

An evaluation of the implementation of decriminalization in British Columbia, Canada



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Background



Government
of Canada

Original exemption (31.1.2023)

On January 31, 2023, a subsection 56(1) **exemption** under the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* (CDSA) related to personal possession of certain controlled substances came into effect in the province of British Columbia (BC). After a thorough assessment, this exemption was granted by the federal Minister of Mental Health and Addictions and Associate Minister of Health to support the province in implementing its **comprehensive public health response** to the overdose crisis. The pilot project was planned to be in effect until January 31, 2026.

Under the original exemption, adults aged 18 years of age and older in BC could not be arrested or charged for the possession of a cumulative amount of up to 2.5 grams of opioids (e.g. heroin, morphine, and fentanyl), cocaine (including crack and powder cocaine), methamphetamine (meth), or MDMA (ecstasy) for personal use.

Amendment – September 18 2023

At the request of British Columbia, the original exemption was amended to prohibit possession in additional areas designed primarily for youth including, within 15 metres of a public outdoor playground, spray pool or wading pool, or skate park.







BC's request to prohibit possession of controlled substances in public spaces (submitted April 26 2024)

As of May 7, 2024, we are granting BC's request to prohibit possession of controlled substances in public spaces.

[Exemptions](#) will continue to apply in private residences, healthcare clinics as designated by the province of BC, places where people are lawfully sheltering, and [overdose prevention and drug checking sites](#).

Evaluation Design

The final overarching evaluation design, based on the logic model and indicators, includes several quantitative and qualitative sub-studies designed to evaluate key areas of research

 People Who Use Drugs (PWUD)	 Police & Criminal Justice System	 General Public	 Health Services System	 Economic Impacts	 Knowledge Triangulation
<p><i>Examines health impacts and experiences with decriminalization among PWUD</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantitative analyses Qualitative interviews 	<p><i>Examines criminal justice impacts and experiences with decriminalization among the police and criminal justice system</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantitative & qualitative analyses 	<p><i>Evaluates impact of decriminalization on the general public</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Population Opinion Polling (POP) Survey 	<p><i>Monitors impacts of decriminalization on harm reduction and treatment services</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantitative surveys Key informant interviews 	<p><i>Evaluates the economic impact of decriminalization</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Return on Investment (ROI) analyses 	<p><i>Increases the integrity, transparency, validity, and accuracy of the evaluation and the data collected within each sub-study</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus groups Jurisdictional bylaw policy analyses

People Who Use Drugs (PWUD)	Police & Criminal Justice System	General Public	Health Service System	Economic impacts	Knowledge Triangulation
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Qualitative Interviews with PWUD

Recruitment:

- Undertook first round of qualitative interviews with PWUD to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences
- Facilitated through CRISM network, working group members, and associations with harm reduction and peer organizations (e.g., PEEP, BCCDC, CAPUD, VANDU, AVI, KANDU, NANDU, REDUN, Cool AID); targeted and snowball sampling

Progress:

- Completed data collection (October 23rd 2023 – February 14th, 2024)
 - Reached data saturation around 70 interviews; initiated targeted recruitment efforts in under-represented communities (e.g., northern and rural/remote communities)
- Drawing on memos and notetaking, drafted preliminary coding framework
- Shared coding framework with working group for feedback
- Completed high-level (‘big bucket’) coding
- Currently exploring data for nuances and depth and drafting several manuscripts

People Who Use
Drugs (PWUD)

