

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:



Public Opinion Poll

Overview

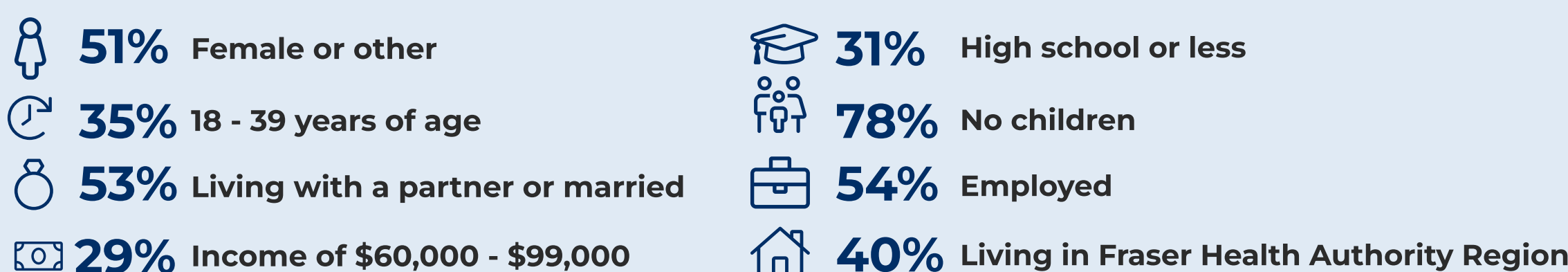
- Public sentiment plays a large role in the outcome of drug policies such as decriminalization.
- Given that reduction of stigma and fear of criminalization is an overarching goal of decriminalization, it is important to understand the public's perception of the policy, and how views may evolve over 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

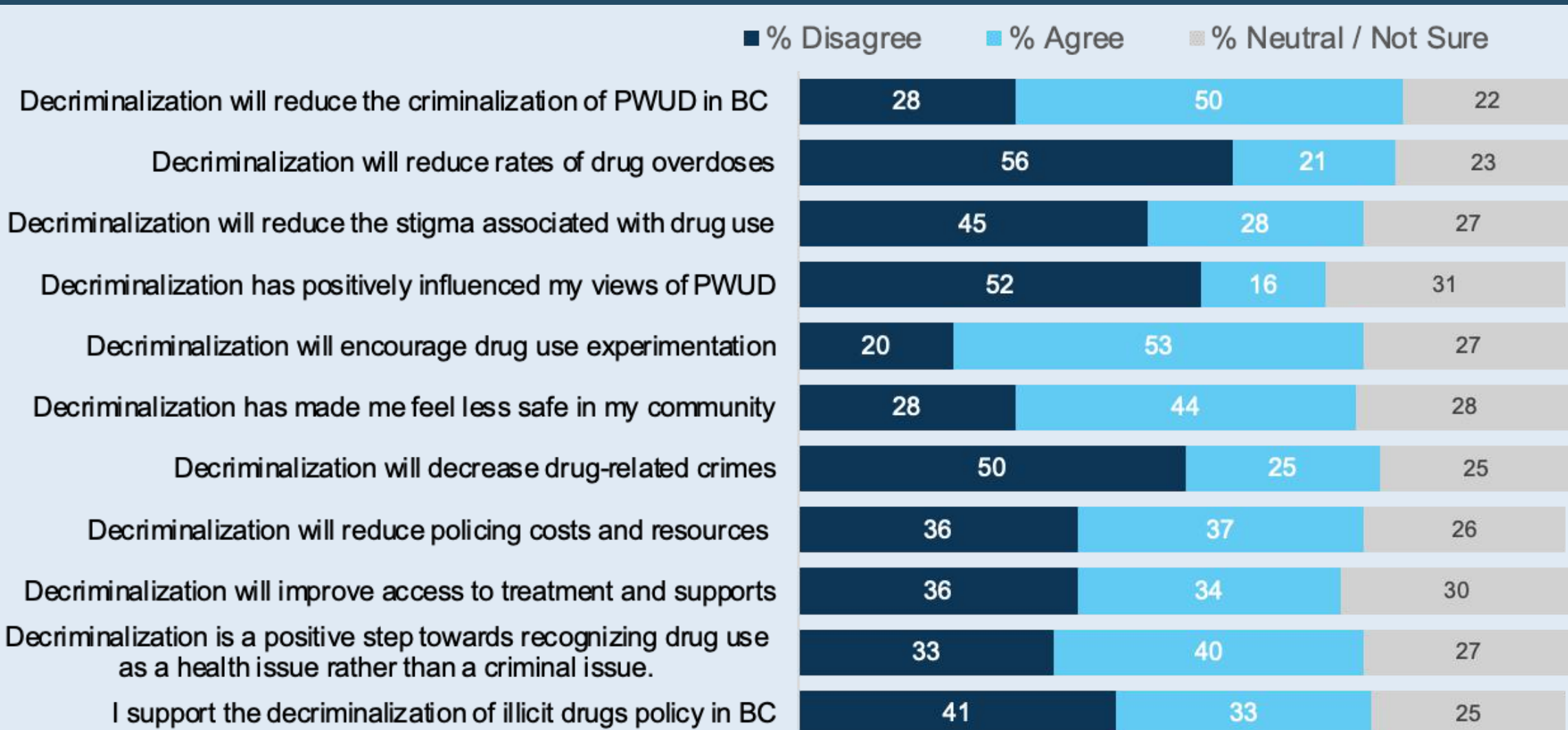
- The first survey was distributed between March 26 - April 1, 2024. Results are presented below.
- One survey item assessed support of decriminalization, and ten items assessed attitudes toward decriminalization.
- Responses were weighted to reflect the BC population based on census data for region, 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)



