



Office of the
Provincial Health Officer

The Drug-Toxicity Public Health Emergency in British Columbia

Select Standing Committee on Health

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Provincial Health Officer**

May 2, 2022

ACKNOWLEDGING WITH GRATITUDE

THE LEKWUNGEN PEOPLES

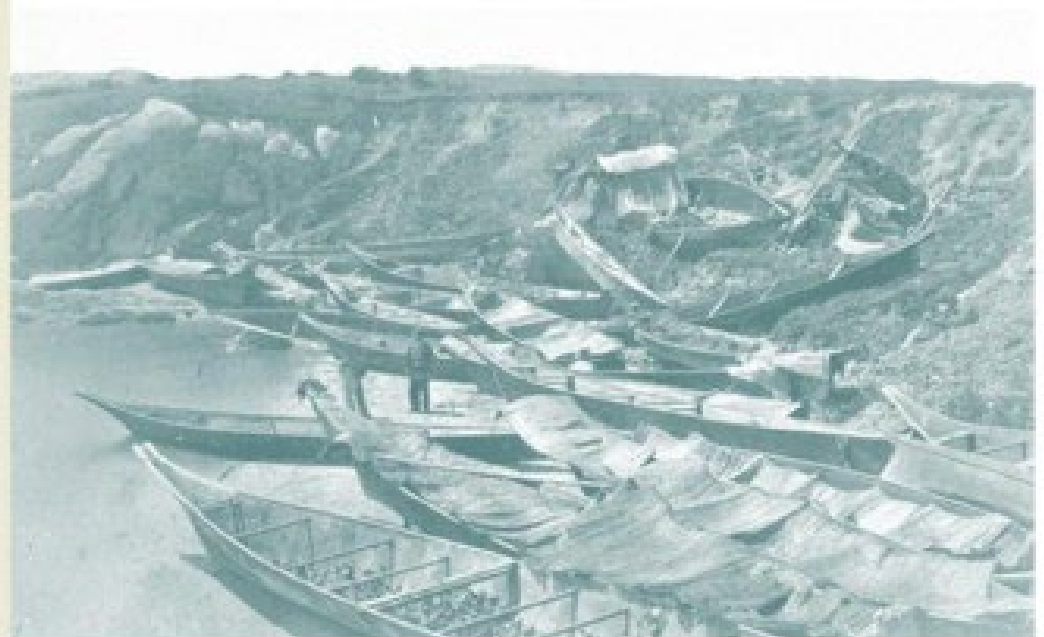
TRADITIONAL KEEPERS OF THIS LAND

Today, Lekwungen
refers to the Songhees
and Esquimalt First
Nations Communities and
their descendants

Hay'sxw'qa Si'em
(thank you respected)



Where ideas work



Where We've Been

Provincial Health Officer declared a Public Health Emergency under the *Public Health Act* in April 2016 in response to an unprecedented increase in drug-toxicity-related harms

Building a Knowledge Base

- Provincial Health Officer issued orders compelling information reporting and linking of databases across government to better understand the nature of the emergency
- BC Centre on Substance Use Research established in 2017 to conduct research, develop training, and produce guidance
- Engaging people with lived/living experience of problematic substance use to understand needs and barriers to care

What We Learned

- Nearly everyone across the province has been affected by the emergency. Priority populations:
 - ❑ Marginalized due to poverty, lack of housing, mental illness
 - ❑ Indigenous Peoples
 - ❑ Young- to middle-aged men living alone, often working in trades
 - ❑ Young experimenters
 - ❑ Those initiated on prescribed opioids, augmenting from street supply

First Nations Disproportionately Harmed

RATE OF TOXIC DRUG POISONING DEATH

5.4 x

First Nations people died at **5.4 times** the rate of other BC residents in 2021. This number was 5.3 in 2020

9.8 x

First Nations women died at **9.8 times** the rate of other female BC residents in 2021

4.2 x

First Nations men died at **4.2 times** the rate of other male BC residents in 2021

Source: First Nations Health. (2021), First Nations and the Toxic Drug Crisis in BC.

TOXIC DRUG POISONING DEATHS

NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO DIED OF TOXIC DRUG POISONING

25.6% 

increase in toxic drug deaths compared to the same period in 2020.

