

Drug Policy Solutions: Reducing Drug Poisoning in Waterloo Region

Waterloo Region Integrated Drugs Strategy

Purpose

Drug poisoning is a leading cause of acute death in Ontario. Current drug policies and practices continue to escalate the crisis to unprecedented levels each year, including in Waterloo Region. The urgency to avoid similar preventable deaths in 2022 and beyond cannot be overstated. The Drug Strategy Network of Ontario (DSNO) represents 37 drug strategies across the province, including the Waterloo Region Integrated Drugs Strategy (WRIDS). The members work together to prevent and reduce harms related to substance use. The DSNO created a series of four policy recommendations (Appendix A) to help reduce drug poisoning deaths and injuries in Ontario. The WRIDS supports these policy solutions as our recommendations for Waterloo Region to immediately reduce drug poisoning deaths and injuries locally.

Recommendations

The Waterloo Region Integrated Drugs Strategy (WRIDS) proposes four policy solutions to immediately reduce drug poisoning deaths and injuries in Waterloo Region. These suggested changes will significantly reduce the harms, including death to people who use unregulated drugs. Additionally, they will improve community health and safety, reduce the burden on publicly funded budgets by relieving the systems costs associated with non-fatal and fatal overdoses, and provide psycho-social relief to individuals, families, and first responders in both medical and non-medical settings.

1. Decriminalization of simple possession with expanded access to health interventions and early intervention services. Decriminalization of drugs for personal use alone will not address the drug poisoning crisis, important supports also need to be implemented to have immediate effects on drug related harms and improving community health and well-being. The WRIDS asks Regional Council to:

- Adopt a motion to endorse the decriminalization of simple possession of unregulated drugs.
- Send an advocacy or endorsement letter to the Federal Government of Canada calling for a national framework for decriminalization of simple possession of unregulated drugs, including universal pardons and amnesty for individuals with past convictions related to simple possession of unregulated drugs.

2. Declare the province's drug poisoning crisis an emergency under appropriate legislation. The public health and emergency response protocols utilized to contain the risks associated with COVID-19 can be adapted and activated to manage the preventable deaths which have resulted from the poisoned supply of unregulated drugs. By declaring a state of emergency, the drug poisoning crisis can be addressed

through the lens of human and consumer rights to provide access to equitable healthcare for people who use drugs.

- Send an advocacy letter to the Provincial Government of the need to provide public real time data for drug poisonings and associated indicators from across the province and to track and publish targets to reduce the incidence of drug poisoning.

3. The immediate expansion of evidence-informed health interventions, including harm reduction practices throughout Ontario.

- Send an advocacy letter to or call for the Provincial and Federal Government to scale-up investments to Waterloo Region for harm reduction supports based on identified community needs. These may include:
 - The immediate upscale of safe supply programs, providing long term funding for existing safe supply programs, ensuring that existing safe supply programs are funded appropriately to provide access to a safer supply of stimulants, benzodiazepines, and hallucinogens.
 - Increased access to point of service drug testing in Waterloo Region for all individuals.
 - Immediate removal of the provincial cap of 21 Consumption and Treatment Services (CTS) sites.
 - Expanding the scope of CTS to include lifesaving safer inhalation services.
 - Increased access to opioid substitution therapies and other evidence-informed harm reduction and treatment services, allowing individuals, the autonomy to choose the treatment services that they desire in a timely manner.
 - Ensuring that the design of harm reduction supports and services that are accessible and co-located with other aligned health and social services. Ensure that peers and people with lived/living experience voices are centered throughout this process.

4. Investments in prevention and early intervention services that provide foundational support for the health, safety, and well-being of individuals, families, and neighborhoods.

- Allocate funding within appropriate government budgets at Provincial and Regional/local levels to support upstream prevention approaches to provide opportunities to build safe and healthy individuals, families, and neighbourhoods for both present and future generations. Sustained investments in prevention efforts reduce the need for downstream funding in future years.
- Support for planning that links early intervention services across multiple sectors. Currently, services for people affected by substance use are scattered across a spectrum of sectors and ministries - including health, addiction, mental health, social services, corrections, and child welfare. A cross sectoral planning approach is needed.

Background Information

The Waterloo Region Integrated Drugs Strategy (WRIDS) has been working to address issues of problematic substance use in Waterloo Region since 2011. The WRIDS is a multi-sectoral collaborative strategy that aims to prevent, reduce, and/or eliminate substance use and its consequences in Waterloo Region through efforts in prevention, harm reduction, recovery and rehabilitation, and enforcement and justice.

In Canada, the severity and scope of deaths due to overdose has stalled life expectancy at birth for the first time in four decades¹. In Ontario, it is estimated that more than 14,000 residents of Ontario have died from accidental drug poisoning since 2016². Our current drug policies and practices continue to escalate this crisis to unprecedented levels each year, including in Waterloo Region. In 2020 and 2021, Waterloo Region recorded an unprecedented number of opioid-related poisoning fatalities.

