

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): Substance Use and Related Risks

Overview & Design

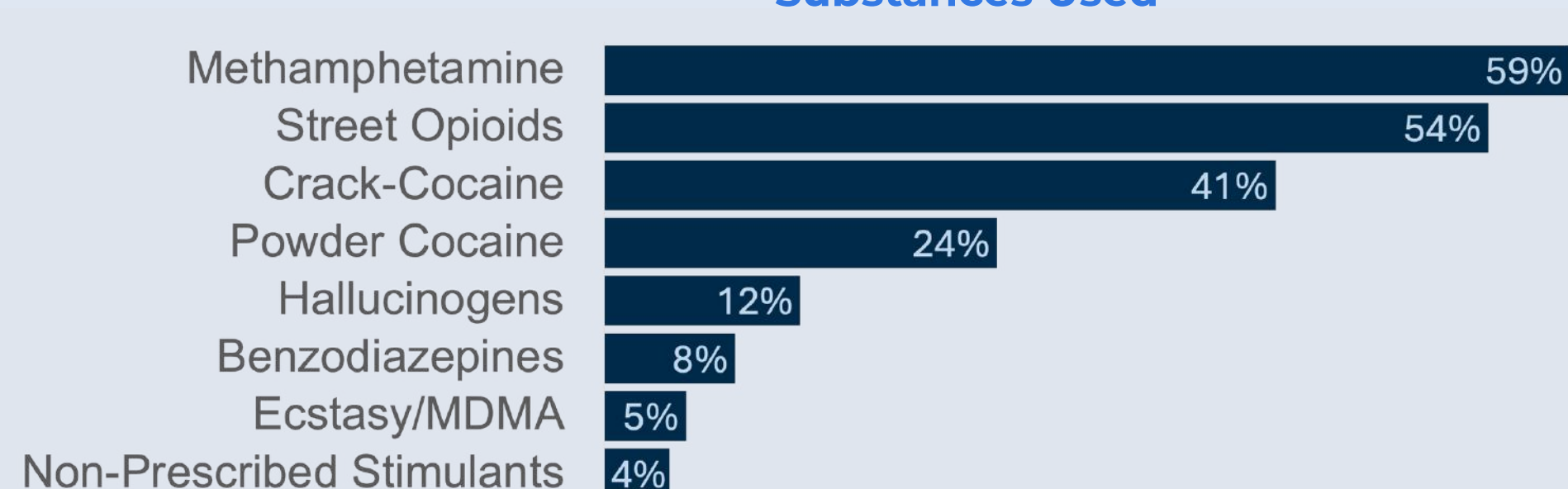
- Evaluations of decriminalization's impact on drug use patterns and behaviours among PWUD are crucial to understand whether the policy is meeting its intended goals, and inform potential policy adjustments.
- This sub-study aims to assess PWUD's awareness and knowledge of decriminalization, as well as how it has impacted their drug use patterns and overdose risks following 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, exploring aspects related to their drug use experiences and related risks.
- Participants also completed an interviewer-administered survey assessing socio-demographics, and drug use and overdose history.
- Interview data were synthesized using a qualitative content 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



- 9%** Experienced an overdose within the last 30 days
- 57%** Engaged in polysubstance use
- 88%** Used inhalation as their primary route of administration
- 84%** Used substances daily

PWUD Awareness and Knowledge of Decriminalization

- Majority of participants were aware that decriminalization had been implemented in BC.
- However, few were aware of the specific details and features of the policy.
- Participants suggested an overall lack of information available on the policy.

"There's...confusion when it comes to the [decriminalization] law, you know what I mean? Nobody really knows what the law is, where is it legal, where isn't it legal, how much, and a lot of people don't know, they just don't know... I think if there was more information out there revolving around it, that would help."

Features of the policy participants were unfamiliar with:

- The policy's 2.5g possession threshold
- The cumulative nature of the 2.5g threshold
- The policy's three-year time limit
- The specific drugs included under the policy
- The goals of the policy

Policy Impact on Drug Use Patterns

69% of participants indicated that their drug use patterns had **not changed** since the implementation of the decriminalization policy.

- Drug use patterns were commonly longstanding and habitual.
- Some participants suggested that they had **increased** their use slightly since decriminalization, as they felt safer to use in public.

"I think I feel a bit safer I guess to [use drugs] in more public areas. So just in a back alley or in a park, away from people of course, but I don't feel like I have to hide it as much, even though maybe that's just a kind of placebo effect. I don't know. [So I find I'm using more because of that on some days]."