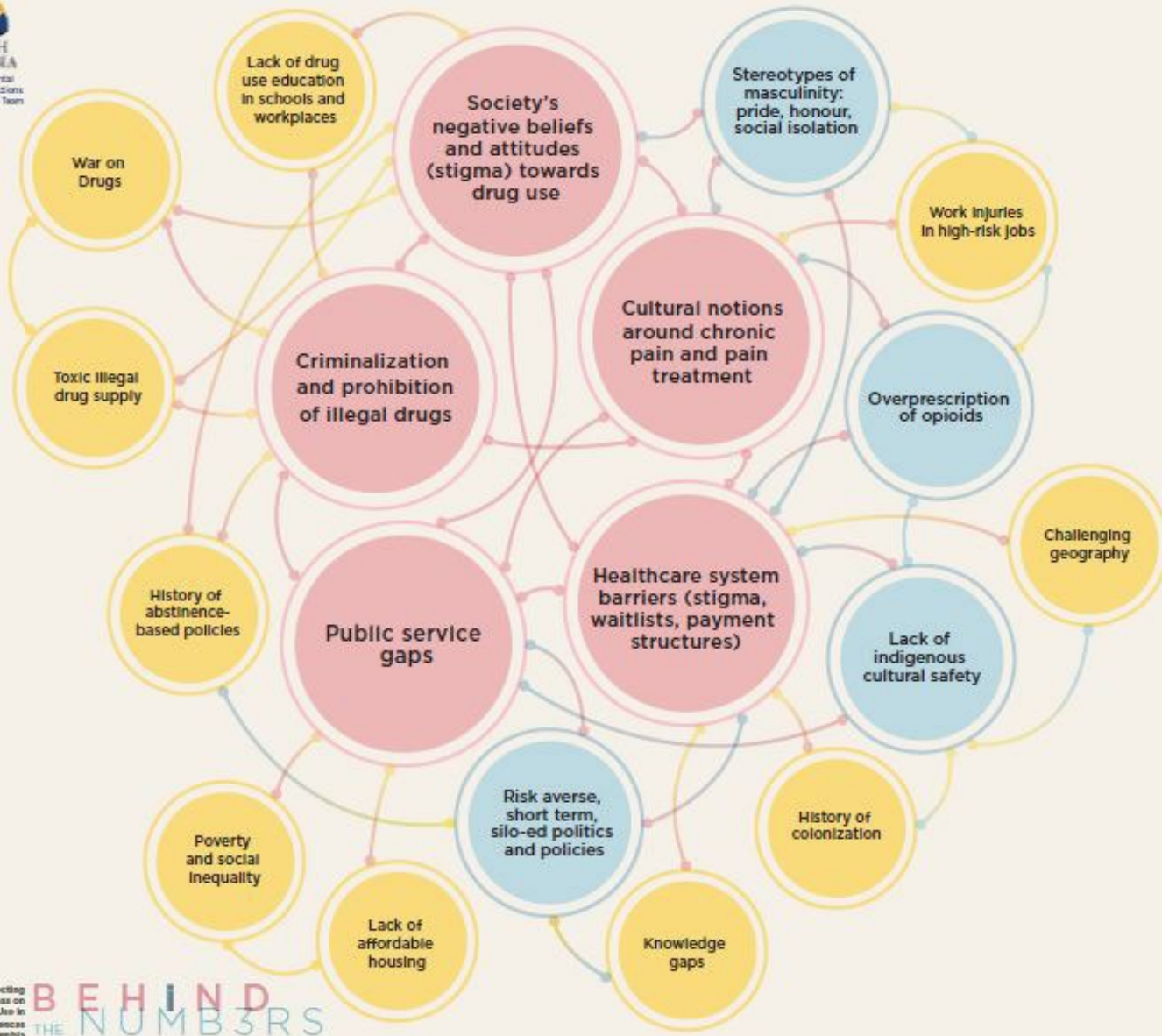
2021



 EQUALS 10 DEATHS

334

A Highly Complex Problem



Systems Map

Understanding the Complexity of the Overdose Crisis in B.C. and Leverage Points for Change

In 2017, 1,422 people died of a drug overdose in B.C. The B.C. Coroners' report (published January 31, 2018) shows that 4 out of 5 people who died were male and 9 out of 10 deaths occurred indoors, including more than half in private residences. First Nations are disproportionately affected by the crisis, with research from the First Nations Health Authority showing that First Nations people are five times more likely to experience an overdose event.

