

Hit hard by opioid crisis, Canadian province decriminalizes small amounts of hard drugs

January 31 2023, by Cara Murez



To fight an urgent opioid overdose crisis, a Canadian province took an

unusual step on Tuesday.

British Columbia decriminalized small amounts of several hard drugs.

This includes up to 2.5 grams of cocaine, heroin and fentanyl, the province's Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions said in a [statement](#).

Going forward, police will not seize the drugs. Instead, adults found with that amount will be given information about [addiction treatment programs](#).

"We know criminalization drives people to use alone. Given the increasingly toxic drug supply, using alone can be fatal," [Jennifer Whiteside](#), British Columbia's Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, said in the statement.

"Decriminalizing people who use drugs breaks down the fear and shame associated with [substance use](#) and ensures they feel safer reaching out for lifesaving supports," she said. "This is a vital step to get more people connected to the services and supports as the Province continues to add them at an unprecedented rate."

The exception is sellers and traffickers of hard drugs, who will still face criminal prosecution.

"The situation has never been more urgent," [Addictions Minister Carolyn Bennett](#) said during a media briefing just before the start of the three-year pilot project, *CBS News* reported.

"The effects of this public health crisis have devastated communities across British Columbia and across Canada," Bennett said.

The hope is to remove the stigma surrounding [drug use](#) and encourage people to seek help for the health issue of addiction.

Stigma and shame "drives people to hide their addictions," British Columbia's chief public health officer [Dr. Bonnie Henry](#) said during the briefing. "That means that many people are dying alone."

After Kathryn Botchford's husband, Jason, died of a [drug overdose](#) in 2019, she kept the cause of death a secret until she realized "I was unconsciously creating shame."

Botchford said she hadn't known her husband was even using drugs, *CBS News* reported.

"When I discovered how he died, I thought there must be a mistake. Jason doesn't do drugs. We have three [young kids](#) and he knows the risks," she said. "But I was wrong. He died alone using an illegal substance."

More than 10,000 people have overdosed since a [public health emergency](#) for opioids was declared in 2016 in the province of 5 million people. Deaths have hit 30,000 throughout Canada, according to *CBS News*.

Public health officials first announced the new program last May. They may later expand the program to other provinces.

Canada has spent more than \$800 million, the equivalent of \$600 million U.S., to try to end the crisis. This includes money spent on addiction treatment, supplies of the overdose antidote naloxone and opening 39 supervised drug consumption sites across Canada, *CBS News* reported.

It has had a positive impact, with more than 42,000 overdoses reversed

at safe injection sites, Bennett said. More than 209,000 Canadians have been referred to health and [social services](#).

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on the [opioid overdose epidemic](#).

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Citation: Hit hard by opioid crisis, Canadian province decriminalizes small amounts of hard drugs (2023, January 31) retrieved 6 April 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-01-hard-opioid-crisis-canadian-province.html>

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