

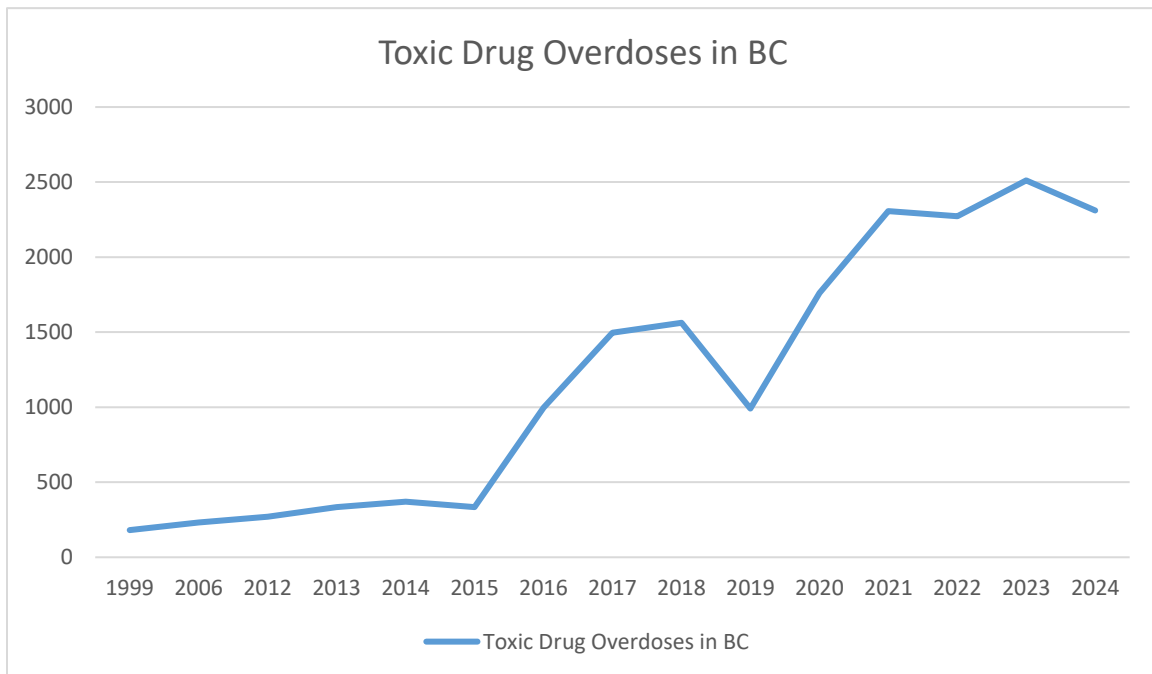


The impact of toxic drug overdoses and deaths in BC

Fact Sheet, January 2025

The situation

- An emergency over toxic drug deaths was declared in BC in April 2016. Overdose deaths had been slowly on their way up for many years prior to this, but the steep rise from 2016 on would be unprecedented.



- The primary cause of increased deaths is the growing toxicity and unpredictability of the street supply of opioids, or “down,” the vast majority of which (94.4 per cent) contains the synthetic opioid fentanyl or a fentanyl analog¹. As noted in 2022 by now-retired BC Chief Coroner Lisa Lapointe, the current drug policy framework of prohibition is the main driver of the illegal, unregulated and toxic street supply.
- Prior to 2012, BC’s knowledge of illicit drug use in the province was limited to data from Vancouver and Victoria, which accounted for about 15% of BC’s total population at that time. Little data and many gaps in knowledge remain as to the historic impact of illicit drug use in suburban, rural, and northern populations.

A national crisis

- The toxic drug crisis affects people in every province, with 49,145 opioid toxicity deaths occurring in Canada between January 2016 – June 2024
- 84 per cent of those deaths were in BC, Alberta and Ontario

Faces of the crisis

- 70 per cent of people dying are ages 30-59, almost three-quarters of them male
- BUT – overdose deaths among females are increasing year over year. The 2024 rate of 21 deaths per 100,000 is 60 per cent higher than in 2020.
- Female death rates in the North and on Vancouver Island are higher than the provincial average - 46 per 100,000 in the North, 26 per 100,000 on the Island
- A 2022 coroner’s review found that 35 per cent of those who died were employed at the time of their death, with over half of them working in the trades, transport or as equipment operators.
- In 2024, 82 per cent of fatal drug poisonings were either from smoking drugs (68 per cent) or snorting them (14 per cent). Injecting accounted for just 12 per cent of overdose deaths.

