

Responding to BC's Opioid Overdose Epidemic

Progress Update October 2017

Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions



BACKGROUND

Since BC’s Public Health Emergency was declared in 2016, people across the province have mobilized to immediately respond to and prevent overdoses and overdose deaths. Despite these efforts, an unprecedented number of people continue to die; projections suggest BC may see 1,500 overdose deaths or more in 2017 (see Figure 1). To date there have been 1,013 overdose deaths in 2017.

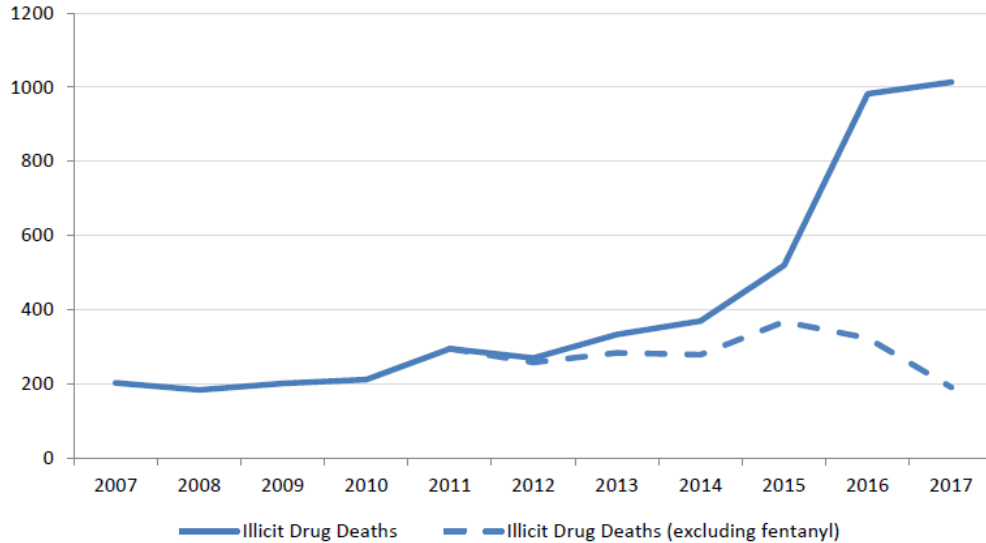


Figure 1: Illegal Drug Overdose Deaths (BC, 2001 – August 31, 2017)

BC continues to experience record rates of overdose death in all areas of the province. As of August 31, 2017, BC’s rate has reached a peak of 56.3 per 100,000 individuals in Vancouver Health Service Delivery Area (see Figure 2).

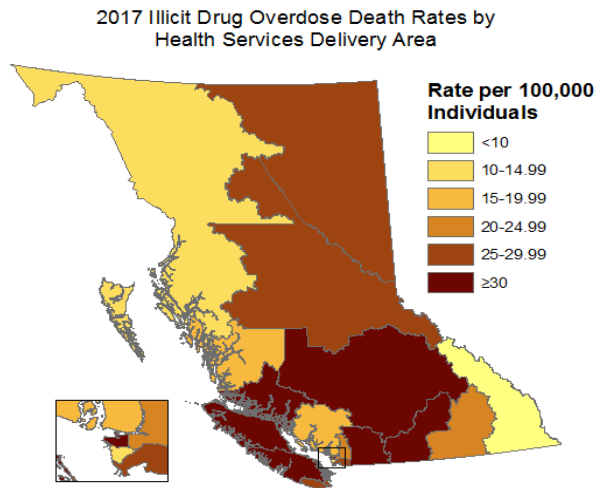


Figure 2: Illegal Drug Overdose Death Rate (BC, July 31, 2016 to August 31, 2017)

ESCALATING BC'S RESPONSE TO THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY

BC's overdose epidemic remains complex and dynamic, where the ground is prone to frequent shifts. The situation is complex because there is a wide range of people using illegal drugs for a variety of reasons in different contexts, locations, combinations, and routes of administration. It is dynamic because of the introduction of new substances into the illegal drug supply, which is driven by the enormous financial incentive to manufacture increasingly potent drugs.

In July 2017, the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions was established with responsibility to lead the provincial response to the opioid emergency. The Minister's mandate letter outlines the major priorities for the new ministry, including the need to work in partnership to develop an immediate response.

