

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 System
- 
Economic Impacts

Qualitative Interviews with Police Officers: Changes to Policing Practices and Operations

Sub-Study Objectives

- Police officers play a key role in implementing and enforcing the decriminalization policy, including distributing pocket-sized resource cards to facilitate connections to health and social services for people who use drugs
- Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of decriminalization's impact on police practices and operations is essential to assess how the policy is implemented in practice and to identify implementation gaps

Methods

- From November 2023 to March 2024, we conducted qualitative telephone interviews with **30 active police officers** across BC. Interviews included an interviewer-administered survey capturing sociodemographic characteristics and information about participants' roles
- Interview data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis

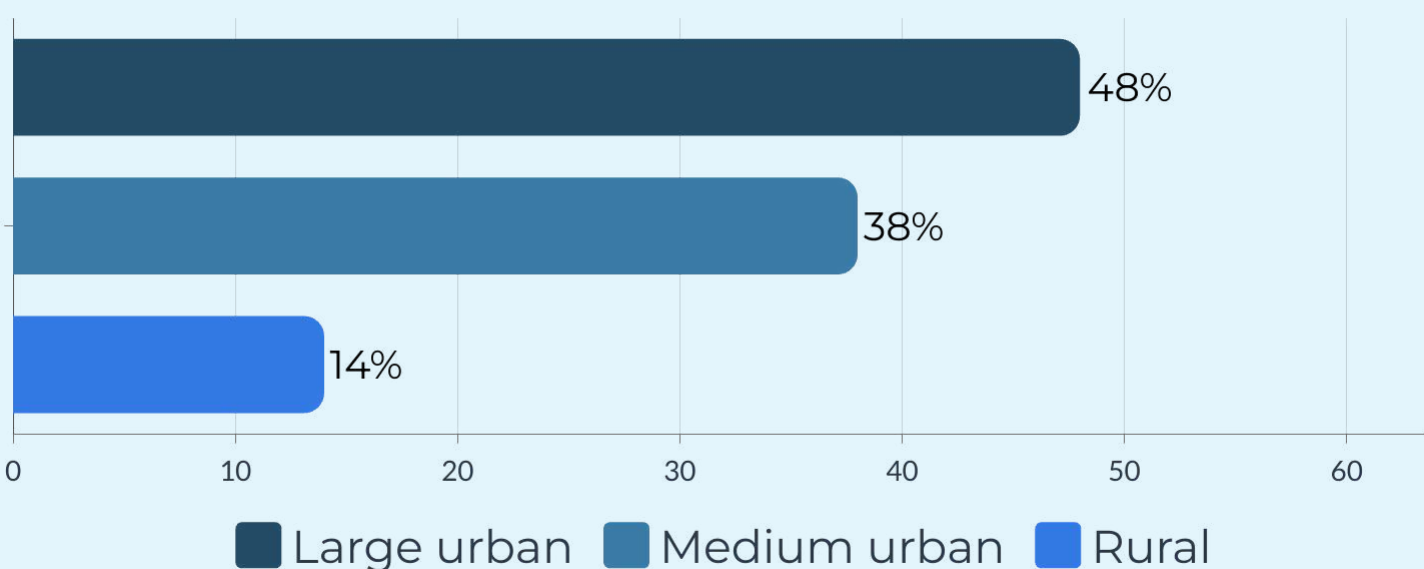
Results

Officer Characteristics (n=30)

