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

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.

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

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.

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.

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

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1 in 7 of these deaths occurred within hotels providing emergency shelter services.

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

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).

Drugs Involved in Opioid-Related Deaths

Fentanyl directly contributed to 87% of opioid-related deaths during the pandemic, compared to 75% before the pandemic.

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).

Deaths among People Experiencing Homelessness

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

1 in 7 of these deaths occurred within hotels providing emergency shelter services.

Location of Opioid-Related Deaths in Ontario

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.

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