

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:



Qualitative Interviews with People Who Use Drugs (PWUD): Experiences and Perceptions of Stigma

Overview & Design

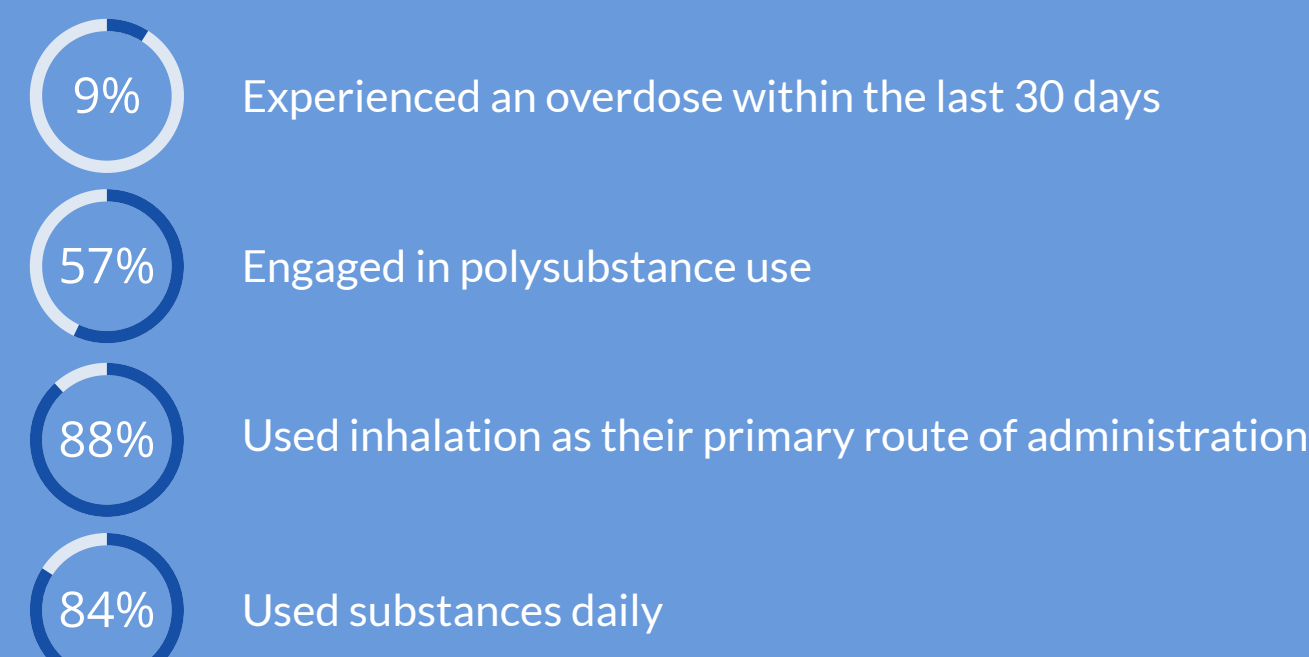
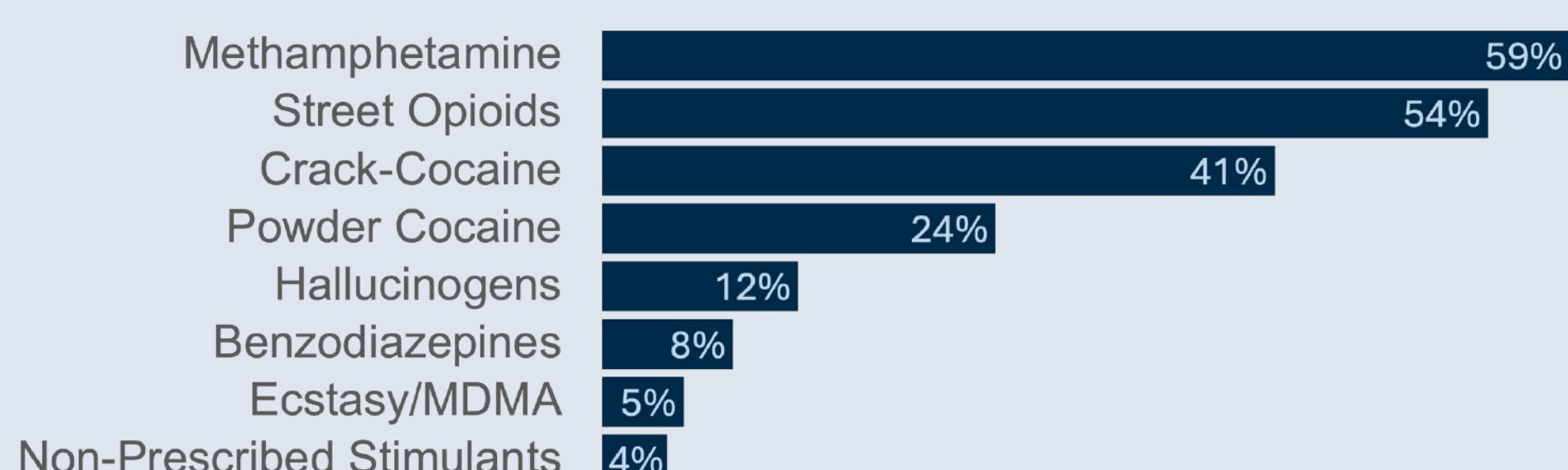
- By shifting from a punitive model to a public health approach, the decriminalization policy's intent is to create an environment where PWUD feel safe accessing essential health and support services without fear of criminalization and judgement.
- This sub-study aims to assess PWUD's experiences and perceptions of societal, structural, and self-stigmatization post-decriminalization, and whether or not these experiences impacted their willingness and comfortability accessing health and social services during the initial year of the policy's implementation.
- Between October 2023 and February 2024, we conducted qualitative telephone-based interviews with a diverse sample of **n=100 PWUD** across BC.
- Participants also completed an interviewer-administered survey assessing socio-demographics, and drug use and overdose history.
- Interview data were synthesized using a qualitative thematic analysis approach.

