



NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
2022PSSG0063-001528
Oct. 12, 2022

Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
BC Coroners Service

Rapid increase in deaths among people experiencing homelessness in B.C. in 2021

VICTORIA – Preliminary reporting from the BC Coroners Service shows 247 deaths of individuals experiencing homelessness were reported to the agency in 2021, which is a 75% increase over the number of lives lost in 2020.

“This report reflects the risks and realities that people experiencing homelessness face every day,” said Lisa Lapointe, chief coroner. “We know that many are facing significant health concerns, including physical disabilities, mental-health challenges and substance-use issues. Additionally, as is also evident in the province’s housed population, the report details the significant risks associated with toxic drugs for those who are unhoused. My hope is that this information will help support positive action, both during Homelessness Action Week and beyond.”

During the 10-year period studied (2012-21), approximately 120 deaths of people experiencing homelessness were investigated by the BC Coroners Service annually. However, following a significant increase in the number of lives lost between 2015 (73) and 2016 (181), an average of about 153 deaths per year were reported between 2016 and 2020.

Individuals between 30 and 59 years accounted for 72% of reported deaths, and 83% of decedents were male. More than half of the investigated deaths occurred in either the Fraser (32%) or Vancouver Coastal (25%) health authorities.

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of the investigated deaths were classified as accidental, and 87% of those accidental deaths were determined to have been caused by illicit drug toxicity. In 2021, 93% of all accidental deaths among people experiencing homelessness were identified as being caused by the illicit drug supply.

“The BC Coroners Service’s death review panel report into illicit drug toxicity deaths found a high correlation between deaths due to drug toxicity and persons living in poverty or experiencing housing instability,” Lapointe said. “Almost one-third of the 2,117 decedents in the panel’s protocol cohort were either living outdoors or in temporary shelters. This data in this release reinforces the panel’s recommendations: the urgent creation of a provincewide framework for distribution of safer supply; the establishment of clear goals, targets and deliverable timeframes to reduce the number of illicit drug toxicity events and deaths; and the establishment of an evidence-based continuum of care.”

For the purposes of the reporting, an individual experiencing homelessness was defined as “a person living outdoors, in a makeshift shelter, a parked vehicle, or any other structure not intended for habitation; or a person staying at an emergency shelter (overnight) or temporarily sheltered (suspected to be for less than 30 days) by friends or family, in a short-term shelter,

temporary modular housing, safe house for youth, or transition house for women and children fleeing violence.” People residing in short-term shelters, safe houses or transition houses for an unknown length of time were included.

Additional key preliminary findings are below. Data is subject to change as open investigations are received:

- 50% of individuals met the criteria for street homelessness and 33% for sheltered homelessness. Males were more likely than females to meet criteria for street homelessness (51% versus 44%).
- Deaths occurred more often in the later months of the year. November (11%) had the highest proportion of deaths, followed by August (10%) and December (10%).
- By classification, from 2012-21, 74% of deaths were considered accidental, followed by 13% classified as natural and 7% as suicides.
- The townships with the highest number of deaths were Vancouver (248), Surrey (127) and Victoria (99).

Learn More:

Deaths of Individuals Experiencing Homelessness 2012-21:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/deaths-of-individuals-experiencing-homelessness.pdf>

BC Coroners Service Death Review Panel: A Review of Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths:

https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/death-review-panel/review_of_illicit_drug_toxicity_deaths_2022.pdf

Contact:

Ryan Panton
Manager
Strategic Communications and Media
Relations
BC Coroners Service
236 478-1582

Connect with the Province of B.C. at: news.gov.bc.ca/connect