Attitudes Toward Decriminalization (n=1,202)



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

Characteristics Associated with Support of Decriminalization (n=1,202)

	Disagree	Neutral/Not Sure	Agree	Rao-Scott Chi-Square	Disagree vs. Neutral/Not Sure	Agree vs. Neutral/Not Sure
	N (%) ^a	N (%) ^a	N (%) ^a	P-Value	OR (95% CI) ^b	OR (95% CI) ^b
Age						
18 to 39 Years Old	137 (25.0)	119 (38.5)	187 (44.3)	< 0.0001	Reference	Reference
40 to 59 Years Old	185 (32.9)	85 (25.1)	133 (29.9)		1.97 (1.35-2.88)	1.01 (0.69-1.48)
≥ 60 Years Old	167 (42.1)	89 (36.4)	86 (25.8)		1.89 (1.19-3.02)	0.72 (0.45-1.16)
Gender						
Male	239 (49.3)	118 (41.8)	207 (52.2)	0.0333	Reference	Reference
Female or Other	249 (50.7)	173 (58.2)	197 (47.8)		0.73 (0.54-1.01)	0.66 (0.47-0.91)
Educational Attainment						
Up to High School	86 (28.3)	71 (37.2)	75 (29.2)	0.0095	Reference	Reference
College / Trade School	170 (32.4)	93 (27.9)	108 (24.8)		1.39 (0.91-2.13)	1.12 (0.71-1.75)
University	233 (39.2)	129 (34.9)	223 (46.0)		1.39 (0.92-2.09)	1.52 (1.00-2.32)

Being **40 to 59 years old** and being **≥ 60 years old** were associated with an **increased** likelihood of **disagreeing** to support decriminalization, compared with being neutral/not sure.

Being **female or other gender** was associated with a **decreased** likelihood of **agreeing** to supporting decriminalization, compared with being neutral/not sure.

Abbreviations: CI - Confidence Interval; OR - Odds Ratio
^a Frequencies are unweighted and percentages are weighted
^b Multinomial logistic regression model included age, gender, educational attainment and employment status

Implications & Next Steps

- More people appear to oppose the decriminalization policy rather than support it.
- 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.
- The next survey was launched in February 2025.

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.