

Actions to Respond to the Drug Poisoning Crisis in Toronto

**Presentation to the Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and
Queer Advisory Committee**

December 8, 2021

Item QS4.4

- On December 6, 2021, the Board of Health directed the Medical Officer of Health to submit a request to Health Canada by the end of 2021 for an exemption under Section 56(1) of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, thereby starting a process to decriminalize the personal possession of illicit substances within the City of Toronto's boundaries.
- The Board of Health also requested that the provincial and federal governments expand funding for supervised consumption and other harm reduction services to better address the needs of specific groups (including Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (2SLGBTQ+) communities).¹

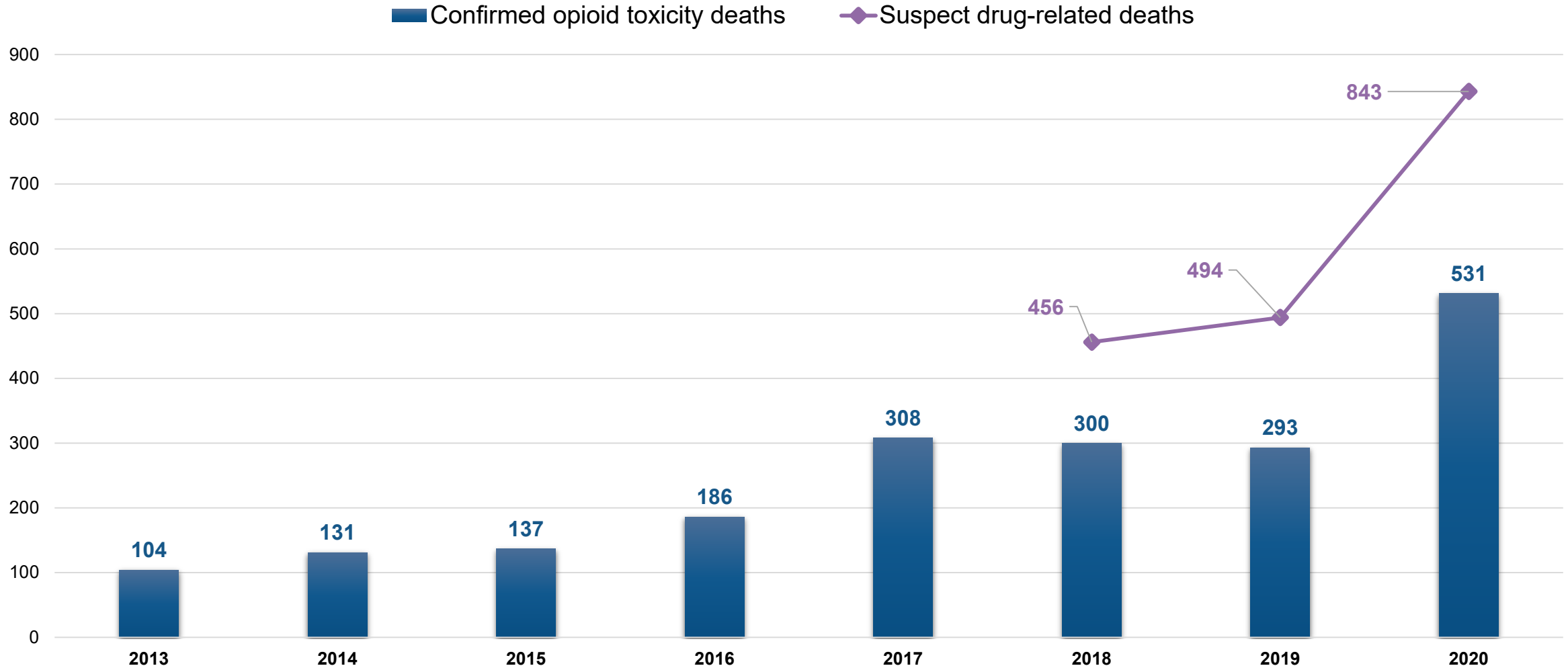
¹ Item HL32.3: Actions to Respond to the Drug Poisoning Crisis in Toronto
<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2021.HL32.3>

The drug poisoning crisis has intensified

- Toronto continues to be in the midst of a drug poisoning crisis, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic
- The drug supply has become increasingly toxic and unpredictable
- Fatal and non-fatal overdoses continue to increase
- Toronto Paramedic Services is responding to record-high and ever-increasing numbers of suspected opioid overdose calls

2020 had a record number of confirmed opioid toxicity deaths in Toronto

Suspect drug-related and confirmed opioid toxicity deaths in Toronto



*Preliminary data. Numbers are expected to change as coroners complete investigations.
Sources: Public Health Ontario and Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario.