Police & Criminal
Justice System

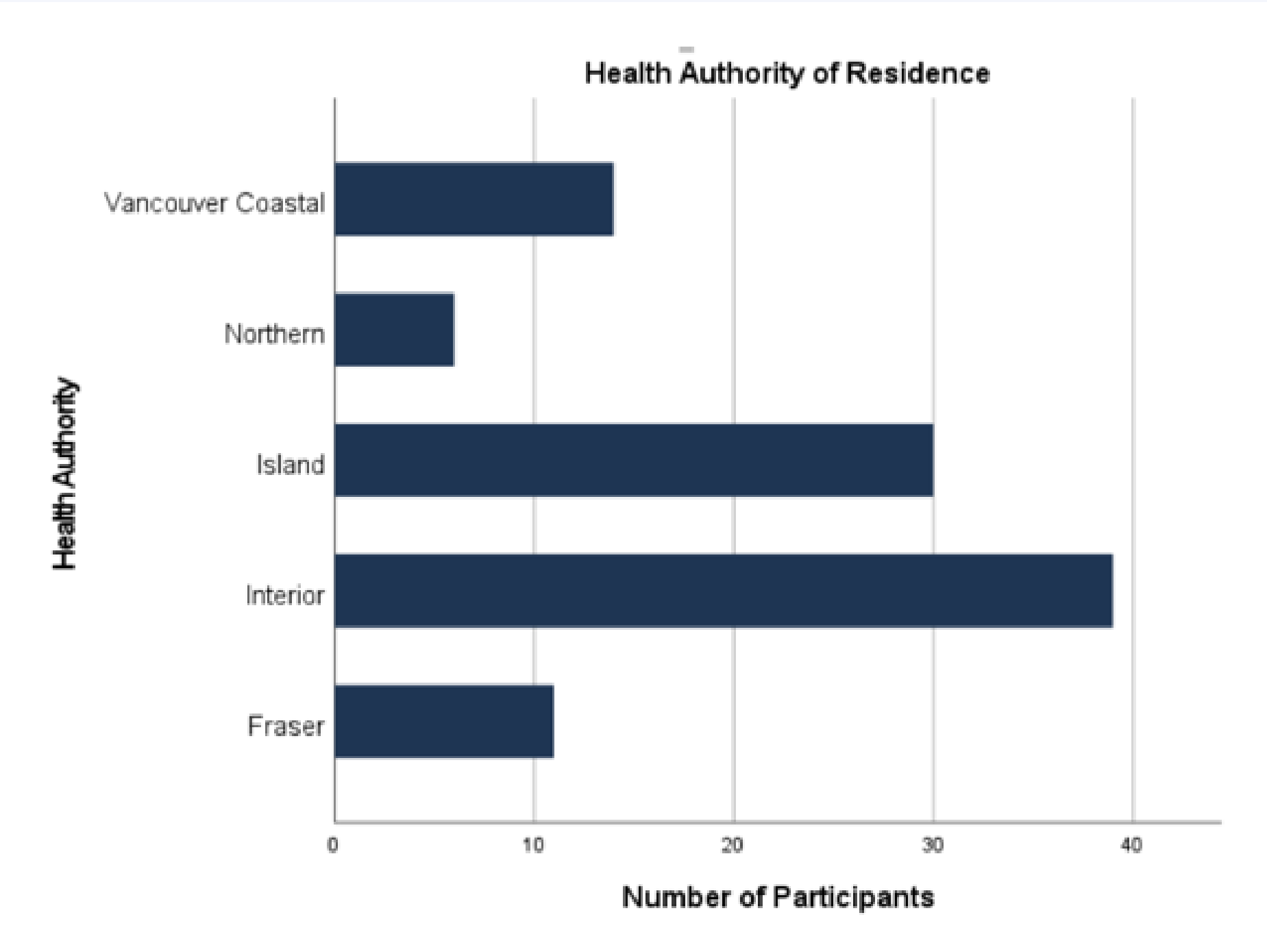
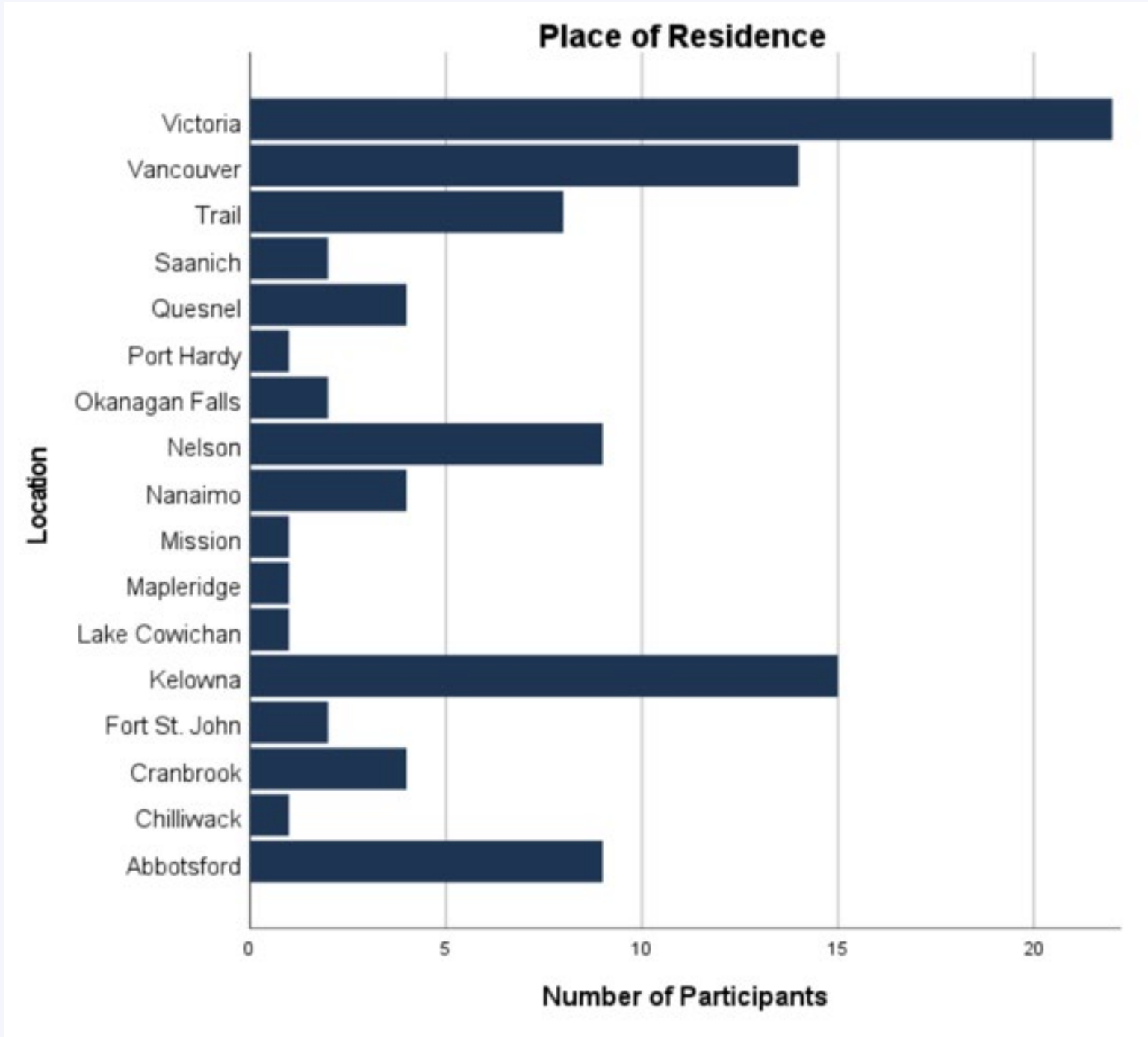
General Public

