

EXPERIENCES OF STIGMATIZATION AMONG PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS IN THE INITIAL YEAR OF BRITISH COLUMBIA'S DRUG DECRIMINALIZATION POLICY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Background:

In 2023, Health Canada approved a three-year pilot decriminalization initiative allowing adults in British Columbia (BC), Canada, to legally possess a cumulative 2.5 g of opioids, cocaine, methamphetamine, or MDMA. The policy aims to reduce barriers to accessing harm reduction and treatment services. Addressing stigma is considered a crucial step in mitigating BC's overdose crisis, to encourage access and utilization of services without fear of judgment. This study examined impacts of the decriminalization policy on stigma among people who use drugs within the first year of implementation.

Methods:

From October 2023 to February 2024, 100 semi-structured telephone interviews and brief socio-demographic surveys with people who use drugs from across BC were conducted to explore their experiences of stigmatization post-decriminalization. A qualitative thematic analysis was used to synthesize the data.

Results:

Findings revealed that societal, structural, and self-stigma remain pervasive among people who use drugs post-decriminalization. While most participants reported little change in their experiences of stigma since the policy's implementation, some reported an increase, while others observed a decrease. Increased stigma was attributed to perceived heightened visibility of public drug use, which amplified societal stigma. Conversely, decreased stigma was linked to shifting public perceptions of drug use as a public health issue and more humanized interactions with police. Despite mixed experiences, participants remained optimistic that the policy could contribute to long-term stigma reduction and offered recommendations to support this.

Conclusion:

While decriminalization has the potential to reduce stigma and increase comfort in accessing critical harm reduction and substance use treatment services, achieving these outcomes requires additional efforts. Public awareness campaigns, targeted anti-stigma education, and broader systemic changes were suggested by participants to address stigmatization in BC. Strengthening these areas could enhance access to and utilization of services, ultimately supporting the broader goals of decriminalization.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.