

Evaluation of the Decriminalization of Illegal Drugs in British Columbia

Findings from Year 2

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:



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

- 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 pilot period of three years. The 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
 - On May 7, 2024, the policy was **amended** to effectively **restore criminal penalties** for public possession and restrict the legal possession of 2.5g to private residences, places where people are legally sheltering, overdose prevention, drug checking and supervised consumption sites, and places that provide out-patient addiction services

BC DECRIMINALIZATION POLICY TIMELINE

The policy has experienced several amendments throughout the three-year trial period:



Sub-Study Objectives

- Police officers played a key role in the **implementation and enforcement** of decriminalization and its subsequent amendment; ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the policy's impact on police practices and operations is essential to understanding how it unfolds in practice
- This sub-study aimed to explore how decriminalization and its subsequent amendment have impacted policing practices, drug enforcement, operations, as well as to examine police officers' perspectives on the operational guidance provided to support implementation of the amendment

Methods

- We conducted qualitative telephone interviews with **17 active police officers** across BC between November 2024 and March 2025
- Interviews explored officers' experiences of policing during both the decriminalization policy and its subsequent amendment
- Interviews also included an interviewer-administered survey assessing participants' sociodemographic characteristics and professional roles
- Interview data were analyzed thematically

Results

Officer Characteristics (n=17)