Behind these numbers, there are stories about people's lives and ideas for change. Through conversations with more than 100 people who use drugs (like heroin, cocaine, meth) and people in support provider roles, we found connections between parts of this complex problem, revealing root causes. Reframing the overdose crisis from these root causes shows the most significant leverage points for lowering overdose deaths in B.C. Collaboration among all stakeholders at these leverage points is an essential part of action and change.

How to use this map

This map shows connections between problems. Some problems have more connections than others and can be viewed as root causes.

Think about how your initiative could influence the overdose crisis in B.C. How is it connected to other problems and what impact could it have?

- 7 or more connections** Pink circles show problems with the most connections to other problems. Initiatives focused here could influence multiple problems at once.
- 4 to 6 connections** Blue circles show problems with connections to several other problems.
- 1 to 3 connections** Yellow circles show problems with the least connections to other problems.

Increasingly Toxic Drug Supply

Fentanyl and analogues ‡ were relevant to over **8 in 10** illicit drug toxicity deaths in 2020, followed by methamphetamine

‡ Fentanyl increases the risk of overdose due to the variable potency within the illicit drug supply



Benzodiazepines are increasingly being detected in the drug supply, which can increase the risk of overdose

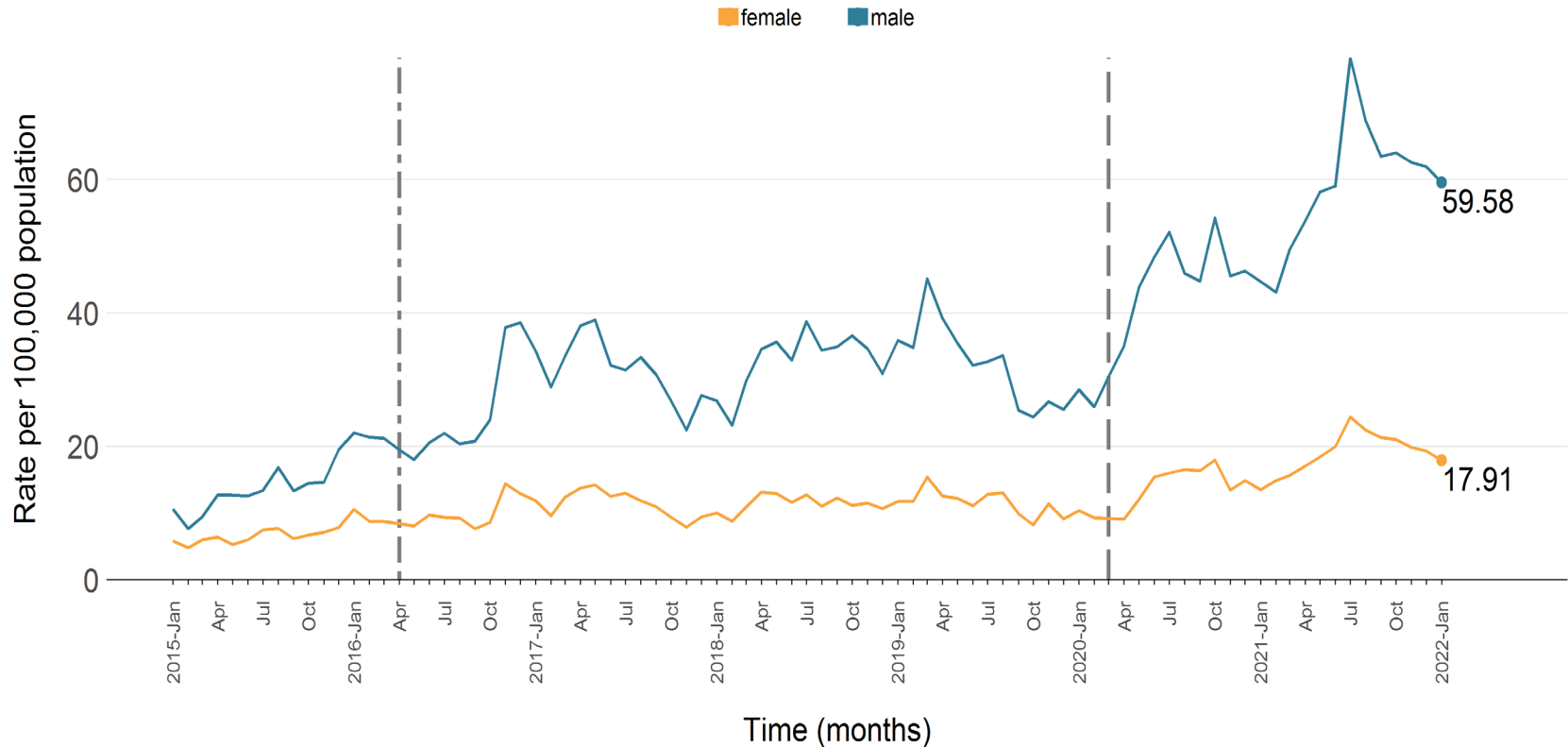


Increased number of **high fentanyl concentrations** in toxicology reports

Source: BC Coroners Service.

Paramedic-Attended Overdose Events

Paramedic-Attended Overdose Event Rate in British Columbia
by sex, from January 2015 to January 2022



Source: BC Emergency Health Services.

