Changing Circumstances Surrounding Opioid-Related Deaths in Ontario during the COVID-19 Pandemic


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Nearly 1 in 10 of these deaths occurred within shelters or supportive housing.

46% Benzodiazepines were detected in nearly half of opioid-related deaths during the pandemic, compared to only 30% before the pandemic.

Stimulants directly contributed to significantly more opioid-related deaths during the pandemic (58% vs. 50% before the pandemic).

Drugs Involved in Opioid-Related Deaths

Fentanyl directly contributed to 87% of opioid-related deaths during the pandemic, compared to 75% before the pandemic. The involvement of all other opioids, particularly methadone, hydromorphone, oxycodone, and morphine, did not increase during this time.

Benzodiazepines were detected in nearly half of opioid-related deaths during the pandemic, compared to only 30% before the pandemic. This was largely driven by a 10-fold increase in the detection of etizolam in opioid-related deaths, a benzodiazepine not approved for use in Canada.

Stimulants directly contributed to 58% of opioid-related deaths during the pandemic, compared to 50% before the pandemic.

Almost 1 in 6 opioid-related deaths during the pandemic occurred among people experiencing homelessness.

Deaths among People Experiencing Homelessness

There was a 79% increase in monthly opioid-related deaths in 2020, from 139 deaths in February 2020 to 249 deaths in December 2020.

73% of opioid-related deaths during the pandemic occurred when no one was present to intervene. This was similar to pre-pandemic trends.

1,109 opioid-related deaths during the pandemic occurred among people aged 25 to 44, representing an increase of 501 deaths compared to before the pandemic.

76% of opioid-related deaths during the pandemic occurred among men, rising from 71% of deaths during the pre-pandemic time period.

30% of opioid-related deaths among people employed during the pandemic occurred among those working in the construction industry. This was similar to pre-pandemic trends.

Rates of opioid-related death rose significantly in half of Ontario’s public health units during the pandemic. The highest rates of opioid-related death during the pandemic occurred in Sudbury and Districts, Porcupine, and Algoma public health units.

This may be due to lower availability of services in rural and remote regions, making it difficult to reach those at highest risk of overdose.

Physical distancing measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in reduced service levels for pharmacies, outpatient clinics, and harm reduction sites that provide care to people who use drugs. Consequently, despite the intention to reduce the impact of COVID-19, these measures also increased risks of drug-related overdose and death.

Note: This infographic compares circumstances of opioid-related deaths occurring pre-pandemic (March 16, 2019 – December 31, 2019) and during the pandemic (March 16, 2020 – December 31, 2020).

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Stimulants directly contributed to significantly more opioid-related deaths during the pandemic (58% vs. 50% before the pandemic).

This was largely driven by increases in the involvement of cocaine and methamphetamine in opioid-related deaths.

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58%

Deaths among People Experiencing Homelessness

Almost 1 in 6 opioid-related deaths during the pandemic occurred among people experiencing homelessness.

135 deaths during the pandemic

323 deaths during the pandemic

Opioid-related deaths among people experiencing homelessness increased by 139% during the pandemic.

96% of opioid-related deaths during the pandemic occurred among men, rising from 71% during the pre-pandemic time period.

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