Health Service
System

Economic impacts

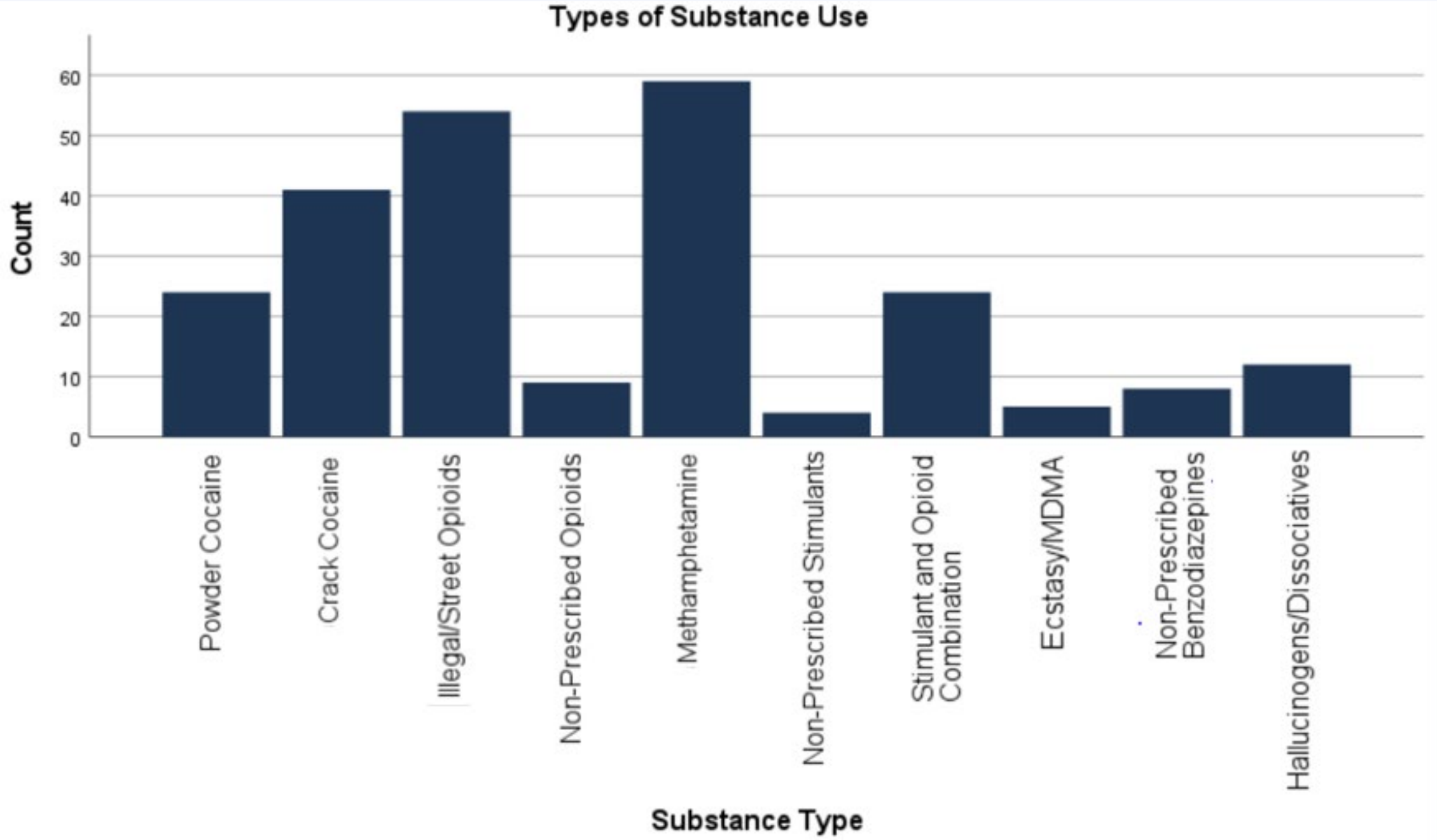
Knowledge
Triangulation

Qualitative Interviews with PWUD: Participant Locations (n=100)



People Who Use Drugs (PWUD)	Police & Criminal Justice System	General Public	Health Service System	Economic impacts	Knowledge Triangulation
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Qualitative Interviews with PWUD: Substance Use Characteristics (n=100)



Substances Used

- Methamphetamine: 59%
- Illegal/street opioids: 54%
- Crack-cocaine: 41%
- Powder cocaine: 24%
- Hallucinogens: 12%
- Non-prescribed opioids: 9%
- Non-prescribed benzodiazepines: 8%
- Non-prescribed stimulants: 4%
- Ecstasy/MDMA: 5%
- **Polysubstance use: 57%**

Primary Route of Administration

- Inhalation: 88%

Frequency of Substance Use

- Daily: 84%

People Who Use Drugs (PWUD)	Police & Criminal Justice System	General Public	Health Service System	Economic impacts	Knowledge Triangulation
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Qualitative Interviews with PWUD: Preliminary Themes

Awareness & Knowledge of the Policy	
<i>Awareness of the policy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most PWUD were aware of the policy, but many of the specifics (e.g., threshold amount, drugs included, cumulative nature, etc.) were unknown Some PWUD were misinformed (e.g., erroneous threshold amounts, public consumption is legal, conflated decriminalization with legalization or safe supply) Five PWUD were completely unaware of the policy
<i>Knowledge Sources</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most PWUD had heard about the policy through word of mouth, followed by the news Some had directly heard about it from harm reduction sites or through drug advocacy groups
<i>Need for More Knowledge & Education</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PWUD expressed confusion around what was and was not legal Despite some level of awareness, PWUD suggested there is a lack of knowledge and understanding of policy specifics, indicating more education and awareness is required

People Who Use Drugs (PWUD)	Police & Criminal Justice System	General Public	Health Service System	Economic impacts	Knowledge Triangulation
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Qualitative Interviews with PWUD: Preliminary Themes

Perceptions of the Policy	
<i>Support for the Policy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The majority of PWUD were supportive of decriminalization, suggesting that it is beneficial and a ‘positive step forward in the right direction’, and ‘long overdue’ PWUD suggested it could help reduce criminalization and increase access to harm reduction and treatment services
<i>Reduced Fear of Arrest</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many PWUD expressed they are less concerned about being arrested and feel more comfortable to carry the substances they need without fear of repercussions
<i>Concerns About the Policy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some PWUD were concerned that the policy would enable and normalize drug use and make drugs more accessible, particularly for youth Some questioned the link between decriminalization and any expected reduction in overdose deaths, indicating that it would likely not have any impact A few PWUD expressed skepticism that the policy was done in bad faith (e.g., threshold too low, only in place for three years), and suggested it was 'set up for failure'

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Qualitative Interviews with PWUD: Preliminary Themes

Drug Use and Purchasing Behaviors	
<i>Drug Use</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The majority of PWUD indicated their use patterns (amount, frequency) had not changed • A few PWUD indicated indicated their use increased because they were more comfortable to use publicly
<i>Increased Public Consumption</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many PWUD suggested that public drug use had visibly increased in their community post-decriminalization, and that it was becoming normalized • The majority were in support of Bill C34, particularly to protect children from viewing drug use
<i>Purchasing Behaviors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most PWUD indicated their purchasing behaviors (amounts, frequency, distribution channels) had not changed
<i>Impact of 2.5g Threshold on Purchasing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants were nearly evenly split on whether they typically purchased/carried above or below the 2.5g threshold; Regardless, many suggested it should be increased • Those who purchased more typically bought more for economic reasons as the per unit cost decreased as the amount purchased increased • Those who purchased less typically bought a couple ‘points’ worth at a time as it was ‘all they could afford’

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Qualitative Interviews with PWUD: Preliminary Themes

Dealer Interactions and Drug-Related Risks	
<i>Dealer Interactions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The majority of PWUD indicated their interactions with their dealers had not changed • They met and interacted with them in the same ways, in similar frequencies, and in the same locations as they did before
<i>Increased Low-Level Dealers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several PWUD indicated an increase in ‘low-level’ or ‘amateur’ dealers due to decriminalization and the reduced fear of arrest • These dealers were perceived to be inexperienced, often cutting/buffing the supply with additives and ultimately increasing PWUD’s risk
<i>Trust in Dealers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PWUD often indicated they trusted their dealers to give them a reliable supply, and would purchase larger quantities at a time if possible to maintain access to what they considered to be a ‘safe’ supply
<i>Overdose Risk</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most PWUD indicated they were unconcerned with overdosing, and that this had not changed since decriminalization • Reasons included knowing their tolerance, trusting their dealer, engaging in risk mitigation practices (e.g., starting ‘low and slow’, testing their drugs)

