

Topic	Findings from the 2022 Harm Reduction Client Survey: Patterns of Purchasing and Possession of Drugs
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Data source	2022 Harm Reduction Client Survey
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Key messages

- Most individuals reported buying drugs for personal use in the past 30 days. Half of the participants bought drugs only for themselves while half also bought for others.
- The median frequency of survey respondents getting opioids (i.e. ‘down’, heroin, or fentanyl) and methamphetamine was once per day; lower frequencies were reported for powder cocaine and crack cocaine.
- While most respondents obtained less than 2.5g of a drug at a time, over 70% of respondents obtained more than one type of drug in the last 30 days. People who regularly get more than one kind of drug may easily go over the cumulative 2.5g threshold allowed in the exemption to the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act*.
- When cumulative one-day drug supplies were calculated, approximately one-third of individuals obtained amounts that exceeded 2.5g over the course of an entire day. Therefore, for many individuals who use drugs every day, their daily purchasing amount may also exceed 2.5g, even if they only use one drug.
- People who have lived and living experience of drug use shared that money, the need to travel, and having a safe place to store drugs are some of the important factors in deciding how much drug to obtain.
- As this is a specific population being surveyed, we cannot generalize these findings to the general population of people who use drugs more broadly in British Columbia. However, surveys from this sample of individuals who access harm reduction supplies still provide information from an important population that faces structural marginalization.

Introduction

Study Objective: Determine individuals' patterns of purchasing and possessing drugs before the temporary exemption to the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* came into effect on January 31, 2023.

- The exemption to the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* allows for personal possession of up to 2.5 cumulative grams of opioids, methamphetamine, powder cocaine, crack cocaine, and MDMA in British Columbia.
- The 2022 Harm Reduction Client Survey (HRCS) collected baseline information about pre-decriminalization patterns of purchasing and possession of drugs.
- For results from other decriminalization-related analyses, please see the 2022 section of the Harm Reduction Client Survey website, or the Decriminalization section of the Harm Reduction Reports website.

Study Design and Methods

- The 2022 HRCS was administered at 29 harm reduction sites in BC among adults who reported use of unregulated substances, opioid agonist treatment (OAT), or prescribed safer supply (PSS) in the last 6 months. Data were self-reported and cross-sectional, and collected between November 2022 and mid-January 2023. Participants received a \$15 honorarium for completing the survey. The total sample for the 2022 HRCS was 503 participants. Please see the Appendix for an overview of the Harm Reduction Client Survey methodology.
- Questions in this study include:
 - How do you usually get your drugs (buy/trade/gifted/other)?
 - Do you usually buy only for yourself, for others, or for yourself and others?
 - How often do you travel to buy drugs?
 - For each drug (opioids [i.e. 'down', heroin, or fentanyl], methamphetamine, crack cocaine, powder cocaine, and MDMA), how often did you get it and how much did you usually get?
 - For individuals who reported acquiring drugs daily, what was the total quantity of drug obtained on a typical day?
 - Do you have a spot where you can stash your drugs at the place where you currently live?

Findings

- Over 90% of respondents bought drugs for personal use, while 40% said others gave them drugs, and 27% traded services for goods (Table 1; respondents could select more than one option). Trading goods and services for drugs was more common in rural areas and smaller communities.
- Half of respondents bought drugs only for themselves (47%) and half bought for others (47%), which was consistent across most respondent characteristics (Table 2).
- Only 16% stated that they travelled outside their community to buy drugs, with 60% doing so less than once a day; however, more than a quarter of respondents did not answer this question (Table 3).
- Half of the people who obtained opioids or methamphetamine did so at least once a day (28 times per month), compared with at least four times a week (16 times per month) for people who obtained crack cocaine, and two times a week (eight times a month) for people who obtained powder cocaine (Table 4).
- For each drug, people acquired a median quantity of one gram or less per transaction (Table 5).
- Most people obtained less than 2.5g per drug each time they obtained that drug, no matter how often they obtained it (Figures 1-4). Three-quarters of respondents (73-79% depending on the drug) also obtained more than one drug in the previous 30 days (Table 5).
- For individuals who obtained drugs daily, approximately one in three obtained a cumulative one-day supply of more than 2.5g (Figure 5).
- Less than half of participants reported having a place to safely stash their drugs (Table 6). Availability of a place to stash drugs varied by respondent characteristics, such as health authority of survey site and age group.

Interpretation

- There are many different ways to obtain drugs and varying preferences on purchase quantity. While many individuals obtained drug amounts under 2.5g per transaction, this does not necessarily align with how much an individual may need to use over the course of an entire day, nor does it indicate how much an individual may end up holding at one time.
- Given that the majority of the individuals surveyed use more than one substance, these individuals may exceed the cumulative 2.5g threshold allowed in the exemption to the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* even if they hold less than 2.5g per drug.

