

Impact of Decriminalization on Drug Use Experiences and Related Risks among People Who Use Drugs in British Columbia

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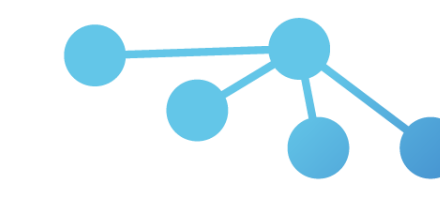
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Introduction

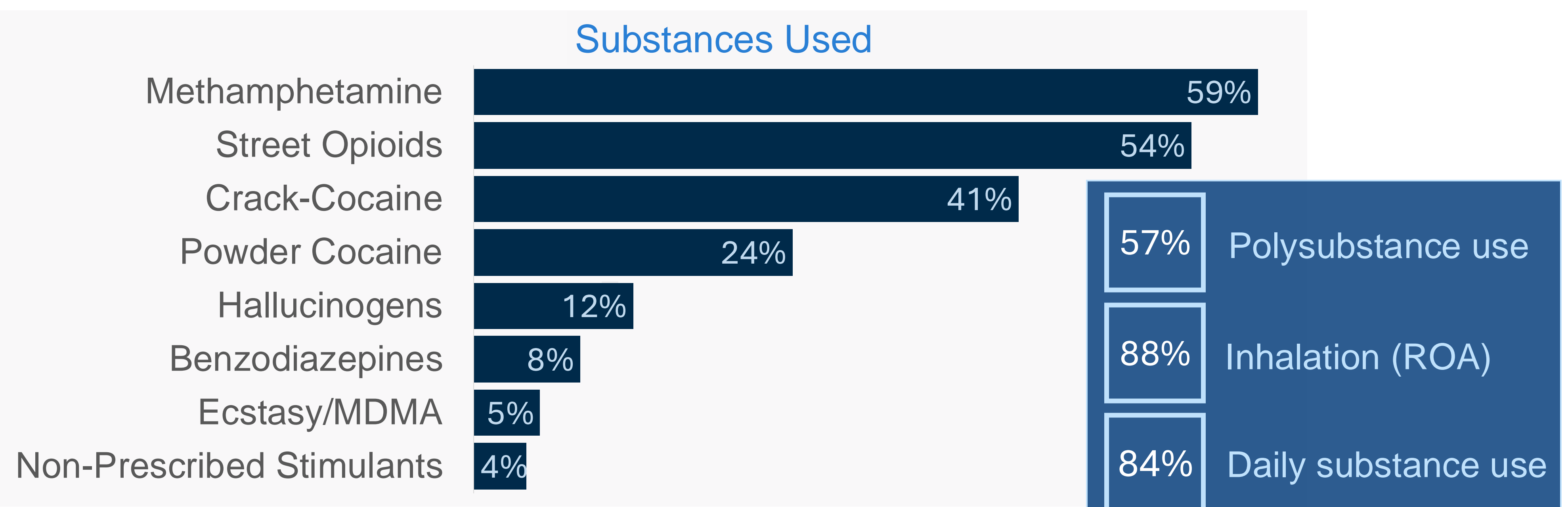
- In January 2023, British Columbia (BC) piloted decriminalization of personal possession of drugs for a period of three years, including:
 - Up to **2.5 grams** of certain illicit drugs (opioids, cocaine/crack-cocaine, methamphetamine, MDMA/ecstasy) for adults (18+)
 - Goal of decriminalization is to **reduce stigmatization** and **drug use harms**, and **improve uptake** of health and treatment services
- Qualitatively examined the impacts of the decriminalization policy on **people who use drugs (PWUD)**

Methods

- Telephone interviews with PWUD (~45 mins)
- 100 Participants (18+)
 - ✓ BC resident since before January 31, 2023
 - ✓ Consumed unregulated drugs at least 3x / week
- October 2023 – February 2024
- Purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling
- Qualitative content analysis

Results

	44	Average age
	56%	Men
	70%	White
	87%	Straight / heterosexual
	33%	Secondary / high school
	32%	In a private residence, with others
	82%	Unemployed



Drug Use & Purchasing Patterns

- Decriminalization had **minimal** impacts on drug use, purchasing, and carrying behaviours among PWUD*
- Even split between participants who purchased/carried **below** or **above** 2.5 g
- Reasons for purchasing/carrying above/below threshold:
 - Cost benefit / affordability
 - Safety
 - Accessibility
 - Criminalization risk

*This study was a qualitative analysis not designed to measure increase/decrease in frequency of use

“I find I’m using more [on some days] because [I feel safer to use drugs in more public areas]”

“I would only buy like basically two grams at a time...which can be a real hassle, because I’m always having to pick up all the time... I didn’t want to be charged.”

“We’re definitely going to buy as much as [we can] – and we get better prices that way.”

Drug-Related Risks

“I’ve been going to the same person for years... I trust them. I trust the product. They’ve never given me or any of my other friends anything that would hurt us.”

“Everybody and their dog thinks that they’re a dealer and they know how to cook it...or have the right recipe for fentanyl...there’s a lot more hot spots in it.”

- **Toxicity** of the drug supply (e.g. benzodiazepines and tranquilizers) continued to impact **overdose risk**, suggesting that trusted suppliers were essential to **reduce** this risk
- Some PWUD perceived a **reduced** fear of arrest - Resulted in an **increase** in ‘amateur’ sellers since decriminalization who buffed supply with additives, which **increased** risk for overdose
- Some PWUD were **more likely** to use with others since decriminalization due to a **reduction** in stigmatization, ultimately **reducing** their overdose risk

Benefits and Concerns of Policy

- PWUD felt **safer** to use their drugs and **less at risk** for criminalization
- PWUD had concerns that decriminalization may **increase** drug use among youth
- PWUD noted the potential for **increased** public drug consumption and visibility of use in communities
- PWUD suggested the 2.5 gram possession threshold is **too low**
 - Cumulative nature of threshold did not reflect realities of PWUD who engaged in polysubstance use

“[People should be able to] make an adult decision on what kind of drugs they would like to take for whatever purposes [without being criminalized for it].”

“Some people kind of take it a little too far. They think just because they can’t get charged, it means that they can just [use drugs] anywhere...It’s not really appropriate.”

“I think as a side [meth] user, I would say a ball, 3.5g, is a fair amount...But with down (heroin/fentanyl)... [down users are] going to smoke at least probably five or six points a day...[2.5g] is not a realistic number.”

Conclusion & Recommendations

- Need to continue monitoring the impact of the possession threshold and public consumption legislation in BC
- Adjunct solutions needed to address the escalating toxicity of the drug supply (e.g., ‘safe supply’ programs)
- Policy amendments to ensure the possession threshold better reflects PWUD’s realities