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Qualitative Interviews with PWUD: Preliminary Themes

Police Interactions	
<i>Limited police interactions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most PWUD had not had any interactions with police related to their drug use PWUD with interactions mostly described police not confiscating their drugs, not arresting them, or returning their drugs to them after the interaction
<i>Police discretion</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many PWUD suggested that police discretion still plays a large role in their interactions Whether or not interactions were respectful ‘depended on the specific police officer’
<i>Police resource cards</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nearly all PWUD who interacted with police described that they had not offered resource cards or any verbal information on health and treatment services in the community PWUD suggested they would be open and accepting of resource cards and associated support, indicating that it would be ‘humanizing’
<i>Jurisdictional differences</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Police interactions, presence, and treatment of PWUD appears to differ by jurisdiction There was an increase in police presence or PWUD-police interactions in some communities and a decrease in others Differences between police forces (e.g., RCMP vs. Municipal, as well as Urban vs. Rural)

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Qualitative Interviews with PWUD: Preliminary Themes

Decriminalization Goals	
<i>Reduction in Overdose Crisis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most PWUD were hopeful that decriminalization would reduce overdose deaths A few PWUD indicated that it may inadvertently increase overdose deaths
<i>Reduction in Stigmatization</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most PWUD reported experiences of being judged and shamed for their drug use and indicated that this had not changed since decriminalization Many were hopeful that decriminalization would eventually reduce stigma, but several thought it may have the opposite effect
<i>Access to Harm Reduction Services</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some PWUD felt more comfortable to access harm reduction services since decriminalization and had noticed an increase in available services within their community (e.g., more advocacy groups, mobile outreach, etc.) PWUD commonly suggested there are not enough supports and services available
<i>Suggestions for improvement</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy improvements were often suggested, including calls to revise the threshold, to implement more harm reduction services and places for PWUD to safely use drugs (particularly in light of Bill 34), and to extend the policy to provide a regulated drug supply

People Who Use
Drugs (PWUD)

Police & Criminal
Justice System

General Public

Health Service
System

Economic impacts

Knowledge
Triangulation

Qualitative Interviews with Police

Recruitment:

- Undertook first round of qualitative interviews with police to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences with decriminalization in relation to their views on the policy and its features, the policy implementation process, relation to other laws, public consumption, interactions with PWUD (arrests, seizures, and charging), impacts on organized crime, and operational impacts
- Facilitated through SFU network and established connections with police officers and chiefs of police, as well as snowball sampling

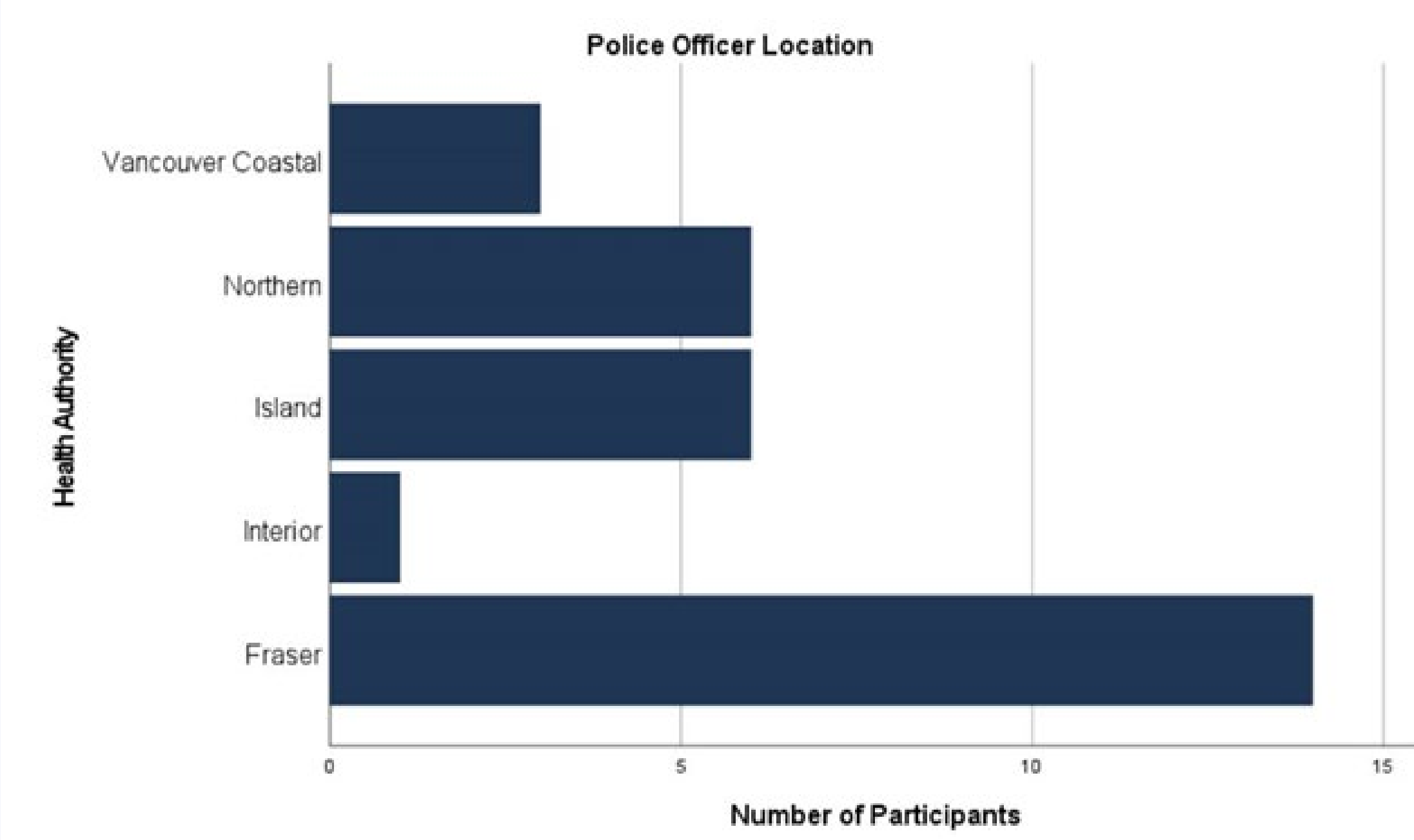
Progress:

