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## NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General  
BC Coroners Service

### **More than 1,500 lives lost to toxic illicit drugs in first nine months of 2021**

VICTORIA – Reporting released by the BC Coroners Service shows that 333 lives were lost to suspected illicit drug toxicity in August and September 2021, raising the total number of British Columbians lost this year to 1,534.

“Once again, we are reporting record numbers of deaths in our province due to the toxic illicit drug supply,” said Lisa Lapointe, chief coroner. “The tremendous loss being felt by families and communities across B.C. as they mourn loved ones lost far too soon, is heart-breaking.”

The 1,534 cumulative deaths in 2021 are the most in the first nine months of a calendar year and represent a 24% increase over the 1,240 deaths recorded between January and September 2020. The provincewide death rate stands at 39.4 per 100,000 residents, nearly double the rate in 2016 when the public health emergency into substance-related harms was first declared.

September is the 12th consecutive month in which there were at least 150 deaths due to toxic illicit drugs, and an average of 170 British Columbians have been lost each month in 2021. Both the 181 reported deaths in August and the 152 deaths reported in September are record numbers for those months.

Consistent with previous reporting, toxicology results indicate that the illicit drug supply in B.C. is both volatile and increasingly toxic. Fentanyl and its analogues have now been detected in 84% of all illicit toxicity deaths in 2021, with carfentanil, a particularly potent analogue, being detected in 137 deaths, more than double the 65 deaths recorded in all of 2020. The vast majority of toxicological results indicate the presence of multiple substances, with the three most frequently detected (in addition to fentanyl) being cocaine, methamphetamine/amphetamine and other opioids.

“Our province is in the sixth year of this public health emergency, and the death rate due to toxic drugs has never been higher,” said Lapointe. “Urgent action on a number of fronts is required, including much broader access to safe supply, more readily available and efficient drug-checking services, and a shift from a law-enforcement focus to a health-centred approach. The Province’s application to the federal government to decriminalize possession of illicit drugs for personal use is an essential step to address the drug toxicity crisis. Criminalizing those who use substances has done nothing to address this complex health issue and has resulted in greater suffering and marginalization. How many more deaths are we willing to accept to maintain drug policies and laws that have no basis in evidence?”

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

- 71% of those who have died as a result of suspected drug toxicity in 2021 were

between 30 and 59, and 79% were male.

- The number of illicit drug toxicity deaths in August and September 2021 is equal to about 5.5 deaths per day.
- By Health Service Delivery Area, in 2021, the highest rates were in Vancouver, Thompson Cariboo, Northwest, North Vancouver Island and Fraser East.
- By Local Health Area, in 2021, the highest rates were in Upper Skeena, Lillooet, Merritt, North Thompson and Hope.
- Deaths due to drug toxicity remain the leading cause of unnatural death in B.C.

### **Learn More:**

Illicit drug overdose death report (Data to Sept. 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 Sept. 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/1609977106OOyN2HFTIkYYKxfbZi8XL6s1NfTIHl0ejSYqQnt.pdf>

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