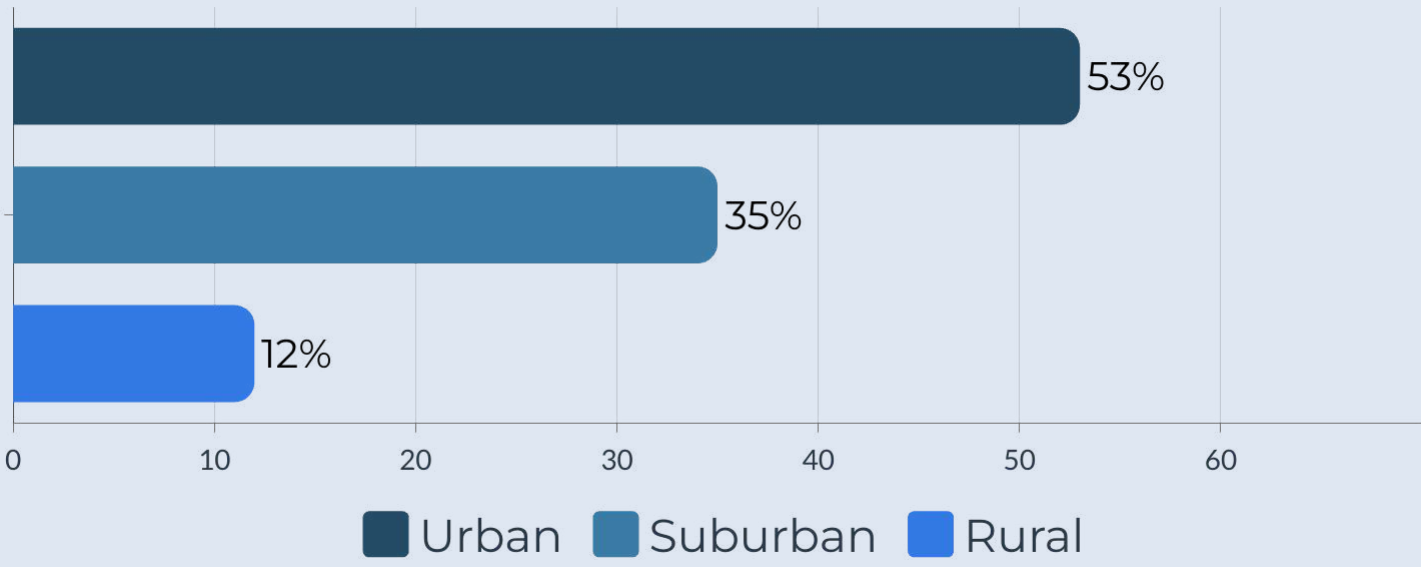
Sociodemographic Characteristics

82% Men **82%** White **43** Average age

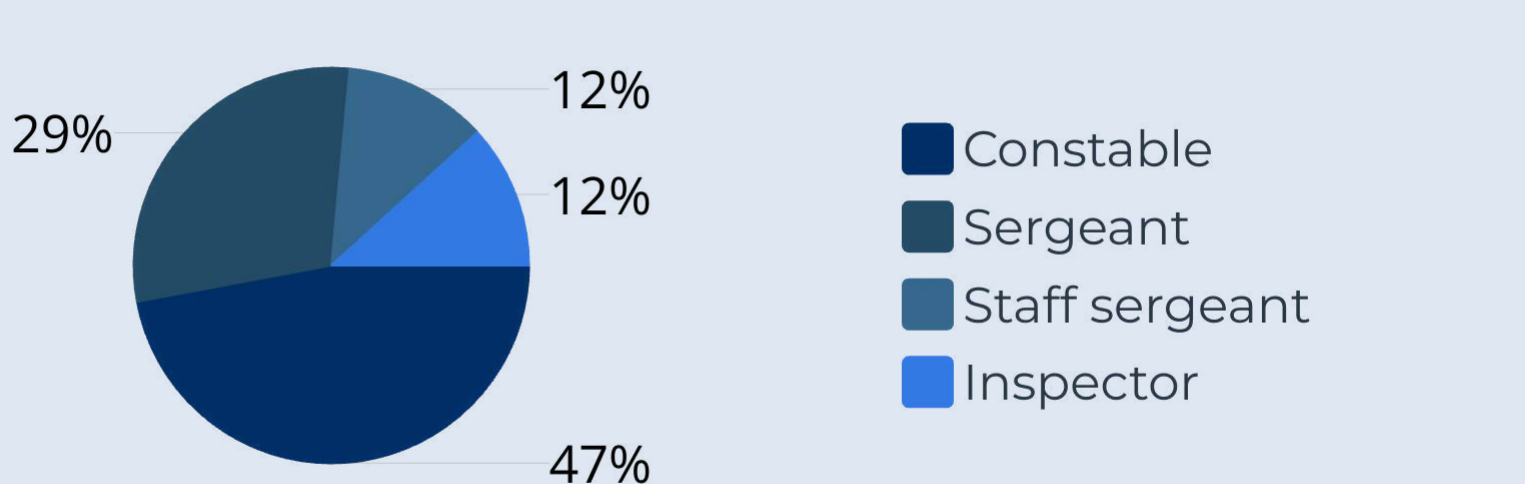
Police Service

17 Average length in police service (years) **13** Average length in current jurisdiction (years)

Municipality Size



Police Rank



Policing Experiences during Decriminalization

During the initial decriminalization period, most officers reported **little change** in their approach to enforcing drug possession, as possession was already a **low enforcement priority**

- However, consistent with Year 1 findings, officers continued to report concerns about reduced authority, limited discretion, and challenges responding to public drug use

“Decriminalization kind of handcuffed us. Before, if someone was using drugs or they were openly using drugs, you could place them under arrest for possession. [...] It kind of gave you a starting point for furthering [trafficking] investigations. [...] There’s really nothing that we can do [post-decriminalization] because they’ve taken those powers away from us.”

Also consistent with Year 1 findings, officers continued to report an overall **lack of clear guidance** and **uncertainty** about liability and use of discretion, particularly when deciding whether to **return or seize drugs**

“If we give drugs back or we don’t seize the drugs and that person overdoses, now we’re being under criminal investigation. [...] So now [officers] are hesitant to do anything cause we don’t really know, are we protected or are we not? [...] If I give [their drugs] back, am I going to get charged criminally? Am I going to lose my job? What’s going to happen to me?”

“Decriminalization didn’t necessarily change a whole lot in terms of our enforcement practices. Decriminalization was more or less existent as it was. It’s very, very rare in my career that I’ve arrested someone for simple possession.”

Officers also described challenges balancing their **reduced enforcement authority** with **public expectations to maintain safety and order**, leaving them feeling unable to respond effectively to public drug use and related concerns

“Decriminalization took our ability to do any kind of enforcement. So we were kind of put in this position where we couldn’t win no matter what we did. If we enforced what the public wanted, then we were essentially violating the other people’s rights. And by not doing enforcement at all, then the public is saying we’re not doing anything.”