- Completed data collection (November 16th 2023 – Mach 2nd 2024)
- Drew on memos and notetaking to draft preliminary coding framework
- Completed high-level (‘big bucket’) coding
- Currently exploring data for nuances and depth and drafting several manuscripts

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Qualitative Interviews with Police: Socio-Demographic Characteristics (n=30)

Socio-Demographic Characteristic (n=30)	Full Sample n (%)
Age (range)	27-51
Years employed as an officer (range)	1-28
Sex	
Male	24 (80%)
Female	6 (20%)
Ethnicity	
White	24 (80%)
Ethnic Minority	6 (20%)
Police Force	
RCMP	18 (60%)
Municipal	12 (40%)
Organizational Role	
Constable	20 (66%)
Supervisory	6 (20%)
Management	4 (13%)
Specialty	
General/other	20 (66%)
Organized Crime/Drug Units	10 (33%)



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Qualitative Interviews with Police: Preliminary Themes

Views of the exemption	
<i>A lack of readiness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "The cart is not ready and we sent the horse running"
<i>Will not achieve its objectives</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I think they’re going to see that it’s going to be a bit of a failed experiment. It’s not going to have the effect that was intended” Expectation that charging practices will not change because officers already did not charge for possession “I’ve never put in charges in nine years for criminal possession of a narcotic. Never. In [city] we just don’t have the time”
<i>Politically Based, Not Evidence-Based</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political and activism driven: “I got to be frank, it was activist driven and the people who were at the table wasn’t the whole picture of community” “And it was very clear that it was more of a political push to have drugs decriminalized without conducting much research into the efficacy of decriminalization and how it applies within the realm of British Columbia”

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Qualitative Interviews with Police: Preliminary Themes

Spectrum of views: Ranged from fully in favor, to open/indifferent, to fully against	
<i>In Favour</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enforcement approach was not working and formalizing the practice of not charging or seizing is the right approach to achieve consistency for all officers throughout the province
<i>Open or Indifferent</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most officers we spoke with had views along these lines Good, but not fully thought out Would have been more in favour if the policy was multi-pronged. This is a complex problem and decriminalization is on piece of a larger response that is needed. If it genuinely stops people from dying, then “not against it on paper”
<i>Against</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "I generally vote no to decriminalizing" Some officers expressed stronger feelings against decriminalizing drugs "in any shape or form“

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Qualitative Interviews with Police: Preliminary Themes

Arrests, Seizures, and Charging Practices	
<i>Amounts under 2.5g</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally strict non-enforcement approach Recognition that they can still exercise enforcement for amounts below 2.5g <i>if</i> there are indicators of trafficking
<i>Amounts over 2.5g</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater discretion used/more variation in responses Management perspective was "we want officers to use common sense"
<i>Factors influencing discretionary decisions on whether to arrest, seize, or recommend charges</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whether the drugs are involved in an overdose incident Trafficking indicators (e.g. how drugs are packaged) Location of town (e.g. DO NOT enforce in areas where people are street entrenched, but DO enforce in business areas) The role of the drug in the offence committed How much over the threshold (e.g. 3g vs. a kilo) Consideration for whether they think prosecutors would approve the charge in the circumstances or not

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Quantitative Analyses: PWUD and Police & Criminal Justice System

Interrupted Time Series Analyses (2015-2023):

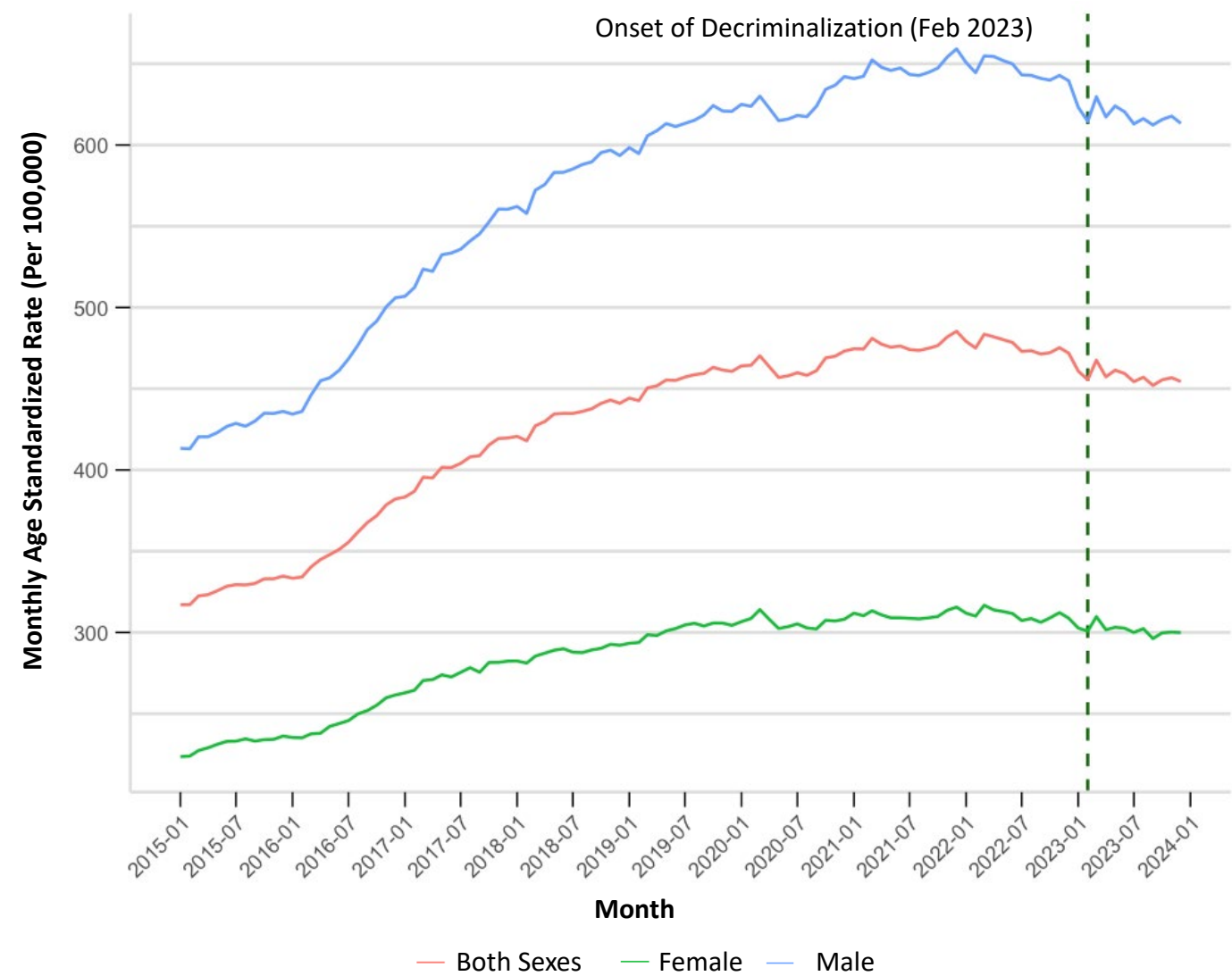
- Outcomes included: (1) Clients dispensed medications for OAT (PharmaNet); (2) First-time clients dispensed medications for OAT (PharmaNet); (3) Supervised consumption services visits; (4) Opioid poisoning paramedic calls (BC Emergency Health Services); (5) Drug poisoning deaths (BC Coroners Service). All data were sourced from BC Centre for Disease Control.
- Analyses were conducted using Generalized Additive Models (GAMs).
- Total and sex-specific age-standardized rates were calculated and log-transformed.
- Onset of decriminalization was coded as February 01, 2023.
- Unemployment rate and COVID-19 (COVID-19 Stringency Index) were modeled as confounders.
 - Included separately in models due to multicollinearity.

