

THE INITIAL IMPACT OF DECRIMINALIZATION OF ILLICIT DRUGS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA ON PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION

AUTHORS: Russell C^{1,2}, Bonn M³, Boyd J⁴, Bardwell G⁵, Hyshka E⁶, Sedgemore K⁷, Ali F^{1,2}

Affiliations:

1. Institute for Mental Health Policy Research, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), 33 Ursula Franklin St., Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 2S1
2. Ontario Node, Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Misuse (CRISM), 33 Ursula Franklin St., Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 2S1
3. Canadian AIDS Society
4. Department of Medicine, University of British Columbia
5. School of Public Health Sciences, Faculty of Health, University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, ON, N2L 3G1, Canada
6. School of Public Health, University of Alberta
7. Coalition of Peers Dismantling the Drug War

BACKGROUND:

On January 31, 2023, the Canadian province of British Columbia decriminalized the personal possession of 2.5g of certain drugs. The goals of decriminalization are multifaceted and include addressing criminalization as a social determinant of health, reducing harms caused by criminalization, and removing barriers to support people who use drugs. As the key population this policy will impact, it is imperative that people who use drugs' initial experiences with decriminalization are examined.

METHODS:

As part of a national evaluation of the decriminalization policy, between October 2023 and February 2024, we qualitatively interviewed 100 people who use drugs recruited from communities across BC. Participants partook in a structured socio-demographic survey, followed by a semi-structured interview where they described their initial experiences with decriminalization. Interviews will be analyzed thematically.

RESULTS:

Preliminary qualitative results suggest that most participants consider decriminalization a positive step forward as they are less concerned about being arrested and are more comfortable to carry the drugs they need without fear of repercussions. Participants were mostly aware of the policy, although the specifics (drugs included, threshold amount, and duration) were not always known. Participants who interacted with the police did not receive resource cards or verbal information on community health and social services. Other results will focus on drug use and purchasing patterns, access to services, stigmatization, and the potential impacts of public consumption legislation.

CONCLUSION:

This qualitative study sheds light on the initial impacts of the decriminalization initiative in BC among people who use drugs. Results are preliminary but have the potential to inform policymakers regarding the appropriateness and implementation of the policy. Results also underscore the importance of continuing to evaluate this policy as it evolves.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT:

Matthew Bonn reports personal fees from AbbVie and grants and personal fees from Gilead Sciences, outside of the submitted work. All other authors have no conflicts. The authors acknowledge funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (Grant Number: EVD-184698).

Notes: This qualitative study is currently in progress and will be completed shortly. We will have submitted a full manuscript draft for publication in a peer-reviewed journal before the conference and anticipate having more concrete results and additional themes to present. This study is part of a larger evaluation of the decriminalization of drugs in BC being undertaken by the Ontario Node of the Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Misuse.