Data from local, national, and international research shows that we continue to see escalating rates of accidental overdoses, overdose-related deaths, and an increasingly toxic drug supply. It is clear that our current approach of drug criminalization has resulted in serious social and health harms and we must change the way we approach drug policy in Ontario and across Canada.

Key Research

The criminalization of substance use, including simple possession, has resulted in serious harms for individuals who use drugs³. Some of these harms include difficulty accessing harm reduction services, criminal records which act as barriers to housing and employment, being forced into unsafe spaces and into high-risk behaviours, creates an illegal, unregulated drug market, contributes to high downstream costs associated with the justice system, and perpetuates stigma and discrimination towards those using unregulated drugs³.

It is important to note that with the above-mentioned harms of our current drug policies, Indigenous, Black, and other racialized and marginalized populations are disproportionately and negatively impacted⁴. Research shows that drug criminalization has increased structural inequities in Canada including the perpetuation of stigma and discrimination and the over-incarceration of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized and marginalized populations⁴.

Decriminalization vs. Legalization

Decriminalization removes criminal penalties for personal use and possession of drugs in small quantities, but maintains criminal penalties to illegal drug manufacturers, dealers, and traffickers⁵.

Legalization refers to the removal of criminal sanctions for drug use and a regulated market for drugs is created and subject to regulatory controls⁵.

The WRIDS supports decriminalization of simple possession with expanded access to health interventions and early intervention services. To date, no country has fully legalized personal use of all unregulated drugs. Some have legalized and regulated the distribution and consumption of cannabis including Canada, Uruguay, and some US States⁶. In Ontario and across Canada, there have been several Boards of Health, City Councils, and organizations that have adopted motions and/or called for decriminalization of the simple possession of drugs. Although there are a range of potential positive outcomes of legalization and regulation, there is not enough current research to support full legalization and regulation. WRIDS is making recommendations based on current evidence, recommendations may change as new evidence is published.

The Importance of Inhalation Services

While injection is still a prevalent mode of drug use, new research shows that there has been a significant shift away from injection only use towards inhalation⁷. During the pandemic, over one-third of deaths (33.7%) had indication of inhalation only use and just under half of deaths (48.3%) had indications of both injection and inhalation⁷. These numbers are significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels of injection drug use (22.5%) and both injection and inhalation drug use (36.9%)⁷. This significant increase in inhalation as the chosen mode of drug use suggests a need for tailored harm reduction services, including an immediate need for supervised inhalation and smoking services across Ontario.

Conclusion

The support for decriminalization of simple possession continues to grow among many Boards of Health, Councils, Cities, and organizations in Ontario and across Canada. There is significant evidence showing that with our current drug policies, we will continue to see increasing rates of drug poisoning deaths, an increasingly toxic supply, and a disproportionate impact on Indigenous, Black, and other racialized and marginalized populations.

The WRIDS hopes that Regional Council considers the four policy recommendations as a way to reduce drug poisoning deaths and injuries locally. The WRIDS through its Steering Committee is happy to support Regional Council with any of the recommendations and associated advocacy/letters of endorsement to the Provincial and Federal Government. We look forward to long-term solutions and an open dialogue that will seek to address the drug poisoning crisis.

Acknowledgements

The WRIDS would like to acknowledge that behind the data in this report there are real people with stories of grief and loss. Families, friends, and loved ones of those who were lost to drug poisoning in Waterloo Region and Ontario. The data cannot begin to quantify the grief and loss many have experienced due to drug poisoning.

References

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- ² Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario. Suspect drug-related deaths in Ontario. Unpublished data. 2021
- ³ City of Toronto. A Public Health Approach to Drug Policy. June 28, 2018. Item HL28.02
- ⁴ Decriminalization done right: A rights-based path for drug policy. (2022). Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, accessed: <https://www.drugpolicy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/EN-PTL-Decrim.pdf>
- ⁵ Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. Decriminalization: Options and Evidence (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2019-04/CCSA-Decriminalization-Controlled-Substances-Policy-Brief-2018-en.pdf>
- ⁶ Proposition 47: The Safe Neighborhoods and Schools Act. (2022). State of California, accessed: <https://www.courts.ca.gov/prop47.htm>
- ⁷ Gomes T, Murray R, Kolla G, Leece P, Bansal S, Besharah J, Cahill T, Cambell T, Fritz A, Munro C, Toner L, Watford J on behalf of the Ontario Drug Policy Research Network, Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario and Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). Changing circumstances surrounding opioid-related deaths in Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic. Toronto, ON: Ontario Drug Policy Research Network; 2021. Retrieved from https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/c/2021/changing-circumstances-surrounding-opioid-related-deaths.pdf?sc_lang=en

Appendix A

Solutions to End the Drug Poisoning Crisis in Ontario: Choosing a New Direction

Please access the link to download the PDF and references <https://www.drugstrategy.ca/drug-poisoning-policy-solutions.html>