The Minister of Mental Health and Addictions has continued to meet with people with lived experience, their families, first responders, volunteers and staff from community-based organizations, addiction experts and others working on the front line of the opioid emergency. Under the direction of the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, and informed by those working in the system, the Province is developing a cross-sector action plan and dedicating resources—more than \$322M over three years—to accelerate the response.

New measures announced in September include:

- **Community crisis innovation fund**
- **Scaling up rapid-access community treatment**
- **Broader access to no-cost naloxone kits**
- **Support for those on the frontlines**
- **Public awareness campaign**
- **Action to protect public safety and cut off illegal fentanyl supplies**
- **Additional funding for the BC Coroners Service to expand the Drug-Death Investigations Team**

KEY AREAS OF FOCUS

1. **Saving lives:** Services for people who continue to use drugs that help reduce the risk of overdose, reduce the severity of overdose, or provide immediate lifesaving interventions when an overdose has happened.
2. **Ending the stigma around addictions and mental illness:** Activities that reduce negative attitudes about people who use drugs that may keep people from seeking and receiving help for problematic substance use.

3. **Rebuilding the network of mental health and addiction treatment services:** Services that support treatment of and recovery from addiction.
4. **Addressing the full range of supports and social factors:** Activities and services that address social factors related to substance use such as housing, income, employment, intergenerational trauma and community development.

PROGRESS REPORTING

The Province is focused on transitioning from an emergency response to building and sustaining an improved system that meets the needs of people when and where they need it. Ensuring actions are informed by the latest data and evidence available is integral to an effective and robust response. The Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions commits to public progress reporting on the four key areas of focus every month for the foreseeable future.

1. Saving lives

Progress update

Government is investing \$6 million over three years to further expand naloxone availability:

- **The Take Home Naloxone Program is working with the B.C. Pharmacy Association to establish new distribution sites at community pharmacies throughout the province. British Columbians who use opioids or are likely to respond to an overdose will be able to get free kits at pharmacies by the end of the year.**
- **The Take Home Naloxone Program is working with first responders to increase naloxone distribution among those who recover from an overdose event and do not wish to be transported to the hospital. More naloxone training opportunities and additional new distribution locations around the province are also being planned.**
- **Since 2013, more than 55,000 Take Home Naloxone kits have been distributed free of charge (nearly half of them in 2017 alone), with 590 locations currently distributing kits.**
- **The BC Centre for Disease Control, working with implementing partners, has finalized and released a [provincial guide for Overdose Prevention Services](#).**
- **From December 2016 to September 24, 2017, there have been 405,703 visits to 24 overdose prevention sites with 2,029 overdoses reversed and zero deaths.**
- **As of August 31, fentanyl checking services in Vancouver were expanded to all overdose prevention and supervised consumption sites.**

2. Ending the stigma around addictions and mental illness

Progress update

Government has allocated \$2 million in 2017-18 and \$2.37 million in 2018-19 and 2019-20 to support new public awareness efforts, including:

- A new campaign will be launched in the fall of 2017, with a particular focus on reaching men aged 30 to 60 years, the group most at risk of overdose, and reducing stigma about addiction.

The government is partnering with WorkSafeBC, B.C. Restaurant & Food Services Association and BC Building Trades Council –and others to come on board in the near future – to increase the reach of the campaign. The partnerships are designed to create new, targeted avenues for building awareness on how to stay safe and where to reach out for support.

Resources continue to be made available for teachers, parents, friends, family, those who may witness an overdose, and anyone wanting more information on the Public Health Emergency. Visit www.gov.bc.ca/overdose for more information.

3. Building a network of mental health and addiction treatment services

Build an improved treatment system by concentrating substance use services to ensure rapid access

To make sure that help is available when people are ready to start on a path to recovery, health authorities are scaling up rapid access to medication treatments for opioid addiction. People who receive appropriate and effective treatment for opioid use disorder are less likely to seek out and use illegal opioids. Therefore, expanding the reach and improving upon the range of existing treatment options for people with opioid use disorder is a key component of preventing overdoses.

Progress update

Funding details to support expanded access to opioid addiction treatment under government's \$322 million investment over the next three years are being finalized, and will include rapid-access addictions clinics and specialized substance use hubs.