Sociodemographic Characteristics

 **83%** Men  **80%** White  **30-39** Most common age group

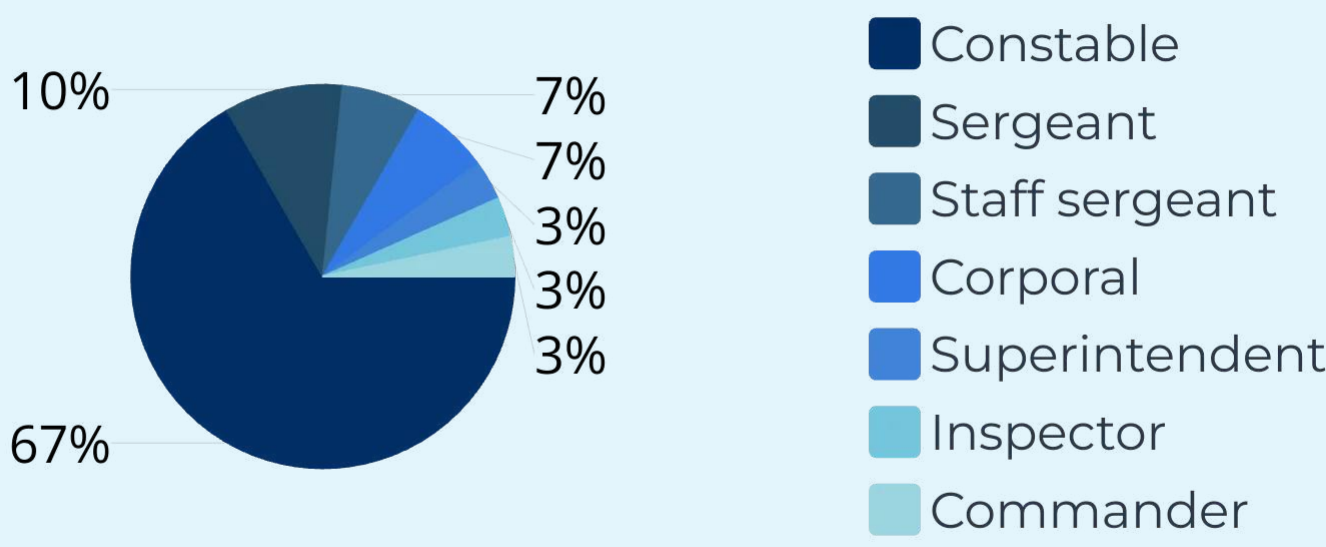
Municipality Size



Police Service

 **0-9** Most common length of police service (years)  **0-9** Most common length of service in current jurisdiction (years)

Police Rank



Perceptions of the Decriminalization Policy and its Features

Officers expressed a **range of perspectives** on decriminalization, with some **supporting** and others **opposing** the policy, while most held **neutral** or **mixed** views

- Some supported the policy's underlying principles, believing it could **improve** the **historically adversarial relationship** between law enforcement and people who use drugs
- Others saw limited value in formal decriminalization, given that they perceived themselves as already operating under a de facto decriminalization framework in which drug possession was rarely enforced

"[Decriminalization] gives hope for individuals who had a really bad point of view of police. [...] It's nice to get that partnership or bridge gaps with the community and the police again."

Many officers were **not ideologically opposed** to decriminalization but **criticized** the policy's design and its implications for frontline policing

- Officers viewed the 2.5g cumulative threshold as **too high**, emphasizing that it did not adequately account for the realities of polysubstance use or differences in individual drug potency

Officers also reported difficulties **operationalizing the 2.5g threshold in practice**

- Some described **strict enforcement** of the 2.5g limit
- Others reported difficulty visually estimating 2.5g without the use of scales, resulting in greater reliance on judgement and discretion

"I would be more on board if there were actually more treatment options and not just doubling down on our healthcare system that we already have."

Officers also viewed the police-distributed resource cards as largely **unhelpful**, suggesting that they **lacked nuance** and did not adequately reflect the needs or experiences of people who use drugs

- They reported that people who use drugs often **rejected** the cards, either because they were **already aware** of available resources or because they continued to face persistent barriers to accessing services decriminalization had not addressed

"I feel that the cards are made for the Lower Mainland. They are not applicable for persons in the North. The addicts are given resources for how to access help online. Our addicts don't have computers. They don't have phones that function with data. So you're asking them to access resources that they don't have access to. So [the cards are] redundant."

Others **perceived** the cards as having limited potential impact on connections to services among people who use drugs

- Some criticized the cards for providing only **provincial-level resources**, rather than directing people to local or specialized services that may be more accessible and responsive to their needs
- More broadly, officers reported that there was no standardized approach to tracking resource card distribution or assessing the impact of interactions on service uptake among people who use drugs

"How do you measure diversion away from the criminal justice system? You can't. And they're not even tracking if more people are calling these services from these cards."

