Patterns of Medication and Healthcare Use among People Who Died of an Opioid-Related Toxicity During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ontario

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant rise in accidental/unintentional opioid-related deaths. Understanding patterns of medication and healthcare use among people who died of an opioid-related toxicity during the pandemic can help identify opportunities for support and prevention.

**Demographics**
Rates of opioid-related death during the pandemic:

- **2X** increase among males
- **79%** increase in those aged 25-44
- **3X** higher in Northern Ontario compared to Southern regions of the province

**Opioid Involvement**
Deaths increasingly involving only non-pharmacological opioids from the unregulated drug supply

During the pandemic, only

- **1 in 10** deaths involved only pharmaceutical opioids
- **1 in 4** people had a recent opioid prescription prior to death
- **Almost half of these individuals were prescribed methadone**

**Other drug involvement**

- **3 in 5** opioid toxicity deaths had a stimulant as a direct contributor. These involved methamphetamine, cocaine, and phencyclidine.
- **44%** cocaine
- **27%** methamphetamines

**Recent healthcare encounters**
Health service use among people at risk of overdose is high, but declined during the pandemic

- **1 in 2** had a healthcare encounter in the 30 days prior to death
- **1 in 4** had a healthcare encounter in the 7 days prior to death
- **Specifically, in the prior 7 days:**
  - **13%** had an outpatient visit
  - **7%** had a primary care visit
  - **6%** had a hospital encounter
  - **78%** of these people had a(n) **opioid use disorder (OUD)**

There was a significant decrease in the number of people with previous outpatient visits related to psychotic disorders during the pandemic

- **89%** of people who had a mental health-related healthcare encounter (including OUD) in the past 5 years

**Timelines Studied**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Deaths in Toronto (March to December 2019)</th>
<th>Deaths in Ontario (March to December 2020)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>1,017 opioid related deaths</td>
<td>1,808 opioid related deaths</td>
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**Methadone**

- **55%** of people had been recently dispensed methadone
- **3X** higher in Northern Ontario compared to Southern regions of the province

**Fentanyl**

- **5%** increase in the detection of non-pharmacological benzodiazepines among opioid-related deaths during the pandemic

**Etolizolam**

- **29%** of these deaths

- **Available by prescription in Canada**

**Focused analysis:** People experiencing homelessness

The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on people experiencing homelessness

- **2X** increase in the number of deaths among people experiencing homelessness
- **121 to 293** deaths during the pandemic

- **1 in 4** had a prior healthcare encounter related to OUD
- **93%** had a mental health-related healthcare encounter

For more information: