

# 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:



## Health Service System: Survey of Opioid Agonist Treatment (OAT) Site Operations

### Overview

- **Opioid Agonist Treatment (OAT)** is currently the gold standard pharmacotherapy treatment for opioid use disorder (OUD) in Canada.
  - OAT involves the use of prescribed opioid agonist medications to prevent withdrawal and reduce cravings.
  - Engagement in OAT services has been shown to decrease drug-related harms, criminality, and healthcare costs, significantly improving the quality of life for PWUD.
- As such, ongoing monitoring and evaluation of decriminalization's impact on access to and utilization of health and support services, including **opioid agonist treatment (OAT) services** across the province, is essential to ensure its effectiveness in meeting its goals.
- A comprehensive understanding of the current landscape of OAT service provision in BC can provide insights into how the operation of these vital services may change in light of the decriminalization policy.
- This sub-study aims to examine how decriminalization has impacted the **service operations of OAT sites in BC** using yearly cross-sectional surveys distributed to OAT site representatives, with follow-up qualitative interviews.

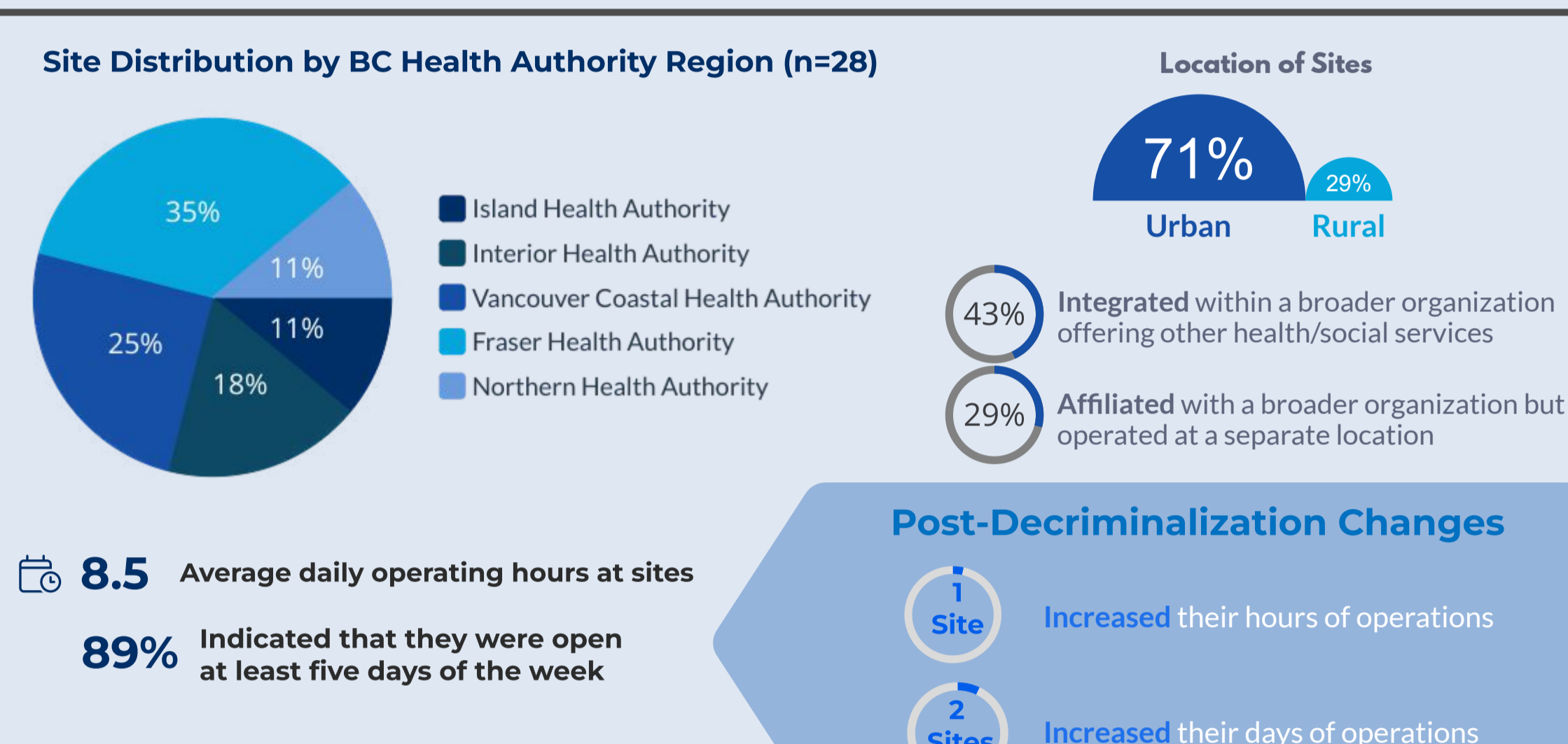
### Methods

- Between March and May 2024, we distributed the first cross-sectional survey to site representatives from **n=28** OAT sites across BC. Results are presented below.
- The survey explored the operational characteristics of their OAT sites, including the demographics of their primary clientele, and assessed any preliminary operational changes following the first year of decriminalization.
- Sites were identified using online repositories (e.g., 'Toward the Heart'), as well as from contacts through the CRISM network, project working group members, and regional Health Authority Decriminalization Leads.
- We included both public and private standalone OAT clinics whose primary purpose was addiction treatment, including harm reduction sites that had integrated OAT services.
  - Broader community health centres or pharmacies that distributed OAT medications, primary or emergency care settings, youth-specific sites, and sites opened after January 31, 2023, were excluded from the survey.
- Survey data were analyzed descriptively to identify trends, both pre- and post-decriminalization.

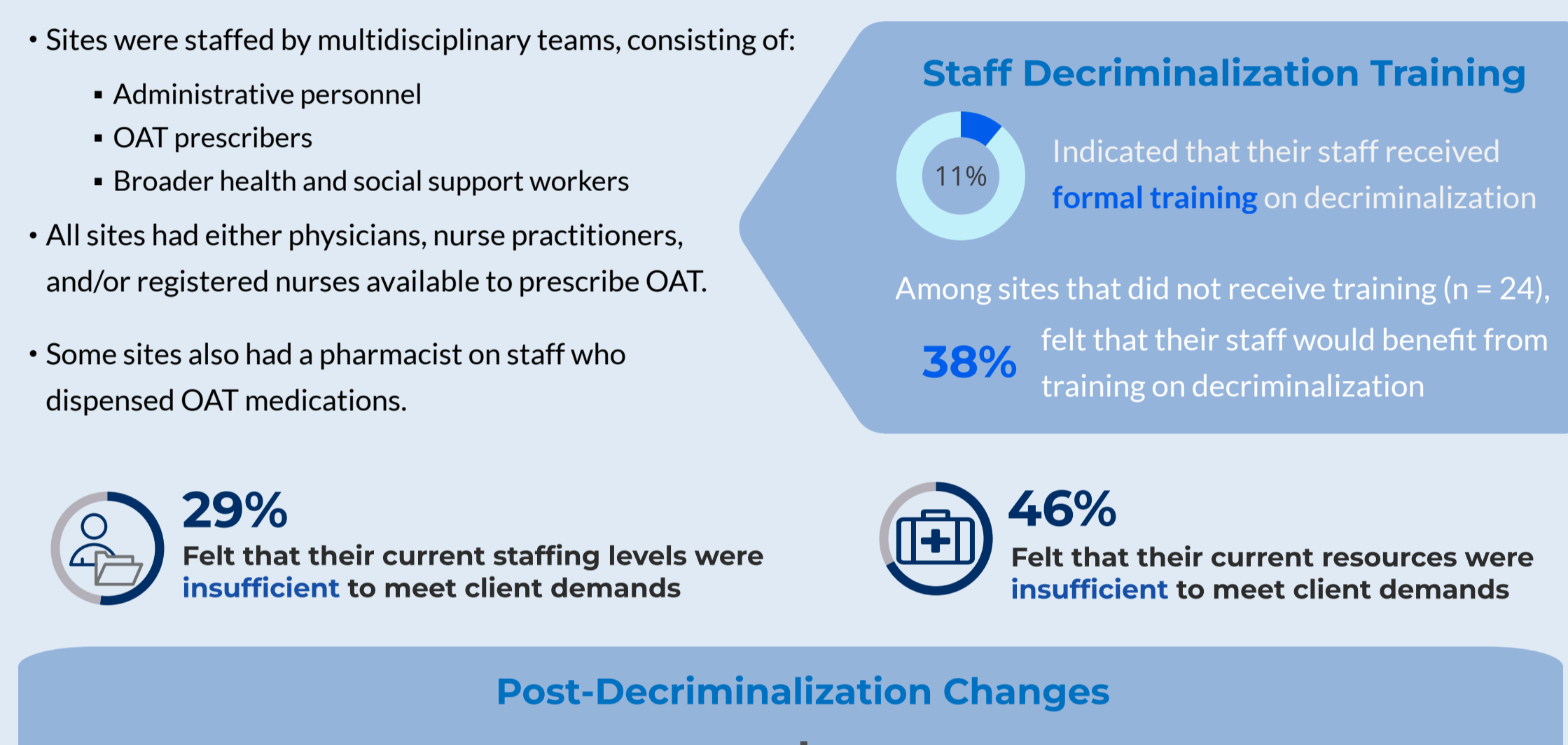
### Results

#### HR Site Characteristics (n=28)

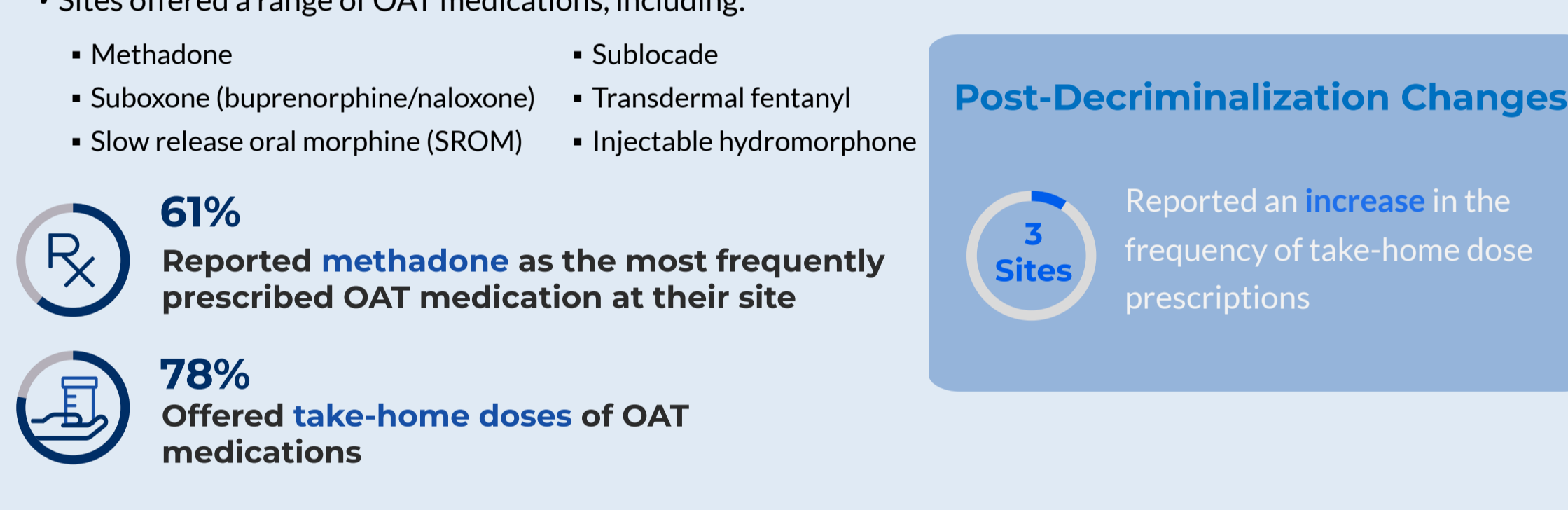
##### Site Infrastructure and Operations



