Evaluation of the Decriminalization of Illegal Drugs in British Columbia

Findings from Year 1

On January 31st, 2023, the province of British Columbia (BC) decriminalized the personal possession of up to 2.5 g of opioids, cocaine, methamphetamine, and MDMA among adults (18+) for a period of three years. This decriminalization initiative aims to reduce stigma, criminalization, and associated harms for people who use drugs (PWUD), while improving access to health services, trust in law enforcement, and public awareness of drug use as a health issue.

The **Ontario Node of the Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Matters (OCRINT)** is conducting a five-year independent evaluation of the decriminalization policy to assess its impact across the following domains:











People Who Use Drugs (PWUD)

Police & Criminal Justice System

General Public

Health Service Economic System Impacts



Public Opinion Poll

Overview

- Public sentiment plays a large role in the outcome of drug policies such as decriminalization.
- Given that reduction of stigma and fear of criminalization is an overarching goal of decriminalization, it is important to understand the public's perception of the policy, and how views may evolve over the course of its implementation.
- In collaboration with IPSOS, a public opinion polling firm, OCRINT is conducting yearly cross-sectional surveys among a representative sample of approximately n=1,500 English-speaking adults (18+) residing in BC.
- This sub-study aims to evaluate and characterize the BC public's awareness, understanding, perceptions, and attitudes towards decriminalization.

Methods

- The first survey was distributed between March 26 April 1, 2024. Results are presented below.
- One survey item assessed support of decriminalization, and ten items assessed attitudes toward decriminalization.
- Responses were weighted to reflect the BC population based on census data for region, age, gender, and education.
- We used Rao-Scott chi-square tests and a multinomial logistic regression model to identify associations between demographic characteristics and support of decriminalization.

Results

Sample Characteristics (n=1,202)

51% Female or other

31% High school or less ເບລີ 78% No children

35% 18 - 39 years of age 53% Living with a partner or married

54% Employed

29% Income of \$60,000 - \$99,000

40% Living in Fraser Health Authority Region

Attitudes Toward Decriminalization (n=1,202)

% Agree ■ % Disagree % Neutral / Not Sure Decriminalization will reduce the criminalization of PWUD in BC 28 50 22 56 21 Decriminalization will reduce rates of drug overdoses 23 Decriminalization will reduce the stigma associated with drug use 45 28 27 52 16 31 Decriminalization has positively influenced my views of PWUD Decriminalization will encourage drug use experimentation 20 53 27 Decriminalization has made me feel less safe in my community 28 44 28 50 Decriminalization will decrease drug-related crimes 25 25 Decriminalization will reduce policing costs and resources 36 37 26 36 Decriminalization will improve access to treatment and supports 34 30 Decriminalization is a positive step towards recognizing drug use 33 40 27 as a health issue rather than a criminal issue. I support the decriminalization of illicit drugs policy in BC 41 33 25

Perceived Benefits of Decriminalization Less strain on police/court/prison resources

- More support for PWUD
- Fewer criminal records
- Less stigma
- Potential reduction in crime

Perceived Concerns of Decriminalization Increase in addiction/PWUD

- Easier access/exposure to drugs among youth
- Normalization of drug use
- Public visibility of drug use
- Policy does not address the root cause of the
- problem

• More people appear to oppose the decriminalization policy rather than support it.

Implications & Next Steps

- Lower support for decriminalization among older adults and females.
- Most participants were split on whether they believe the policy will reach its intended goals (e.g., reducing policing
- costs, improving treatment, changing negative perceptions of PWUD). • Open drug use in public spaces was listed as a concern, and 43% of participants indicated the policy has made them
- feel less safe in their community. Results will be used as a baseline to monitor key outcomes and perceptions of the policy going forward.

Source: Imtiaz, S., Russell, C., Ali, F., Elton-Marshall, T., Patenaude, S., Rehm, J., Public Support Of And Attitudes Toward Decriminalization Of Possession Of Illegal Drugs Among The General Population In British Columbia. Journal Of Drug And Alcohol Dependence. Under Review.

- The next survey was launched in February 2025.





