While the majority of deaths continued to occur in large urban areas and private residences, during the pandemic:

- The public health unit regions reporting the greatest increases in the number of opioid-related deaths were:
  - Toronto Public Health
  - Peel Public Health
  - City of Hamilton Public Health Services

The Opioid Overdose Crisis
Opioid-related deaths across Canada have been an ongoing public health crisis for over a decade. Between January and March 2020 alone, 1,018 opioid-related deaths were recorded in Canada, the majority of which were accidental.

The COVID-19 Pandemic
A state of emergency was declared in Ontario on March 17, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequent physical distancing measures resulted in reduced capacity for pharmacies and harm reduction sites, and may have led to social isolation, lack of access to a regular drug supply, and disruptions in care that increased risks of drug-related overdose and death.

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

Demographics

- An average of 34 deaths per week occurred in Ontario during the 3.5 months before the pandemic.
- This increased to 46 deaths weekly in the first 3.5 months of the pandemic, a 38% increase.
- If current trends continue, 2,271 opioid-related deaths are expected in 2020, compared to 1,512 in 2019.

- The largest increases in deaths occurred among people aged 25 - 44 and 45 - 64 years.
- The proportion of opioid-related deaths among men increased from pre-pandemic to during the pandemic.

Drugs Involved

- Fentanyl was more commonly a direct contributor to opioid-related deaths.
- Etizolam was more commonly detected in post-mortem toxicology.
- Cocaine directly contributed to significantly more opioid-related deaths.

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Location

- More opioid-related deaths occurred in Public Indoor Spaces.
- Fewer opioid-related deaths occurred in Public Indoor Spaces.

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