Policy Impact on Purchasing & Carrying Patterns

79% of participants indicated that their purchasing and carrying behaviours (amount, frequency) had **not changed** since decriminalization.

- There was an even split between those who purchased **below** or **above 2.5 g**.
 - Those who purchased **above 2.5 g** indicated they purchased amounts more commonly sold within the unregulated drug market (e.g. 3.5 g [an '8-ball'], 7 g [a 'quarter'], or more).

Reasons for Purchasing

Below 2.5 g

- Affordability
- To avoid risk of criminalization

VS

Above 2.5 g

- Cost benefit
- Convenience
- Trusted suppliers
- To share with others

"Because I didn't want to carry big amounts I would only buy like basically two grams at a time...which can be a real hassle, because I'm always having to pick up all the time... I didn't want to be charged."

"We're definitely going to buy as much as [we can] – and we get better prices that way. When you get it closer to the source or as close to the source that it's coming through, [the drugs are] less cut."

Policy Impact on Overdose Risk

- Many participants indicated that the **toxicity of the drug supply** (e.g., benzodiazepines and tranquilizers) directly impacted their overdose risk.
 - This issue **pre-dated** decriminalization and had not been alleviated by decriminalization.
- Several participants stated that they had noticed an **increase** in 'low-level' or 'amateur' sellers since decriminalization, due to a reduced fear of arrest.
 - These sellers were perceived to be inexperienced, often cutting/buffing the supply with additives, ultimately **increasing** PWUD's risk for overdose.

"Everybody and their dog thinks that they're a dealer and they know how to cook it. So there's all these people thinking that they know how to mix – or have the right recipe for fentanyl... there's a lot more hot spots in it."

Participants' Overdose Mitigation Strategies

- Testing their drugs** (e.g. starting with a small dose to test its potency)
- Relying on **trusted** sellers and drug sources
- Some noted engaging in **increased drug use with others** post-decriminalization due to reduced stigma and more awareness, thus **reducing** overdose risk

"I'm less likely to use alone, just because, like I said, there's been more awareness, there's been more talk about drugs. There's not as big a stigma on drug addicts. We're not as ashamed, and there's more access to Narcan kits, I feel."

"I've been going to the same person for years. I've known them for a very long time. I trust them. I trust the product. They've never given me or any of my other friends anything that would hurt us or anything like that."

Benefits & Concerns of the Policy

- Majority of participants viewed the policy **positively** and felt **safer** to use the drugs they need with **less risk** for criminalization.
 - Many suggested it was long overdue and should have been implemented earlier.

"[People should be able to] make an adult decision on what kind of drugs they would like to take for whatever purposes [without being criminalized for it]."

"Some people kind of take it a little too far. They think just because they can't get charged, it means that they can just [use drugs] anywhere...It's not really appropriate."

However, some participants were skeptical of the government's intentions, and felt that the policy may **increase overdose deaths** due to a diminished fear of legal consequences.

Some had concerns that the policy may **increase drug use among youth**.

Participants also noted the potential for **increased public drug consumption and visibility of use** in communities.

- Several participants suggested that the 2.5 g threshold is too low, and did not reflect the realities of PWUD who engaged in polysubstance use.

"I think as a side [meth] user, I would say a ball, 3.5g, is a fair amount...But with down (heroin/fentanyl)... [down users are] going to smoke at least probably five or six points a day...[2.5g] is not a realistic number."

Implications & Next Steps

- Findings suggest that PWUD's drug use, purchasing, and carrying patterns have not changed in the first year post-decriminalization.
- Knowledge of the policy appears to be directly related to participants' drug use and purchasing patterns, as some participants strategically changed their behaviour to carry less.
- Results highlight the importance of increasing education and awareness efforts surrounding the policy, as well as ongoing policy evaluation to better understand changes to drug use experiences and their underlying motivations over time.
- There is also a need to continue monitoring the impact of the possession threshold and public consumption legislation in BC.
- Re-evaluation of the policy's possession threshold, as well as adjunct solutions to address the escalating toxicity of the drug supply (e.g., 'safe supply' programs) could help achieve the policy's goals.

Source: Ali, F., Russell, C., Lo, M., Bonn, M., Bardwell, G., Boyd, J., Hyshka, E., & Rehm, J. (2024). Unpacking The Effects Of Decriminalization: Understanding Drug Use Experiences And Risks Among Individuals Who Use Drugs In British Columbia. *Harm Reduction Journal*, 21 (190). Doi:10.1186/S12954-024-01108-5