Domain	Comparative Data	Design*	Data Available
Prescriptions of Opioid Agonist Treatment (OAT) Medications	×	ITS	✓
Utilization of Overdose Prevention Services	×	ITS	✓
Paramedic-Attended Illicit Drug Overdose	×	ITS	✓
Deaths Due to Illicit Drug Overdoses	×	ITS	✓
Load Per Capita of Drugs in Wastewater	✓	JPR	✓
Police-Reported Incidents Involving Illicit Drug-Related Offenses	✓	DiD	Est. Oct 2024
Hospitalizations Due to Illicit Drug Use	✓	DiD	Est. Nov 2024
Police- and Criminal Courts-Based Illicit Drug-Related Criminal Charges	✓	DiD	Est. Oct 2024 and Nov 2024

* DiD: Difference-in-Difference; ITS: Interrupted Time Series; JPR: Joinpoint Regression

Clients Dispensed Medications for OAT (2015-2023):

- Included those dispensed any medication for OAT (including Methadone, Buprenorphine, Buprenorphine-Naloxone, Slow-Release Oral Morphine, Diacetylmorphine Injection, Hydromorphone Injection, Hydromorphone Tablets).



Clients Dispensed Medications for OAT (2015-2023):

- Models did not suggest level changes for total, males or females irrespective of adjustment for unemployment rate or COVID-19. However, models suggested a decline post-decriminalization in the trend of clients dispensed medications for OAT.

		Total		Male		Female	
		Estimate	P-Value	Estimate	P-Value	Estimate	P-Value
Adjustment for Unemployment Rate							
	Intercept	5.820	< 0.001	6.097	< 0.001	5.453	< 0.001
	Time	0.004	< 0.001	0.004	< 0.001	0.003	< 0.001
	Unemployment Rate	-0.003	0.036	-0.004	0.003	-0.001	0.494
	Level Change	-0.013	0.452	-0.018	0.304	0.000327	0.984
	Slope Change	-0.005	0.001	-0.006	0.001	-0.005	0.002
	R-Squared	0.984		0.986		0.978	
Adjustment for COVID-19							
	Intercept	5.798	< 0.001	6.064	< 0.001	5.447	< 0.001
	Time	0.004	< 0.001	0.004	< 0.001	0.003	< 0.001
	COVID-19 Stringency Index	0.000	0.240	0.000	0.156	0.000	0.606
	Level Change	-0.013	0.436	-0.020	0.282	-0.0000334	0.998
	Slope Change	-0.005	0.002	-0.005	0.002	-0.005	0.002
	R-Squared	0.984		0.985			

Decriminalization Evaluation Updates

Quantitative Sub-Study:

- We received quantitative health-related data from BCCDC which included the following outcomes: clients dispensed Opioid Agonist Treatment (OAT) prescriptions (ever and first-time); supervised consumption site visits; paramedic-attended overdoses; deaths due to illicit drug overdose; and load per capita of drugs in wastewater (codeine, morphine, oxycodone, methadone, fentanyl, ecstasy, amphetamine, methamphetamine, and cocaine)
 - Conducted Interrupted Time Series and JoinPoint Regression analyses, stratified by age and sex, controlled for unemployment rate and COVID-19

Results:

- Only statistically significant finding was a declining trend in clients dispensed OAT
- All other outcomes had null findings, suggesting decriminalization has not had a significant impact on these outcomes to date

Next Steps

- Receive and analyze criminal justice-specific outcomes (e.g., arrests and charges related to illicit drug possession, trafficking, importation and exportation) from Statistics Canada

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Public Opinion Poll (POP)

Progress:

- Undertook first round of our repeated cross-sectional public opinion polling (POP) surveys in collaboration with Ipsos (POP specialists) to evaluate the BC public’s awareness, understanding, perceptions, and support or opposition to decriminalization
- Survey fielding occurred between March 26th and April 1st, 2024
- Survey included 1,202 adults (18+) from BC; responses were weighted to reflect the BC population age 18+ based on census data for region, age, gender, and education
- The poll is accurate to within +/-3.3 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, had all BC adults been polled
- We will undertake additional statistical analyses to ascertain potential differences between characteristics of individuals who endorse specific survey questions (e.g., support or opposition to the policy)

**People Who Use
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General Public

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Economic impacts

**Knowledge
Triangulation**

Public Opinion Poll (POP): Implications

Implications:

- Results are largely negative in that more people appear to oppose than support the policy, and most feel that it will increase drug use experimentation
- Most participants were also split on whether they believe the policy will reach its intended goals (e.g., reducing policing costs, improving treatment, changing negative perceptions of PWUD)
- Less than 10% of participants perceived and provided benefits of the policy
- Open drug use in public spaces was listed as a concern, and 43% of participants indicated the policy has made them feel less safe in their community, which may have relevance for evolving public consumption legislation
- Results will be used as a baseline to monitor key outcomes and perceptions of the policy going forward

People Who Use
Drugs (PWUD)