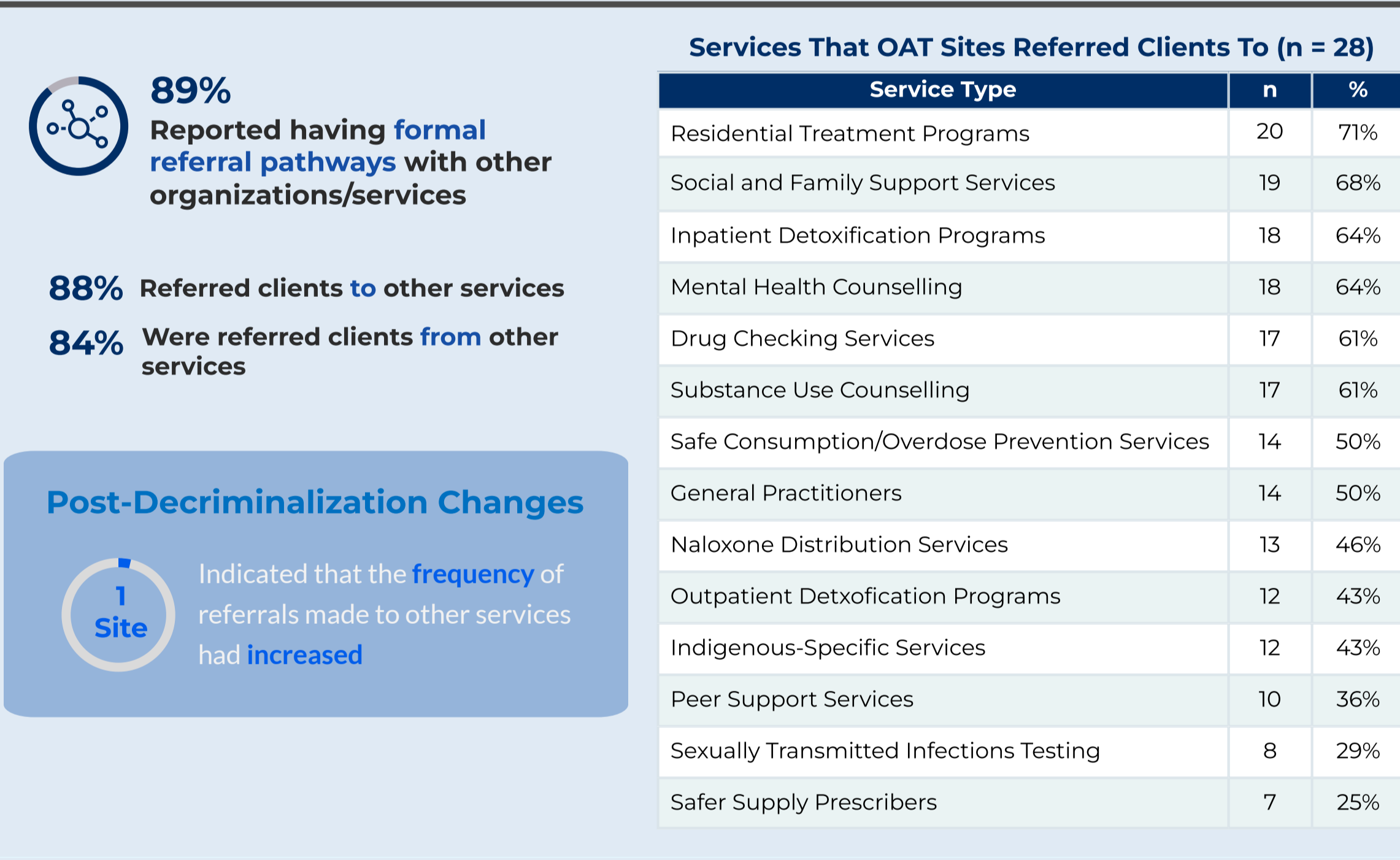
##### Staffing, Training, and Resources



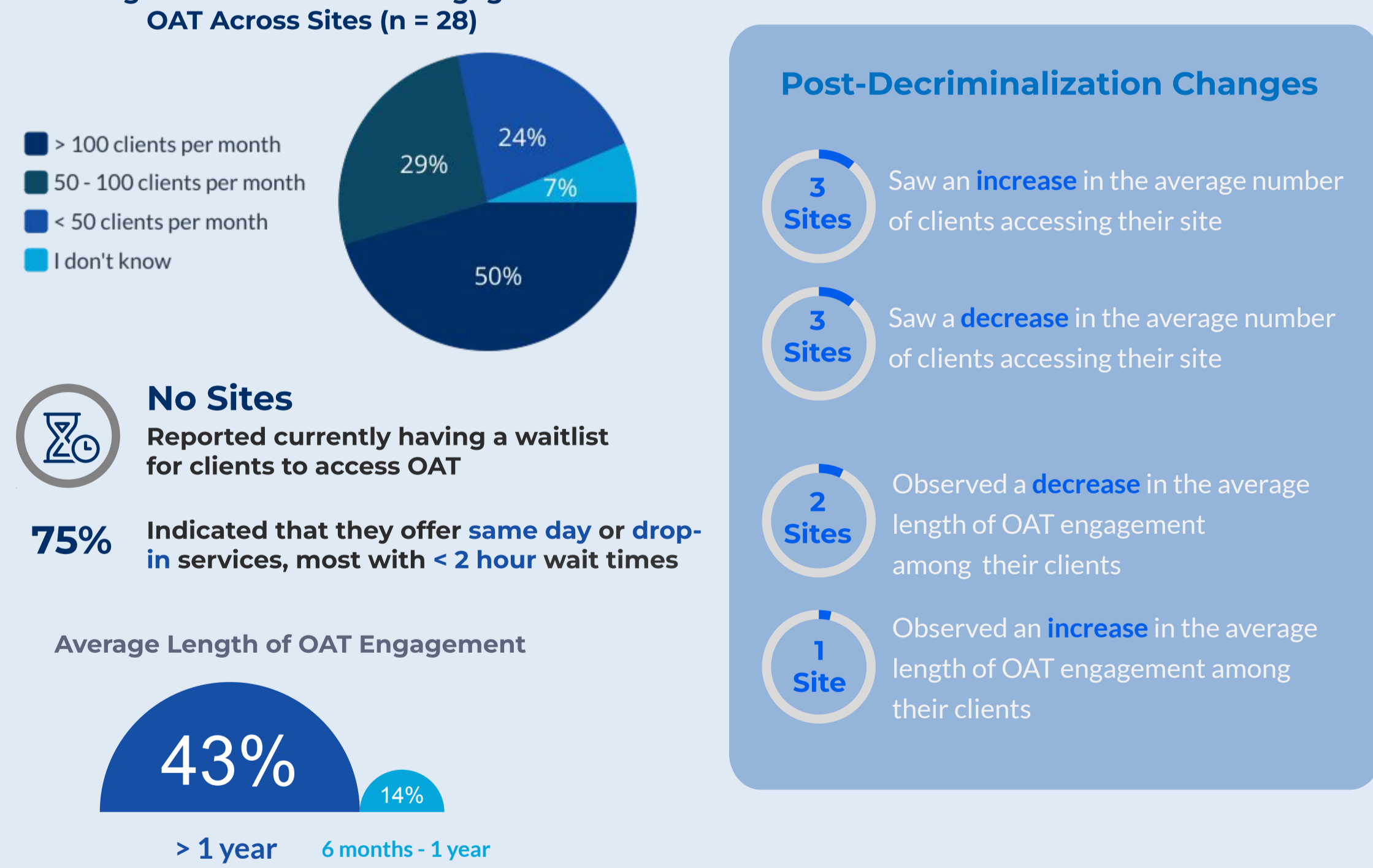
##### OAT Medications Offered



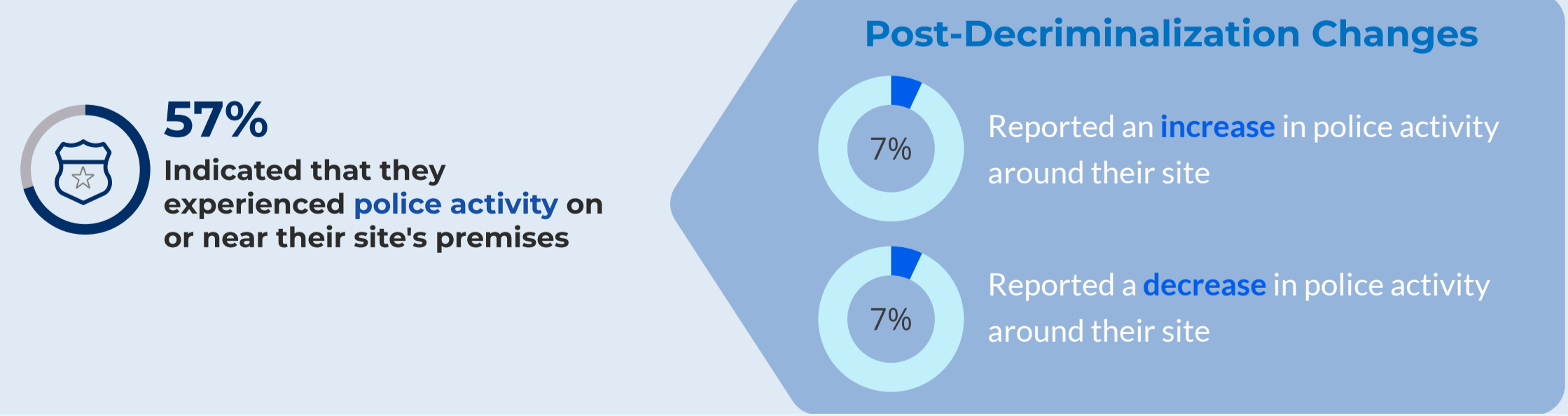
##### Site Referral Pathways



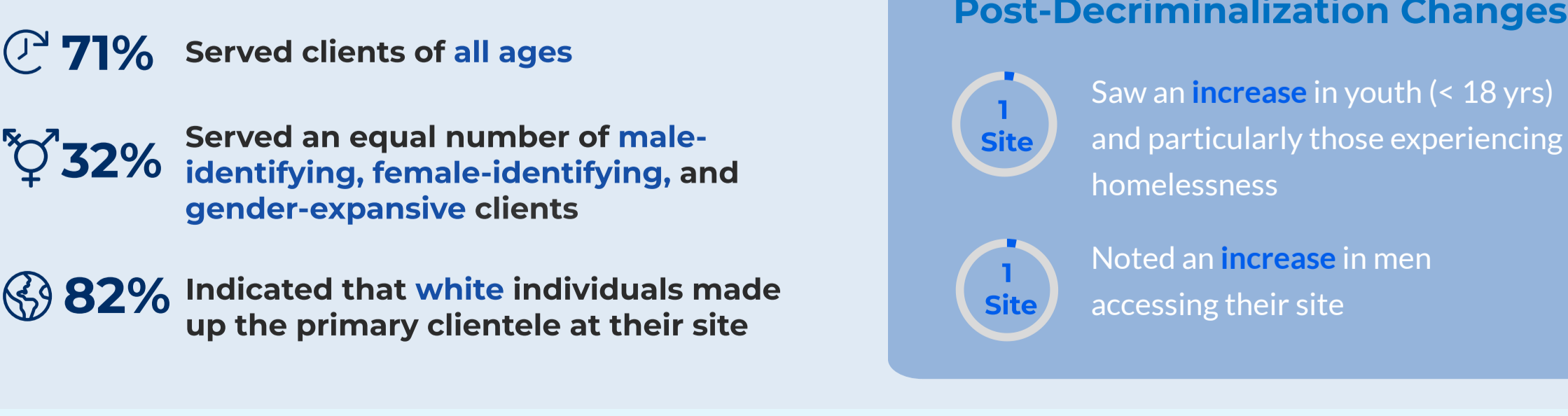
##### Site Uptake and Demand



##### Police Activity Around the Site



##### Site Clientele Demographics (n=28)



### Implications & Next Steps

- There have been **minimal changes** to OAT site operations within the first year of the decriminalization policy.
- However, some sites reported early signals of change related to **clientele socio-demographics**, as well as an **increase in demand** on their staff and resources.
- Findings suggest the need for increased staff training and continued investments into OAT to better support the anticipated demand on services, in order to effectively increase access to treatment among PWUD under the policy.
- Follow-up qualitative interviews with key informants from select OAT sites have been conducted to further explore the direct impacts of decriminalization.
- Results will be used as a baseline to monitor key impacts of decriminalization and related policies going forward.

**Source:** Russell, C., Law, J., Hodgson, K., Mackinnon, L., Shahin, R., Crichlow, F., Patenaude, S., Imtiaz, S., Rehm, J., Ali, F. (2025). Examining Opioid Agonist Treatment (OAT) Site Operations and Early Signals of Change in the First Year of British Columbia's Drug Decriminalization Policy: Insights from a Provincial Survey. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*. <https://doi.org/10.17269/s41997-025-01060-2>