

Evaluation of the Decriminalization of Illicit Drugs in British Columbia

-Progress Update March 2025-

Overview

On January 31st, 2023, 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. 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 & the Criminal Justice System, the General Public, the Health Service System, and Economic Impacts.

Recent Policy Changes

On May 7th, 2024, the Federal Government approved the province's request to **exempt public spaces** from BC's decriminalization policy, essentially re-criminalizing the possession of **any amount** of drugs in **public places** (e.g. hospitals, businesses, transit, parks, etc.). Law enforcement now has the authority to seize illegal drugs possessed in public, and/or make an arrest. Possession of illicit substances (opioids, cocaine, methamphetamine, and MDMA/ecstasy) **below** the 2.5g threshold remains decriminalized for personal use by adults **in private** residences, designated addictions health care facilities, places where individuals are lawfully sheltered, and in harm reduction sites (e.g., overdose prevention, supervised consumption, and drug checking sites).

Furthermore, decriminalization and harm reduction initiatives in BC, across Canada, and in other Western jurisdictions are facing significant backlash. In Canada, conservative federal and provincial governments have vowed to abolish decriminalization and harm reduction initiatives, instead prioritizing a recovery-oriented system of care. In May 2024, the federal government rejected the City of Toronto's request to decriminalize drugs. Meanwhile in BC, in addition to reversing aspects of the decriminalization policy, the NDP government, despite securing a slim majority over the Conservative party in the recent provincial election, has rolled back on harm reduction efforts over the past year, rejecting recommendations to expand access to safer supply programs, and shutting down low-barrier harm reduction distribution models.

Progress on Evaluation Studies

Qualitative Interviews with Police

The sub-study examines police experiences with decriminalization through annual qualitative interviews. The first phase of data collection (November 2023 – March 2024) included interviews with n=30 police officers. The findings have been analyzed and described in two manuscripts; one on 'Policy Alienation' and another on police perspectives of the decriminalization model. The second data collection phase began in November 2024 and is currently ongoing, with 17 interviews completed as of March 27th 2025.

Key Findings

- While officers had **mixed** opinions about decriminalization, most did not see the value in **formally decriminalizing** because there was already an **informal** practice of decriminalization
- Many officers felt excluded from the policy process, and an overall **lack of readiness** regarding the rollout of decriminalization
- Enforcement practices were largely discretionary, and depended on factors such as location, possession amount, trafficking indicators, and whether the officer believed that the recommended charges would be approved
- Officers felt frustrated by the public's demands yet a lack of legal authority to address public drug consumption

Qualitative Interviews with PWUD

This sub-study involves yearly qualitative interviews with approximately n=100 PWUD across BC to explore their experiences with decriminalization. Analyses of data collected from the first phase of interviews (November 2023 – March 2024) are complete, with three primary manuscripts developed on PWUD’s experiences with stigma, police, and drug use.

The second phase will examine perceptions of the policy amendment (‘re-criminalization’), with data collection launching February 18th 2025.

Key Findings

- Findings suggest that PWUD’s drug use, purchasing, and carrying patterns have **not changed** post-decriminalization
- PWUD have had an extensive and tumultuous relationship with police, characterized by historical mistreatment and discrimination, and these negative interactions remained largely **unchanged** in the first year of decriminalization
- Participant’s interactions with police **varied significantly** depending on the officer’s discretion and participant’s social identity, leading to discrepant outcomes
- Overall, participants had **minimal interactions with police**; when they did interact, the police largely turned a blind eye, or did not seize their drugs, suggesting that this aspect of the policy is being realized
- Experiences with societal, structural, and self-stigma were **pervasive** among PWUD, both pre- and post-decriminalization, but **most** were **hopeful** that stigma would decrease over time

Quantitative Analysis

Key Findings

- **Decriminalization was not associated** with an immediate change in the month after its implementation in clients dispensed OAT medications. However, **decriminalization was associated** with a declining trend in clients dispensed OAT medications.
- **Changes were not observed** after decriminalization in first-time clients dispensed medications for OAT, visits to supervised consumption and overdose prevention services, opioid poisoning paramedic responses and drug poisoning deaths.

As part of the evaluation, we are quantitatively examining various health, police, and criminal justice system-related indicators pre- and post-decriminalization from 2013 to 2027.

We have received and analyzed data on opioid agonist treatment (OAT) prescriptions, utilization of overdose prevention services, paramedic-attended illicit drug overdoses, deaths due to illicit drug overdoses, and load per capita of drugs in wastewater.

As the observation period includes the first 11 months of data after decriminalization (i.e. February to December 2023), these analyses focus on the short-term impacts of decriminalization. The findings from these analyses have been synthesized in two academic manuscripts. Data analyses of police-reported illicit drug-related incidents and illicit drug-related criminal charges are currently underway.

Public Opinion Poll

To assess public awareness, understanding, and attitudes toward decriminalization, we are conducting yearly, cross-sectional surveys with a representative sample of approximately n=1500 adults across BC.

The first survey was launched between March 26 and April 1 2024. Data have been analyzed, with inferential statistics used to examine differences in policy support. An academic manuscript describing these results has been submitted for publication.

The second survey was launched in February 2025, and includes questions examining public perceptions and support of ‘re-criminalization.’

Key Findings

- **More** people appear to **oppose than support** the policy, and most feel that it will increase drug use experimentation
- **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 the negative perceptions of PWUD)
- Less than **10%** of participants **perceived benefits** of the policy. Primary benefits noted were less strain on police/court/prison resources, more support for PWUD, and reduction in crime
- Many were **concerned** about **open drug use** in public spaces, and **43%** of participants indicated that the policy has made them feel **less safe** in their community. This may have relevance for the ‘re-criminalization’ of drug use, which is currently being explored in the second iteration of the survey

Health Service System: Mixed-Methods Study

To assess the impacts of decriminalization on health service operations, the evaluation includes yearly cross-sectional surveys and follow-up qualitative interviews with representatives from harm reduction (HR) and

opioid agonist treatment (OAT) sites across BC, identified through online repositories and regional contacts.

Key Findings

- Most OAT and HR sites reported that their service operations had **not changed** substantially since decriminalization within the first year
- There was a **positive trend** in the overall uptake/utilization of HR services post-decriminalization, but **no clear trend** for OAT services
- Both OAT and HR sites experienced an **increase in demand** on staffing and resources post-decriminalization, suggesting their current staffing levels and resources are **insufficient** to meet demands
- Available data indicate **minimal additional funding** allocated to HR services, impacting the ability for these services to meet client needs
- Need for **increased staff training** and **additional investments** into OAT and HR services to better support the current and anticipated increases in demand, and improve access to treatment

Data collection for the first survey was conducted from March 15 to May 31, 2024, and findings have been described in two academic manuscripts, one on HR sites and one on OAT sites.

Follow-up qualitative interviews launched in October 2024, and were completed in January 2025. Coding and manuscript development are now underway.