Police & Criminal
Justice System

General Public

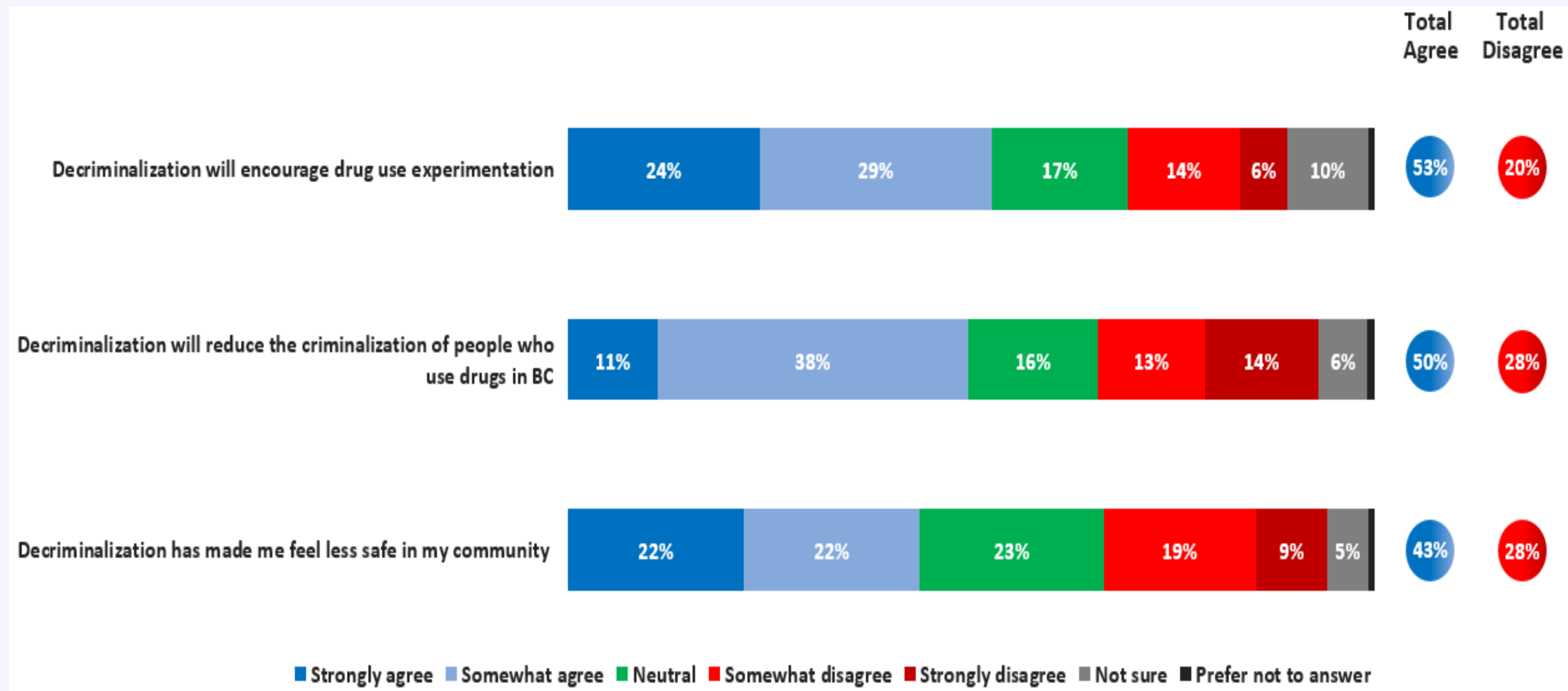
Health Service
System

Economic impacts

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Triangulation

Public Opinion Poll (POP): Perceptions of Impacts of Policy

- Over half of people believe the policy will encourage drug use experimentation
- About half of people believe that the policy will meet its intended goal of reducing criminalization
- Just under half indicated that the policy has made them feel less safe in their community



People Who Use
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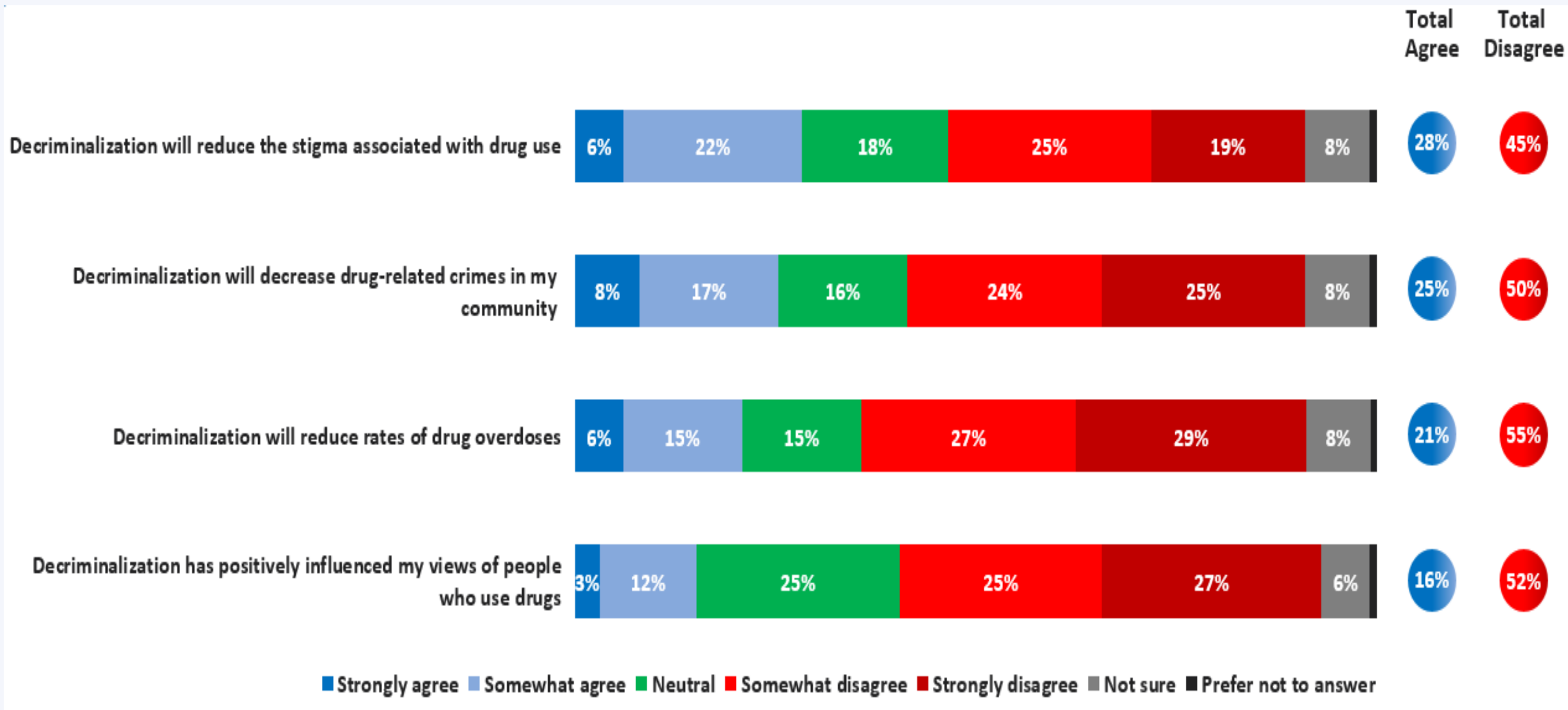
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Public Opinion Poll (POP): Perceptions of Impacts of Policy