Officers also felt that their **reduced authority** to respond to public drug use **affected public confidence and trust**, contributing to reduced officer morale and motivation

“With the public drug use increasing [post-decriminalization], the public seems to be a lot less supportive or tolerant of police - having them call, [and us] not taking any action. I think the blame sort of shifts onto the police. ‘Well, the police aren’t doing anything’, rather than appreciating societal norms have changed, along with [our] authority.”

Overall, officers expressed concerns about the policy’s impact on **public safety**, describing difficulties responding to **public drug use** and questioning whether potential **consequences** had been **adequately anticipated** during policy development

“[Decriminalization] was a bit of a disaster as far as the public safety side of it was concerned. I was thinking ‘how do you stop this now?’ [...] the province and the level of government that allowed it at the federal level are both pretty negligent in not fully considering what the consequences would have been.”

Policing Experiences during the Amendment

Police officers learned about the **May 2024 amendment** mostly **informally**, with **limited top-down guidance**

- While some officers considered the information provided **sufficient**, others found the guidance vague and unhelpful

“Were we trained [on the amendment]? Not really. There were some memos that went out. There was a lot of unknowns still. [...] Now we’re back to arresting [people possessing drugs], but there hasn’t really been any clear training or messaging around that.”

Despite these implementation challenges, officers viewed the amendment as **restoring police authority, discretion, and operational flexibility**

- They felt the amendment **reintroduced discretion** as a tool for responding to individual situations and community concerns
- They emphasized that it **did not** necessarily mean **more punitive enforcement**, rather, it gave them **greater flexibility** to determine when intervention was necessary

“Once the amendment came in May, my level of power and authority did increase quite a bit because it gave me that ability to have discretion. [...] I like having the option of letting someone keep [their drugs]. But I also have that option of taking it if it needs to be taken. So, it allows officers to use discretion and common sense a lot more.”



The amendment also restored **investigative capacity** by allowing possession offences to once again serve as an entry point for broader **drug trafficking** investigations

Officers also viewed the amendment as a necessary **course correction** that **reinstated authority** to address public drug use and disorder

“Now [since the amendment], when there’s problematic drug use and safety and public concerns, we can address them. And that’s kind of nice.”

“[The amendment] definitely made it easier. So now we can arrest for possession. [...] So it helps us investigate the drug traffickers for sure. It made it faster. So it’s almost like we reverted back to before decriminalization. The thing is for us, to be able to arrest someone for possession, it is just evidence gathering for the drug trafficker.”

For some officers, the policy change also partially **restored confidence** in **government responsiveness** and **policy decision-making**, viewing the amendment as an acknowledgement that concerns raised by officers during the initial policy period had been recognized and changes were needed

“I’ll give the government some credit. It’s like, well, [decriminalization] isn’t working. [...] I at least am happy that through pressures they’ve decided to [end] [decriminalization] and change it back to the way it was. And recognizing well, this isn’t working, we need to go back.”

- However, this renewed confidence was **tempered** by frustration about the **timing of the amendment**, with several expressing that the policy change came “**too little too late**” to restore public safety, arguing that earlier implementation could have prevented challenges they experienced during decriminalization

“I think [the amendment] was a step in the right direction, but it should have been done way sooner. [...] If they would have implemented the amendment on the onset of the decrim and had those rules in place, then we wouldn’t have been playing catch up.”

Implications & Next Steps

- While some officers acknowledged the potential **merits** of decriminalization, the majority viewed the initial policy as **constraining** their **authority, discretion, and operational flexibility** to respond to **public drug use, community concerns, and drug trafficking investigations**
- Officers largely **supported** the amendment, viewing it as a **restoration of formal discretionary authority** which provided greater flexibility to determine when intervention was necessary
- These findings highlight the importance of **proactive** and **ongoing consultation** with frontline police when developing and implementing drug policies, which may help proactively identify **potential operational and community-level implications**, and support **confidence and institutional legitimacy**
- Future policy reforms should be accompanied by clear, timely, and consistent **communication and training**, with practical operational guidance on changes to police authorities, discretionary powers, and enforcement practices provided before implementation to **support preparedness and reduce uncertainty**

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).