

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



## 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**.

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**

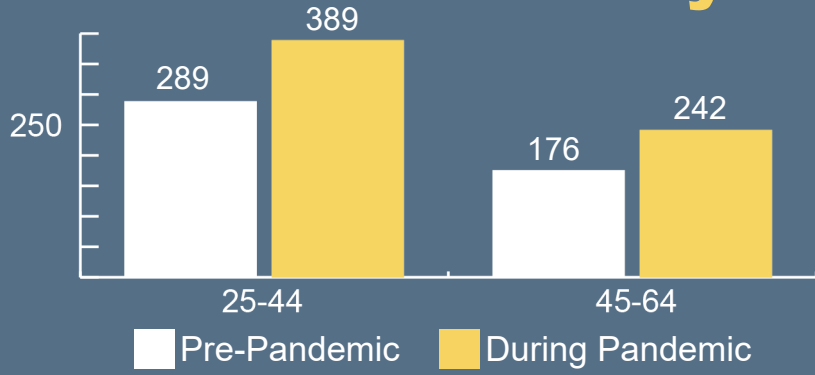
If current trends continue, **2,271** opioid-related deaths are expected in 2020, **compared to 1,512 in 2019**



The vast majority of these deaths continue to be **accidental**

## Demographics

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



An emerging trend during the pandemic is greater opioid-related deaths in neighbourhoods with higher



Before and during the pandemic, opioid-related deaths occurred more often in neighbourhoods with the highest



## Drugs Involved

Compared to before the pandemic:

### Fentanyl

was more commonly a **direct contributor** to opioid-related deaths

This may be due to:



Increased reliance on **Unregulated drug supplies**



Decreased access to **prescription opioids**

### Etizolam

was more commonly **detected in a post-mortem toxicology**

### Cocaine

**directly contributed to** significantly more opioid-related deaths

## Alone

In 3/4 of opioid-related deaths during the pandemic, **no one was present to intervene**



During the pandemic, there were fewer **resuscitation attempts** and less **naloxone administration** compared to before the pandemic

## Location

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

**Fewer** opioid-related deaths occurred in



Public Indoor Spaces

**More** opioid-related deaths occurred in



Outdoor Spaces



Hotels, Inns, and Motels

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**

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Ontario Drug Policy Research Network; Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario/Ontario Forensic Pathology Service; Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario); Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation. Preliminary Patterns in Circumstances Surrounding Opioid-Related Deaths in Ontario during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Toronto, ON: Ontario Drug Policy Research Network; 2020.



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