The legal framework for drug policy in Canada is under federal jurisdiction

- Illicit drugs are regulated under the federal *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act*
- Under the *Act*, all activities are prohibited, including possession for use, import, export, production, and sale
- Decriminalizing the possession of drugs for personal use in Toronto requires an exemption request to Health Canada
- Some exemptions under the *Act* have been granted (for example, operating supervised consumption services)

Current approaches to drug policy and regulation are not working



The current legal framework for drug policy has not reduced the supply of drugs



Indigenous and Black populations are more likely to be targeted for simple drug possession offences



Criminalization leads to stigma and discrimination against people who use drugs



In 2017, \$3.7B was spent on policing, courts, and correctional costs related to drug laws in Ontario¹

¹ Source: Canadian Substance Use Costs and Harms Scientific Working Group. (2020). Canadian substance use costs and harms visualization tool, version 2.0.0 [Online tool]. Retrieved from <https://csuch.ca/explore-the-data/>

Toronto Public Health recommends a public health and human rights based approach

- Human rights and social determinants of health as cornerstones in reducing the harms associated with drug use and criminalization
- People who use drugs able to connect with the supports they need without fear of criminal charges, stigma, or discrimination
- Access to culturally-safe and trauma-informed services by health workers and peers
- New investments from all levels of government, as well as improved access and linkages to existing health services and social supports

The evolving Toronto community anchor model

The Toronto Community Anchor Model is a public health response to the drug poisoning crisis that recognizes the importance of human rights, as well as the social determinants of health, in reducing the harms associated with drug use and criminalization.

The model recognizes that racialized and Indigenous individuals are disproportionately impacted by the harms associated with drug use and criminalization, and works to ensure access to culturally safe, trauma-informed services by health workers and peers.

THE MODEL IS INTENDED TO:

Operate city-wide

Determine limits based on community use

Reduce demand on police and court services

Apply to all drugs

Ensure timely access to voluntary services

Eliminate fines or other penalties

THE MODEL FEATURES:

Open access to people who use drugs as well as referral by first responders and a dedicated outreach team to the Toronto Community Anchor Drug Use Network.

New investments, as well as improved access and linkages to existing health services and social supports, that meet the needs of people who use drugs, particularly African, Caribbean, Black, women, 2SLGBTQ+ residents, and includes a dedicated Indigenous-developed and Indigenous-led pathway.

Toronto community anchor drug use network (in development)



Designated Community Health Centres & Family Health Teams



24/7 Recovery and Treatment Services



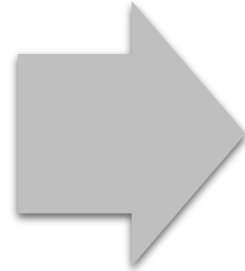
Community Resource Sites



Overdose Outreach Team

Evolving Toronto model

Individual is not charged



Offer culturally-safe, non-stigmatizing, trauma informed health and social services

- Overdose outreach team
- First responders

★ Heard a range of perspectives, which will be explored in workgroups

Examples of health and social services in network

Health maximization
Social and health supports to stabilize and foster health and well-being