A few facts on fentanyl

- *Created in Europe in the late 1950s as a surgical anesthetic, 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine*
- *Now one of the most popular pharmaceutical opioids in the world*
- *Whether diverted from legal markets or produced in home labs, it’s popular among drug suppliers because it’s potent in small amounts, odorless, and easier to produce/transport*
- *Emerged in B.C. drug supply 2009-12. Overdose deaths in BC related to fentanyl increased dramatically at that point.*
- *By 2016, fentanyl was being found in 42 per cent of toxicology tests following an overdose. In 2023, fentanyl or a fentanyl analog was present in 85 per cent of those tests.*
- *Fentanyl is often combined with another pharmaceutical, benzodiazepine, to lengthen duration of effects. It has rendered heroin virtually obsolete in B.C.*

¹ Based on drug sample testing

Impact on Indigenous people

- First Nations people die of opioid toxicity deaths at 6.1 times the rate of non-Indigenous people in BC (2023)
- First Nations women die at 11.7 times the rate of non-Indigenous women, and account for 38.9 per cent of First Nations drug deaths. First Nations men die at 4.8 times the rate of non-Indigenous men (2023)
- First Nations people make up 3.4 per cent of the BC population, but 17.8 per cent of its toxic drug deaths
- The COVID pandemic and the toxic drug crisis combined resulted in the average life span of an Indigenous person in BC dropping by six years between 2017-2021

Dual crises: Toxic drugs and housing

- Most toxic drug deaths occur in private residences (48 per cent in 2024) or shelters, hotels and other indoor locations (32 per cent).
- People experiencing homelessness account for 12 per cent of toxic drug deaths, even while making up a scant 0.5 per cent of the BC population. Someone living unhoused in BC is 24 times more likely to die of a toxic drug overdose than someone who is housed.

Survivors risk brain injury

- A BC study that followed 2,433 patients admitted to hospital between 2006 and 2015 found that at least three per cent of those admitted for accidental opioid overdose had also suffered a brain injury due to oxygen deprivation during the overdose.
- Extrapolated across the roughly 21,000 people in a typical year who BC paramedics revive after a fatal poisoning, that means a minimum 640 people a year are incurring a lifelong brain injury due to the toxic drug supply.
- People with a history of overdose were 38 times more likely to have a diagnosed brain injury compared to a random sample of other British Columbians in a BC study from 2015-17.

Societal Costs

- Death from toxic drugs is the No. 1 killer in BC for age groups 10-59
- The toxic drug crisis costs Canada \$7.1 billion annually – \$1.6 billion in BC. Almost three quarters of that cost is due to lost productivity because of the young age of people – average age 44 - at time of death.
- The number of deaths from the toxic drug crisis is so significant that in 2021, it caused a decrease in average lifespan in BC.

- The peak of paramedic-attended overdoses in a single month in BC since the declaration of the 2016 emergency was September 2021, when paramedics were called to almost 2,600 overdoses in a single month.
- But 2023 set the record for worst year to date, with BC paramedics responding to a record-high 42,172 overdose/poisoning incidents that year - a 25 per cent increase over 2022.

Health approach favoured, but spending is on enforcement

- Public support in BC for harm reduction strategies has been very high for almost 15 years, with a strong majority support for harm reduction services and the distribution of safer-use equipment.
- This majority support isn't reflected at the political level, however. While 50 per cent of people in BC favour a public health approach to address substance use issues and just 4 per cent favour police enforcement, 58 per cent (\$433 million) of the spending in the Canada Drugs and Substances Strategy goes to enforcement.

Grief and suffering

- In 2014, 26 per cent of respondents surveyed at BC harm reduction sites reported witnessing an opioid overdose in the past 6 months. In 2023, 88 per cent had witnessed an overdose in the past 6 months
- In 2018, 19 per cent of drug users surveyed at BC harm reduction facilities had experienced an overdose themselves. In 2023, 50 per cent had.
- Between 30-40 per cent of the 6,000 members of the Ambulance Paramedics of BC have an active mental health claim, many of them related to compassion fatigue and PTSD related to the unregulated drug crisis.