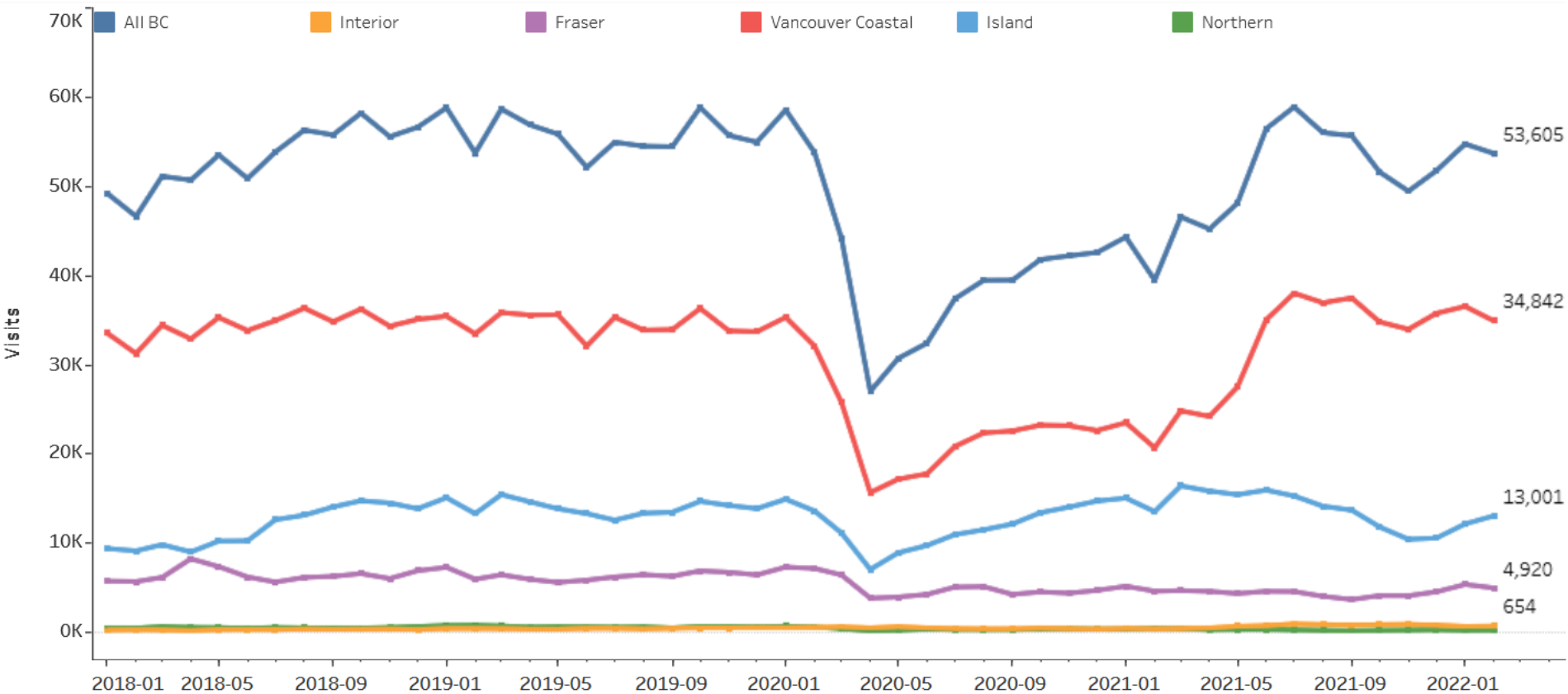
Changing Patterns of Use

	2018	2019	2021
Prefer smoking substances	52%	63%	64%
Prefer injecting substances	34%	28%	14%
Prefer snorting substances	6%	4%	4%
Depends on substance/desired effect	-	-	8%

	2018	2019	2020
<i>Fentanyl</i> use in prior 3 days	39%	46%	54%
Fentanyl use via smoking	59%	67%	78%
Fentanyl use via injecting	52%	48%	36%

Source: BC Centre for Disease Control. Harm Reduction Client Survey 2021 Findings.

Fewer Visits to SCS/OPS Sites



Source: BC Centre for Disease Control. Overdose Response Indicators.

Where We Are Now

Prohibition

Federal drug policy continues to be a barrier to service use and connection.

Toxic Drug Supply

Extreme fentanyl concentrations, carfentanil, and benzodiazepines in drug supply.

COVID-19