Improved, equitable access to health care

Food and nutrition

Housing

Income support enrollment

Harm Reduction
Supports to reduce harms associated with drug use

Overdose prevention

Collaborative health referral

Drug checking

Substance Use Treatment
Expanded access to low barrier evidence-based options

Day and residential treatment

Rapid Access Addiction Medicine (RAAM) in hospital & select CHC + FHT

Mental Health Services
Access to voluntary services

Trauma counselling

Substance use counselling

Mental health treatment

Safer supply
Low barrier expanded prescription access

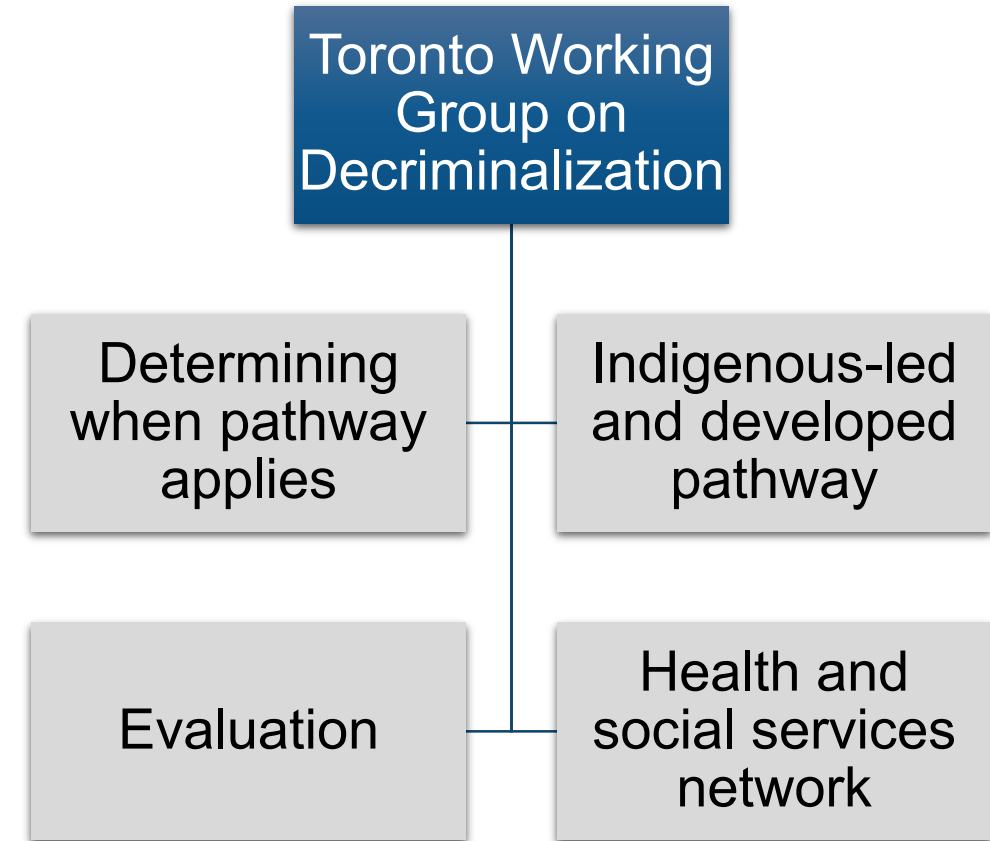
Injectable Opioid Agonist Treatment (iOAT)

Expanded formulary alternatives

Continued and expanded consultations are expected as the model is refined

- Wide range of perspectives and feedback from stakeholders
- Anticipate future working groups and consultations to inform further development of the Toronto model

Preliminary Work Groups (pending feedback from Health Canada)



Future consultation processes will ensure that the voices of people who use drugs, as well as those groups most disproportionately impacted by criminalization are heard. This includes racialized, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+ people, sex workers, people who are parenting/pregnant, and people experiencing homelessness

Toronto Drug Strategy

A comprehensive municipal strategy for alcohol and other drugs based on the integrated components of prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and enforcement.

- Beyond focused recommendations on youth and families, the Toronto Drug Strategy does not take a population-based approach.
- In 2022, Toronto Public Health will be reviewing the Toronto Drug Strategy to ensure it is still applicable to the drug poisoning crisis we face today.

Toronto Overdose Action Plan

Toronto Public Health has worked with community partners to develop and update the Toronto Overdose Action Plan. It includes a comprehensive set of actions for all orders of government to prevent and respond to drug overdoses.

Toronto Indigenous Overdose Strategy

Developed as a companion document to the Toronto Overdose Action Plan. Has recommended actions that were developed through an Indigenous-led consultation process.

Drug-related issues specific to 2SLGBTQ+ Communities

- Broad consultations will be undertaken as part of review of the Toronto Drug Strategy and further development of Toronto's decriminalization model, including with 2SLGBTQ+ communities.
- Are there specific considerations that we should further examine in these consultations? For example:
 - How services and supports could be improved for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals?
 - Are there issues related to 2SLGBTQ+ stigma and discrimination that should be considered?
 - Are there specific drug-use patterns that should be discussed?