Overall, officers believed that the decriminalization policy and the distribution of the resource cards were temporary solutions to a systemic issue, advocating for the scale-up of services that can support people who use drugs in the long-term

"Decriminalization is putting a bandaid over a massive hole on a boat. There needs to be actual therapy, places that people who are using can go where they can actually receive some assistance right away"

Policing Experiences during Decriminalization

Police officers reported **unintended consequences** of the policy that affected day-to-day policing practices

- Officers perceived the policy **constrained their authority** to effectively **manage public drug use**, creating difficulties in responding to and addressing public consumption
- This perceived **inability** to fulfill their broader **public safety mandate** contributed to **frustration**, **burnout**, and **reduced morale** among officers

"It's an emotional toll on us [...] We continue to get calls [from the public], and we say there's nothing we can do about it. We take the brunt force of that."

Many officers also raised **liability concerns** that complicated enforcement and appeared to conflict with the policy's intended approach

- Officers worried that they could be held accountable by the Independent Investigations Office (IIO), an external police oversight agency, if they **returned drugs** to people who later experienced a **fatal overdose**

"We were worried about IIO initially because our thoughts were, we're holding people in custody and we're keeping their drugs. [...] Now we release them, is their tolerance going to go down enough, now that we're giving them [their] drugs [back]. And if they overdose, is that somehow our faults?"

Overall, police officers felt there had been insufficient **consultation** with **police** and **other community stakeholders** who would be impacted by the policy prior to its implementation

- They suggested that many of decriminalization's unintended consequences (e.g. increased public drug use) were **foreseeable** and potentially preventable had frontline officers been proactively consulted

"I'm sure they met with some 50-plus year-old member who's so high in the ranks of the RCMP that they don't even understand what their frontline police officers do let alone what their interactions with drug addicts are or people suffering from drug addiction."

"On a frontline policing level the only thing that's changed [post-decriminalization] is the public calls [the police] in more for open use drugs and you don't actually have an authority to do anything because of their ability to possess up to two and a half grams. So before, if someone was openly using drugs in front of a business [...] you used to be able to do a bit more knowing that what they were doing was illegal. But now it's a bit more of an issue."

Officers described challenges navigating the **legal complexity** and **ambiguity** introduced by the decriminalization policy

- Some expressed concern about **inadvertently exceeding** their legal authority, such as confiscating drugs that were later determined to be below the 2.5g threshold
- Officers also worried that such actions could **unintentionally compromise evidence** required by Crown prosecutors to pursue drug-related charges

"These are some of the things that I think about I'm like 'man I better be on point with my measurements' [...] I think where you're in trouble is if you seize it and it's less than 2.5, then you've over stepped, right? You've abused your authorities"

Officers described the **loss of possession arrests** as an important legal "tool" for investigating drug trafficking, gathering evidence, and building trafficking cases

- They reported **difficulties obtaining charge approval**, which they attributed to prosecutors' reluctance to pursue trafficking charges in the context of limited public interest
- Officers also perceived that people involved in drug trafficking had **adapted their practices** to evade detection, such as carrying drugs in multiple quantities below the 2.5 g threshold
- These challenges contributed to **frustration** and **demoralization** among officers involved in pursuing drug trafficking cases

"People then just became apathetic to drug work altogether. [...] It was already difficult enough, and they're, like, screw this, I'm just not doing it. It's just not worth it."

Implications & Next Steps

- While some officers recognized the intent and potential merits of decriminalization, most **criticized** key policy features, particularly the 2.5g threshold and resource cards, which they viewed as **insufficiently nuanced** and **poorly aligned** with the immediate **needs** of people who use drugs
- Officers also criticized the **policy's rollout**, describing **unintended consequences** for their ability to investigate drug trafficking and fulfill their public safety mandate, as well as uncertainty regarding their legal liability when seizing or returning drugs
- These findings highlight the importance of **proactive** and **ongoing consultation** with police across ranks to communicate the rationale for policy reforms, incorporate operational perspectives, and anticipate implementation challenges
- Future training and policy communication should provide **clear guidance** on police authorities related to public drug use, drug possession, and drug seizures, including how these authorities and potential liabilities **may change** as policies evolve

Source: Greer, A., Butler, A., Ferencz, S., Agnew-Pauley, W., Russell, C., Ali, F. Policing In The Context Of Drug Decriminalization In British Columbia; As Part Of A National Evaluation Of British Columbia's Decriminalization Policy, Funded By Canadian Institutes For Health Research (Frn-184698).