Results

Sample Characteristics (n=100)

- 56%** Men
- 70%** White
- 33%** Secondary / High school
- 32%** Live in a private residence, with others
- 44** Average age
- 82%** Unemployed
- 87%** Straight / Heterosexual
- 37%** Located in the Interior Health Authority Region

Substances Used



Experiences with Stigma Post-Decriminalization

- **Most** participants indicated that their experiences of stigma **had not changed** since decriminalization.
- Experiences of **societal, structural, and self-stigmatization** remained pervasive, and all forms of stigma continued to influence participants' decisions about accessing services.
- Among participants who did note changes in experiences of stigma, there was an **even split** on whether their experiences had **increased or decreased**:

- Several participants noted **heightened** stigmatizing attitudes and behaviours from the general public post-decriminalization, largely due to **increased visibility of public drug use**.

"Some people seem to think it's more okay to do [drugs] just anywhere, anytime, than they did before [decriminalization]. I think maybe if anything, [stigma] has probably gotten worse, because [the public] is being exposed to [drug use] more."

"I think maybe [post-decriminalization], people are realizing [that PWUD] are everyday people. They're people that they work with. They're people that they interact with every day...they're normal people that have substance use issues."

- However, several others reported a **decrease** in public stigma, which led to **reduced shame and comfortability in accessing health and social services**.

"I think that [PWUD] might be more willing to access [harm reduction] resources because they're not being made to feel like they're outcast. Criminals."

Potential for Decriminalization to Reduce Stigma in the Future

- **Majority** of participants were hopeful that the policy could help **reduce** all forms of stigma.
- Many suggested that the potential shift in public perception and societal stigma under decriminalization could **reduce self- and structural-stigma**, and improve their experiences of stigma and discrimination within healthcare settings, **increasing willingness to seek support** among PWUD.
- This shift may encourage PWUD to engage in safer drug use practices, and **increase willingness to seek support** among PWUD.

"I think that [decriminalization] will help people feel better about themselves, for sure...drug users might feel like they need maybe some medical treatment or help, maybe counselling or something like that, instead of feeling like just a criminal."

"I think [the policy] will [raise awareness]. I do feel, like I said, there's more talk about it and if you're allowed to [be] carrying [drugs], you're not so much hiding it from everybody. You're not embarrassed and you're not racing to put it in your pocket or doing [them] at dark, at night, or wearing a toque and hiding your face...So I think it will make people's self esteem a bit better with themselves."

- Participants maintained that the decriminalization policy alone may **not** be sufficient to fully address drug use-related stigma.

Participants' Recommendations to Strengthen the Policy's Impact on Stigma

- **Increase public education and training for police and healthcare workers about the policy, drug use, and PWUD**
- **Prioritize housing options for PWUD**
- **Expand harm reduction services (e.g., Supervised Consumption Sites, Safer Supply Programs, Overdose Prevention Sites)**

"[PWUD need a] place to go. And housing. A lot of [PWUD], they're [using drugs publicly] because they're living outside and there's no available housing for these types of people."

"I think there needs to be more broad sharing and understanding [of information] that really personalizes things a bit more to just show [the public], just to help people have a bit more compassion and understanding [for PWUD]"

"Having a spot to go to [use drugs] would be so much better. That would show [the public] that we don't want to be using in front of their children and in front of their families when they're out doing something together, and we don't want to be upsetting anybody else. That's not any addict's goal."

Implications & Next Steps

- Participants reflected on their experiences with societal, structural and self-stigma post-decriminalization, highlighting the pervasive nature of stigma and its continued impact on their utilization of harm reduction and treatment services.
- While participants expressed optimism about the policy's potential to reduce all forms of stigma over time, significant changes in their lived experiences have yet to materialize, and additional efforts are required to achieve these outcomes and improve the quality of life for PWUD.
- Opportunities to enhance the potential for decriminalization to meet its long-term stigma reduction objectives include public education and awareness campaigns, the expansion of harm reduction and housing services, and enhanced training for police and healthcare workers to foster supportive interactions with PWUD.

Source: Ali, F., Russell, C., Torres-Salbach, S., Lo, M., Bonn, M., Bardwell, G., Budau, J., Hyshka, E., & Rehm, J. (2024). Experiences Of Stigmatization Among People Who Use Drugs In The Initial Year Of British Columbia's Drug Decriminalization Policy: A Qualitative Study. *International Journal Of Drug Policy Special Call*. Under Review.