

Overdose Crisis

An estimated 17 Canadians die every day from accidental overdose related to opioids. Statistics from the Public Health Agency of Canada say over 21,000 Canadians died of accidental overdoses between 2016, when BC declared a public health emergency, and December 2020. Fentanyl continues to drive the crisis, but other drugs are involved. The drug supply is now a contaminated and poisonous mix of stimulants and synthetic opioids that are more powerful than fentanyl. Data from public health agencies across Canada estimates that over 80% of overdose deaths in 2020 involved such a poisonous cocktail of illicit non-pharmaceutical/nonprescription fentanyl, mixed with stimulants.

COVID-19 has only worsened the situation. Health Canada estimates that the number of deaths has increased by 89% since the start of the pandemic. To solve this overdose crisis, what we need is a combination of 3 key strategies:

1. Lifesaving harm-reduction strategies like safe-consumption services and safe-supply programs, which reduce the use of toxic drugs that cause overdoses by providing safer substitutes, often under medical supervision.
2. Tax-funded, accessible recovery and treatment programs.
3. Guaranteed pan-Canadian equal access to federally funded supplies and programs, without the threat of provincial barriers by bringing them under the *Canada Health Act*.

Any solution that fails to mobilize all 3 strategies will merely prolong the crisis. Drug policy should include recovery and treatment. The evidence is clear that harm-reduction programs like supervised consumption sites save lives. Plus, any strategy that does not stop the easy access to the increasingly toxic drug supply will not prevent overdose deaths caused by their use. For too long, provincial governments that are hostile to harm reduction have been able to avoid, overlook, underfund, or block strategies to prevent overdose deaths. The federal government needs to use its policy and funding tools to encourage the implementation of these strategies to stop the overdose crisis.

Liberal

Since 2016, the Liberal government has funded supervised consumption sites and services, overdose prevention sites (OPS), pop-up safe-injection sites, and safe supply programs. The Liberal election platform promises to expand harm-reduction strategies, promising a “comprehensive strategy to address problematic substance use,” and a commitment to invest \$500M “to support the provinces and territories in providing access to a full range of evidence-based treatment.” It does not mention decriminalization.

Conservative

To address the overdose crisis, the Conservative platform focuses on recovery and treatment programs. The platform does not mention harm-reduction strategies or decriminalization. Conservative leader Erin O’Toole told reporters that his government would not block safe-consumption sites (a policy shift from predecessors Andrew Scheer and Stephen Harper). But he made no mention of funding harm-reduction and

safe-supply programs. Instead, the platform commits to \$325 million over 3 years “to create 1,000 residential drug treatment beds and build 50 recovery community centres across the country.” Recovery centres are typically based on abstinence models, providing care and medical treatment with the goal of reducing or eliminating drug use.

NDP

The NDP sees the overdose crisis as a health care issue not a criminal one. They will declare a public health emergency and commit to working with all levels of government, health experts, and Canadians to end the criminalization and stigma of drug addiction. People who are struggling with addiction need help without fear of arrest. They will get tough on the real criminals who traffic in and profit from illegal drugs. They will work with the provinces and health professionals to create a safe supply of medically regulated alternatives to toxic street drugs, support overdose prevention sites, and expand access to treatment on demand for people struggling with addiction. The NDP will launch an investigation into the role drug companies may have played in fueling the opioid crisis and seek meaningful financial compensation from them for the public costs of this crisis.

Green

The Green Party sees the overdose crisis as a health care issue rather than a criminal one. Personal possession and use of illicit drugs must be decriminalized to allow for more accessible medical and social support for those who need it. No one should be in jail for the possession of small amounts of drugs. This approach would allow communities who have been heavily impacted by the federal government's previous drug policy to reintegrate into society. The Greens promise to

- declare the drug poisoning crisis a national public health emergency,
- decriminalize the possession of small amounts of illicit drugs for personal use,
- create a national safe supply of drugs of choice,
- invest in an integrated system of decriminalization and access to meaningful services for persons who seeking treatment,
- offer amnesty for persons convicted of simple possession of cannabis, and
- move to legally regulate illegal drugs based on the best available evidence regarding harms and benefits, treating problematic drug use as a health issue.

Conclusion

Canada's poison drug epidemic is causing an overdose crisis. This is a public health crisis as urgent as the COVID-19 crisis. The good news is that good public policy can help, and the evidence is clear about what policies work. Only focusing on recovery and treatment is not enough. We need harm-reduction strategies like safe-consumption sites and a safe (non-poisonous) supply. The best way to stop the toxic drug supply is to give people pharmaceutical-grade alternatives, or give drug-checking technologies so that users can test, use, and share safely. We must also consider decriminalization.