Supply chain disruptions, economic vulnerability, and physical distancing.

Changing Consumption

Inhalation and increasing multi-substance use.

Pain

Self-medication due to health system inadequacies in addressing pain.

Stigma

Criminalization and social attitudes contributing to social isolation.

Racism

Health system racism, lack of culturally appropriate services, and colonialism.

Social Determinants of Health

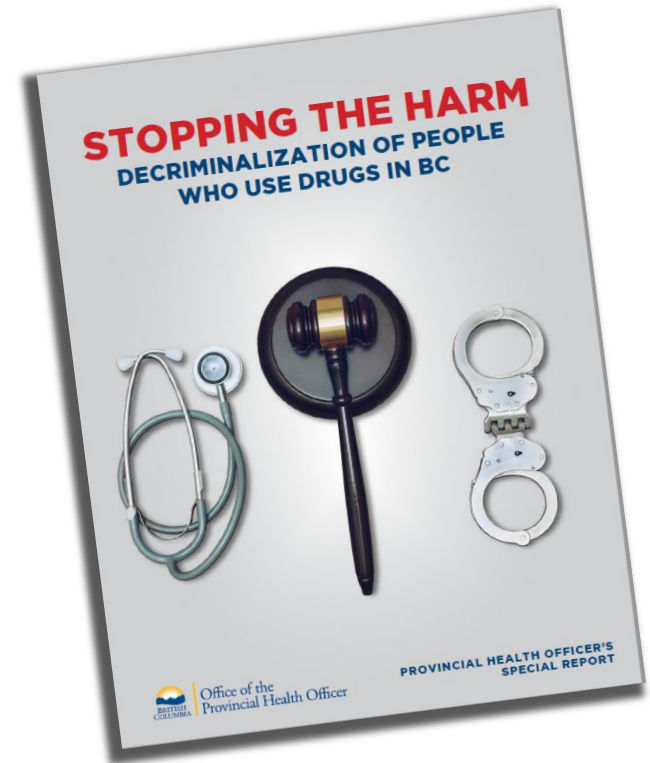
Need to focus on upstream preventative approaches, address poverty and housing.

Lack of Access to Services

Need for an evidence-based treatment and recovery system.

What We Can Do

- Scale up response to be commensurate with the size of the problem
- Decriminalization of People Who Use Drugs
- Pharmaceutical Alternatives to the Unregulated Drug Supply



Questions?