- On October 10, 2017, the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions approved a BC Centre for Substance Use (BCCSU) Guidance Document on injectable agonist treatment. Posted on the BCCSU website, the document provides guidance for injectable opioid agonist treatment (iOAT) programs to treat patients who have not benefited from oral OAT medications, such as buprenorphine/naloxone (Suboxone), methadone and slow-release oral morphine.
- Regional health authorities are expanding the hours of and opening new addictions clinics in Vancouver, Burnaby, Chilliwack, Abbotsford, Mission and Langley. Clinics in Surrey and Maple Ridge are now also offering faster, easier access.
- The BCCSU continues to offer a [free online certificate course](#) targeted at health care professionals interested in learning more about providing care to patients with substance use disorders. Over 3,500 health-care providers have enrolled.
- The BCCSU continues to offer the Provincial Opioid Addiction Treatment Support Program to provide education and information for new prescribers in BC.
- BC submitted orders for diacetylmorphine, naltrexone, and buprenorphine/naloxone from Health Canada's approved list of drugs for an urgent public health need to increase the availability of additional treatment options for people with opioid use disorder.

4. Addressing the full range of supports and social factors

Progress update

Government will invest \$3.4 million as sustainable annual funding to support first responders, especially those working with community organizations through the newly established Mobile Response Team. The team provides training, education and crisis response to support the mental and emotional health of staff and volunteers of community-based organizations responding to multiple overdoses in all health regions.

ENFORCEMENT ACTIVITIES TO PROTECT PUBLIC SAFETY

Progress update

Government has also allocated \$24.2 million over three years to support critical public safety efforts, including:

- **New dedicated anti-trafficking teams within the provincial RCMP and Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit (CFSEU-BC), with additional officers and support staff. This puts more boots on the ground to go after, arrest and prosecute dangerous and violent drug traffickers to disrupt the drug supply line in communities.**
- **Resources for all police agencies for enforcement activity against organized crime importers and traffickers, through the province's gang unit (CFSEU-BC), including more funding for projects that specifically target traffickers, to stem the flow of fentanyl into B.C.**
- **Increased support for police-based outreach in their communities and funding for multidisciplinary approaches to bring together mental health, social service and police agencies to proactively reach people who are seen to be of elevated risk.**
- **RCMP and municipal police continue to contribute to province-wide efforts to keep people alive. To date, RCMP and municipal police have recorded 265 successful overdose reversals by administering naloxone and 7,480 members (sworn and civilian) have received naloxone training.**

GENERATING INTELLIGENCE

The complex nature and causes of BC's overdose epidemic require generating and gathering together multiple data sources to monitor, analyze, and understand the emergency and its underlying issues. This data provides the best available evidence for implementation and evaluation of effective actions. Enhanced population health surveillance activities are now providing more detailed information about overdoses and risk factors to enable targeted interventions and evaluation.

Progress update

Government has invested \$15 million over three years to support community innovation and learning as part of the accelerated response to the overdose emergency:

- **The fund will support implementation and evaluation of nimble, innovative, community-based actions with the potential for immediate impact on the ground.**
- **The fund will be available to introduce measures across the range of response, such as targeted community-based prevention or early-intervention programs, or innovative harm-reduction and treatment approaches to keep people safe and support people seeking help.**

Partners are also working to improve the information available to inform the response:

- **BC Stats, and the Integrated Data Office, are working in collaboration with the BC Centre for Disease Control to bring together data sets from sectors beyond health and assist in better understanding the trajectories of individuals and groups at risk of an overdose event.**
- **An additional \$7.1 M over three years was made available for the BC Coroners Service to expand the Drug-Death Investigations Team, to help resolve backlog and meet the significant increase in workload and lab testing. This will provide timely, accurate data to inform new strategies in this public health crisis.**
- **The BC Centre for Disease Control continues to report overdose data (updated weekly) on their public [website](#). Data include the number of illegal drug overdoses attended by the BC Ambulance Service, 9-1-1 calls for ingestion poisoning, statistics on overdose prevention services, and geographic distribution of illegal drug overdose deaths.**
- **LifeLabs continues to provide the Province with weekly reports on the presence of fentanyl and fentanyl analogues circulating in the illegal drug supply. Two fentanyl analogues, carfentanil and furanylfentanyl, have been detected in all regional health authorities. A third designer opioid named U-47700 has been detected in BC; this substance is not a fentanyl analogue but has been linked with deaths in the United States.**

CONCLUSION

BC is grappling with an overdose epidemic that has complex and dynamic underpinnings, with the rapid introduction of new substances and consistently high rates of unintentional illegal drug overdose deaths spread evenly right across the province. With significant new investments in accelerated cross sector action, the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions is taking action to ensure a comprehensive and robust response to BC's opioid overdose emergency.