

Opioid-related toxicity deaths within Ontario shelters: Key learnings for harm reduction and shelter workers

A report from the Ontario Drug Policy Research Network and Public Health Ontario used provincial health data to look at deaths caused by opioid toxicities (overdoses) in shelter settings in Ontario. The report reviewed data from 2018 to 2022, including periods before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which had wide-ranging impacts on people without stable housing and who use drugs.

This is a summary of key findings and considerations for frontline harm reduction and shelter workers.

Key findings on opioid toxicities in shelters:

- Opioid toxicity deaths in shelters increased three-fold during the pandemic. This was greater than overall opioid toxicity deaths trends in Ontario.
- Only one in seven opioid toxicity deaths in shelters occurred in the presence of someone who could intervene. This indicates that most deaths occurred when people used drugs alone.
- The involvement of stimulants and benzodiazepines increased in opioid-related deaths in shelters during the pandemic. This was consistent with overall trends for opioid toxicity deaths in Ontario.
- Over half of opioid toxicity deaths in shelters involved smoking or inhalation of drugs (in some cases combined with injection).

Considerations to address drug toxicities in shelters:

- Implement a harm reduction approach in shelters that does not punish or deny services to people who use drugs. Abstinence-based approaches encourage concealed drug use, increasing the risk of death.
- Provide overdose response and naloxone training to all shelter staff, including temporary or casual workers, including support for trauma and grief. Offer overdose response training on-site for shelter residents.
- Ensure all shelter staff and residents have easy access to naloxone during all shelter operating hours (including overnight).
- Where possible, have trained shelter staff available to administer oxygen to reverse an overdose.
- Establish clear harm reduction protocols in shelters, including designated spaces to use drugs (including inhaling or smoking), bathroom safety protocols and overdose response protocols for areas both inside and outside of the shelter.
- Promote messaging for safer drug use in shelters that is non-stigmatizing, including:
 - Carry naloxone and know how to use it.
 - Avoid using alone or use a spotting service (e.g., [National Overdose Response Service](#)).
 - Start slowly with low doses.
 - Use a drug-checking service, if available.
- Create partnerships between shelters and community harm reduction organizations for in-reach services, including education/training (for both staff and residents), distribution of naloxone and harm reduction equipment, and peer spotting services.

Read the full report and infographic at:

[ODPRN.ca/research/publications/opioid-related-toxicity-deaths-within-ontario-shelters](https://odprn.ca/research/publications/opioid-related-toxicity-deaths-within-ontario-shelters)