

TO END A CRISIS: VISION FOR BC DRUG POLICY

Executive Summary

To End a Crisis: Vision for BC Drug Policy is not just a drug policy platform - it is a call to action. This Vision was developed over several months by a provincial working group of civil society organizations and people who use drugs. We came together to outline a clear path forward – one beyond the unregulated drug crisis that is now the direct cause of thousands of fatalities every year. We offer this Vision of a future where all people, regardless of whether they use drugs, can access safety, autonomy and well-being.

The unregulated drug supply led to at least 2,511 deaths in BC in 2023. Overdose is now the leading cause of death in BC for people aged 10 to 59. Each of these deaths was preventable. The government's failure to meaningfully intervene in the unregulated drug crisis, and its use of criminal-legal or medical approaches, has roots in the founding of Canada as a nation state. The earliest attempts at prohibition on these lands date back to the *Indian Act*, the Opium wars, and an early 20th century rise in anti-Chinese and anti-Japanese racism. Despite superficial reforms, drug policies in B.C. and across Canada continue to be steeped in and reproduce these harmful structures.

An overwhelming body of evidence demonstrates that prohibition, the foundation from which current drug policy is born, increases social inequalities. Specifically, Indigenous, Black and racialized, disabled, and poor and working-class communities are subjected to discretionary policing practices, discrimination within the housing, education, and employment sectors, and family separation under the guise of preventing and monitoring drug-related activities. Prohibitionist policies are linked to negative mental and physical health outcomes. They are also proven to decrease public safety, yet the enforcement of prohibition continues to monopolize vast public resources while exacerbating the unpredictability and volatility of the unregulated drug supply. At the same time, issues such as lack of housing, limited medical care, and settler-colonial violence go unaddressed.

This Vision builds on the knowledge generated through decades of drug user organizing and activism, contextualized within a substantial body of evidence to meet the demands of the current moment.

This Vision is deeply needed now and as we look ahead. We have chosen to release it at this time in response to escalating anti-drug user stigma from all sides of the political aisle. We reject the disinformation being propagated by those who hold political power and who profit from the unrelenting harm that existing drug policy enacts upon our communities.

We envision nothing short of a sea change. Our lives, wellbeing and the strength of our communities as a whole depend on it.

Our recommendations address four related areas of drug policy for immediate and significant reform: **Drug regulation; Decriminalization; Addressing substantive equality in drug policy reform,** and **Detox, recovery and treatment.**

- **Drug regulation** creates safer, mutually supportive environments for people who use drugs regardless of their drug use patterns while directly addressing the key cause of overdose – the illegal and unregulated drug supply.
- **Decriminalization** emphasizes the need to fully decouple policing from substance use. This will allow people who use drugs to seek formal and community-based support without fear of criminal sanctions and allow our communities to re-focus on fostering health, safety, and wellness for all people.
- **Addressing substantive equality in drug policy reform** is essential to addressing the root social issues that perpetuate cycles of poverty, homelessness, family separation, and social exclusion for people who use drugs.
- **Detox, recovery and treatment** can be an essential part of many people’s journey when chosen voluntarily. We seek to ensure that people who wish to change their drug use patterns will have access to programs and services that are grounded in contemporary evidence. We also seek to reduce the risk of exacerbating the trauma, isolation, and death associated with B.C.’s current unregulated treatment landscape.

Each of the Vision's recommendations have been inspired by three guiding principles: **autonomy, choice, and compassion**. It is from those principles that the authors have grounded the recommendations in the following understandings:

- Drug use is morally neutral
- Many harms that are commonly attributed to drug use are derived from prohibitionist drug policy environments
- Types of personal drug use vary greatly
- Medical institutions can create harms that parallel those of the criminal justice and legal systems
- Policing and criminalization have no place in drug policy
- Policy responses to drug use must be grounded in contemporary best practices and empirical evidence
- Government spending on drug-related policies must be transparent, traceable, and accompanied by publicly available outcome evaluations
- People who use drugs are best suited to describe their needs and must be meaningfully foregrounded at every stage of policy development, implementation, and evaluation

This Vision is a living document. It has been developed through a process of consensus-based decision making that will continue to evolve, and the principles that guide it are as central to our collective path forward as the policy recommendations themselves. We offer it as a tool for building our coalition across sectors, and we encourage you to contact members of the working group to collaboratively expand or refine sections of the platform to reflect our full breadth of experiences.

Drug policies impact everyone. They can define how we move forward collectively in our communities and how we administer scarce health, social and public safety resources as we fight for something better. Moving from broken policy towards a vision grounded in **autonomy, choice, and compassion** is not only essential; it is an act of love and care for all.

We invite you to join us.