- Around half of people disagree that the policy will reduce stigma, reduce drug related crimes in their community, and reduce rates of overdoses
- Over half of people do not agree that the policy has positively influenced their views of PWUD



People Who Use
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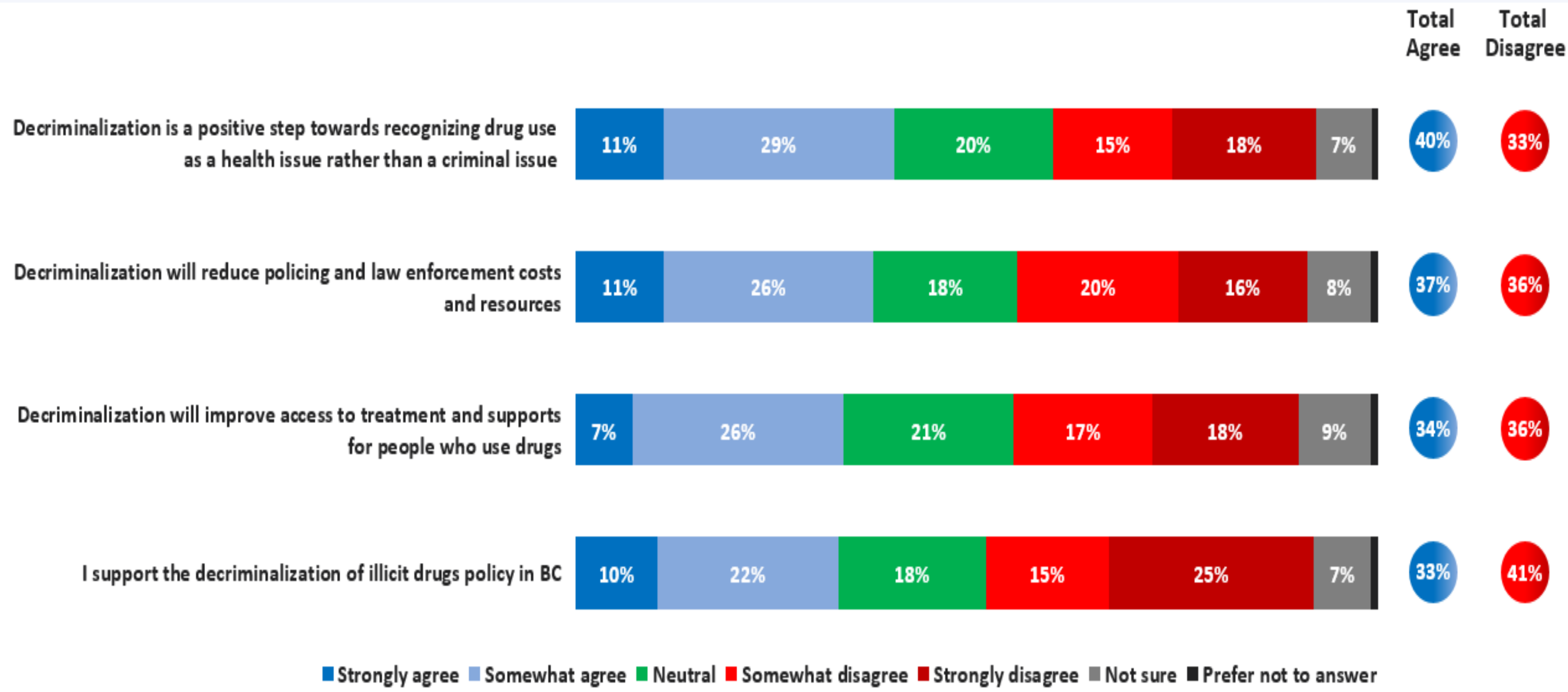
Health Service
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Public Opinion Poll (POP): Perceptions of Impacts and Support of Policy

- Most people were split on whether the policy will reduce policing costs & resources, improve access to treatment and supports for PWUD, and change perceptions of drug use from a criminal to a health issue
- Slightly more people opposed than supported the policy



Like Oregon: perception is key

Failure to get public support!

In a democracy, any high impact political interventions needs to convince the public. Facts are one thing, but perception is another. Crime rates may go down, but if public perception has them going up, there is a problem!

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Harm Reduction (HR) and OAT Services: Mixed-Methods Study

Harm Reduction (HR) and Opioid Agonist Treatment (OAT) Services Surveys:

- We launched, completed, and analyzed our HR and OAT surveys, distributed to all HR/OAT services across BC

Results:

- Decriminalization has not substantially impacted service operations at HR and OAT sites, but has resulted in an increase in demand on staff and resources

Next Steps

- Launch the follow-up phase of this study with in-depth interviews with key informants

Knowledge Translation Activities

Presentations

Title: Evaluation Design: British Columbia's Decriminalization of Possession of Illegal Drugs Policy

- Presented virtually for the Regional Health Authority Decriminalization Leads, March 7th 2024
- Presented virtually at the BCCDC Grand Rounds, March 12th 2024
- Presented virtually at the CAMH Addictions Rounds, February 9th 2024

Articles

Russell, C., Ali, F., Imtiaz, S., Butler, A., Greer, A., Rehm, J., & Decriminalization Evaluation Research Group (2024). The decriminalization of illicit drugs in British Columbia: a national evaluation protocol. BMC Public Health, 24(1), 2879. doi: 10.1186/s12889-024-20336-9

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Thank You

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the people who have contributed to this project, including our participants with lived and living experience with drug use, without whom we would not be able to undertake this important work

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