



## The Overdose and Toxic Drug Crisis in 2021

February 2022\*

### Background

BC's Overdose and Toxic Drug Crisis continues to claim thousands of lives of British Columbians and has only accelerated since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the BC Coroners Service [Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths in BC report](#), 2021 was the deadliest year on record with 2224 lives lost to this crisis.<sup>i</sup> By October the number of deaths had already surpassed that seen in 2020, and November and December further proved to be the deadliest months on record since the declaration of the crisis in 2016, with 210 and 215 illicit drug toxicity deaths, respectively.<sup>ii</sup> It is clear the rates of overdose and toxic drug deaths only continue to increase, and immediate action is required to better address this health emergency.

The number of drug toxicity deaths in November and December equated to approximately 7 lives lost each day.<sup>iii</sup> Of these deaths, approximately 71% of the individuals were between the ages of 30 and 59 and 16% were under the age of 29, including 29 deaths of minors under the age of 19, the highest number of deaths among minors ever reported in a single year since 2011.<sup>iv</sup> Additionally, there were 30 deaths of individuals over the age of 70 in 2021, compared to 16 deaths among that age group in the year prior.<sup>v</sup> Overall, the cumulative number of deaths in 2021 represents a 26% increase over the same period of time in the previous year. Over the past seven years, the rate of death due to drug toxicity has increased by more than 400%.<sup>vi</sup>

Unfortunately, some of the public health measures implemented to help slow the transmission of COVID-19 inadvertently hindered some harm reduction practices. For example, 56% of drug toxicity deaths in 2021 occurred in private residences, and approximately 17% occurred outside in locations such as parks and vehicles.<sup>vii</sup> Coupled with a toxic drug supply, these dual public health emergencies have led to an increasingly complex public health approach which has had to balance harm reduction with COVID-19 safety protocols, many of which have led to a higher incidence of people using drugs at home or alone. Notably, no deaths were reported at any supervised consumption or overdose prevention sites in BC in 2021.<sup>viii</sup> Furthermore, the Overdose and Toxic Drug Crisis in BC does not elicit the same attention as the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a long-standing culture of stigma surrounding substance use that prevents many individuals from trusting the system enough to seek care. Antiquated drug laws and marginalization of those who use drugs only serve to fuel stigma. It is a well-established fact that criminalization of people who use drugs does not in fact protect against harms, but rather fuels stigma and creates more barriers to care.<sup>ix</sup> While there is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic requires a concerted and focused effort to stop the spread of the deadly virus, so too does the Overdose and Toxic Drug Crisis.

NNPBC supports a multi-faceted harm reduction approach including safe supply, the wide use and distribution of naloxone kits, supervised consumption sites, overdose prevention sites, increased funding for community action, greater access to treatment for those who seek it, and decriminalization. NNPBC commends the [BC provincial government for the request for federal exemption to decriminalize personal possession of drugs](#). As part of NNPBC's approach, we advocated for expanded prescriptive authority, allowing RNs and RPNs in the province to prescribe safe alternatives to street drugs. The Provincial Health Office later issued an order expanding prescriptive authority to include RNs and RPNs, recognizing that safer supply is an effective harm reduction strategy to help mitigate the impacts of the Overdose and Toxic Drug Crisis. Harm reduction measures are fundamental in eliminating stigma and bringing adequate attention to BC's Overdose and Toxic Drug Crisis, which in turn can mitigate the impacts of this health emergency and prevent 2022 and the years ahead from being as devastating as 2021. There is no more time to waste, lives depend on it.

## Key Messages

- With more than 2200 deaths, 2021 was the deadliest year of the Overdose Crisis since its declaration in 2016.
- There were 210 and 215 deaths in each November and December 2021 respectively, making them the deadliest months on record for toxic drug deaths.
- The cumulative number of deaths in 2021 represents a 26% increase over the number of deaths in 2020.
- Some of the public health measures instituted for the COVID-19 pandemic have inadvertently hindered some harm reduction practices.
- Stigma is a large factor in preventing the Overdose and Toxic Drug Crisis from receiving the same attention as the COVID-19 pandemic.
- NNPBC supports all harm reduction approaches including safe supply and decriminalization.
- NNPBC supports BC's request for federal exemption to decriminalize personal possession of drugs.

## Further Reading/Resources

- [BC Request for Federal Exemption to Decriminalize Personal Possession](#)
- [Safe Supply](#)
- [De-Stigmatizing Language](#)
- [Stigma & the Opioid Crisis](#)
- [NNPBC & HRNA Call for the Decriminalization of People Who Use Drugs in BC](#)
- [BC Coroners Service: Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths in BC, Jan 1, 2011-Dec 31, 2021](#)
- [BC Coroners Service: Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths in BC, Jan 1, 2011-Oct 31, 2021](#)
- [What does my professional association do?](#)

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<sup>i</sup> BC Coroners Service. 'Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths in BC, January 1, 2011-December 31, 2021.' February 9, 2022. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/illicit-drug.pdf>.

<sup>ii</sup> BC Coroners Service. 'Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths in BC – December 31, 2021.';

BC Coroners Service. 'More than 1500 lives lost to toxic illicit drugs in first nine months of 2021.' November 9, 2021. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/news/bccs-september-2021-reporting.pdf>;

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<sup>iii</sup> CBC News. 'More than 2,200 people died in B.C. in 2021 due to illicit-drug overdoses, coroner reports.' February 9, 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bc-toxic-drugs-deaths-december2022-1.6344991>.

<sup>iv</sup> BC Coroners Service. '*Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths in BC – December 31, 2021.*'

<sup>v</sup> Ibid

<sup>vi</sup> BC Gov News. Public Safety and Solicitor General. 'More than 2,200 British Columbians lost to illicit drugs in 2021.' February 9, 2022. <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2022PSSG0010-000188>.

<sup>vii</sup> BC Coroners Service. '*Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths in BC – December 31, 2021.*'

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid

<sup>ix</sup> Kroeker, Tess and Gagnon, Marilou. 'Nurses and Nurse Practitioners of British Columbia (NNPBC) and the Harm Reduction Nurses Association (HRNA) call for the decriminalization of people who use drugs in B.C.' August 8, 2019. <https://nnpbc.com/pdfs/media/press-releases/PR-HRNA-NNPBC-Statement.pdf>