragic public health issue.”

Lapointe said, “I am encouraged to hear governments at all levels resolving to address substance use and the terrible toll of this health challenge in a meaningful, evidence-based and compassionate manner. It is my sincere hope that, five years from now, we will look back with gratitude at the courageous and innovative steps taken to end this crisis.”

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