- Post-survey consultations with people who have lived and living experience of substance use shared that the decision to buy small or large quantities of drug is informed by a number of factors:
 - If people buy small amounts, it may have been all they could afford, the dealer only had small amounts, they did not want to be caught with large amounts, or they had feelings of stigma or shame about substance use.
 - If people buy larger quantities, it may be because they had the money to take advantage of better pricing, they wanted to share with others, they knew they could get something they wanted, they had to travel for it, or because they had a safe place to stash it.
- Without a secure place to stash drugs, people may need to carry their drugs with them, which can increase their potential for interaction with law enforcement while in possession of drugs.
- Future cycles of the survey will collect similar information post-decriminalization to monitor impacts of this policy. The 2023 cycle will collect information on how much respondents consume in an average day to provide further insight into how actual patterns of substance use relate to the cumulative possession limit.

Limitations

- There was limited information on people who use MDMA.
- The HRCS uses convenience sampling. Therefore, it is not representative of all people who use drugs in BC.
- Since self-reported data is used, biases such as recall bias and response bias may be present.
- Use caution interpreting results around “travelling outside the city or town where you live”. Respondents may have had different definitions of travelling outside one’s community, and the distance between communities varies between urban, rural, and remote parts of British Columbia.
- The estimate of cumulative amount of drug purchased daily may over- or underestimate people’s actual purchasing behaviours. Furthermore, total daily purchasing is not the same as amount held at once, or the amount consumed in a day.

Supporting Information

Acknowledgements

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Document citation

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Tables and Figures

Table 1. Usual way of getting drugs (excluding tobacco, cannabis, and alcohol)

	Responses to this question	Buy drugs n (%)	Trade services n (%)	People give them to me n (%)
Total	478	435 (91%)	130 (27%)	190 (40%)
HA of survey				
Interior	130	121 (93%)	38 (29%)	48 (37%)
Fraser	98	88 (90%)	18 (18%)	40 (41%)
Vancouver Coastal	48	45 (94%)	10 (21%)	19 (40%)
Island	100	92 (92%)	33 (33%)	35 (35%)
Northern	102	89 (87%)	31 (30%)	48 (47%)
Community Size				
Small population centre	166	150 (90%)	49 (30%)	63 (38%)
Medium population centre	154	140 (91%)	45 (29%)	76 (49%)
Large urban centre	158	145 (92%)	36 (23%)	51 (32%)
Concerned about losing housing in the last 6 months				
No	181	166 (92%)	38 (21%)	63 (35%)
Yes	262	243 (93%)	83 (32%)	111 (42%)
Age group				
19 - 29	70	60 (86%)	17 (24%)	31 (44%)
30 - 39	152	144 (95%)	61 (40%)	66 (43%)
40 - 49	125	116 (93%)	37 (30%)	47 (38%)
50 or older	121	108 (89%)	12 (10%)	39 (32%)
Sex/Gender†				
Cis woman	173	152 (88%)	51 (30%)	84 (49%)

	Responses to this question	Buy drugs n (%)	Trade services n (%)	People give them to me n (%)
Cis man	275	257 (94%)	71 (26%)	93 (34%)

†Only categories not below the suppression threshold are shown.

Table 2. In the past month, who did you usually buy drugs for

	Bought drugs for personal use [^]	Only for myself	For myself and other(s)
Total	424	200 (47%)	201 (47%)
HA of survey			
Interior	119	50 (42%)	60 (50%)
Fraser	86	34 (40%)	45 (52%)
Vancouver Coastal	38	20 (53%)	16 (42%)
Island	96	49 (51%)	45 (47%)
Northern	85	47 (55%)	35 (41%)
Community Size			
Small population centre	142	70 (49%)	67 (47%)
Medium population centre	136	56 (41%)	67 (49%)
Large urban centre	146	74 (51%)	67 (46%)
Concerned about losing housing in the last 6 months			
No	157	82 (52%)	68 (43%)
Yes	237	106 (45%)	123 (52%)
Age group			
19 - 29	61	26 (43%)	31 (51%)
30 - 39	140	71 (51%)	62 (44%)
40 - 49	108	46 (43%)	56 (52%)
50 or older	106	55 (52%)	47 (44%)

	Bought drugs for personal use [^]	Only for myself	For myself and other(s)
Sex/Gender [†]			
Cis woman	151	59 (39%)	85 (56%)
Cis man	246	129 (52%)	105 (43%)

[^]Only one respondent stated they only buy drugs for others; this response has been excluded from this table.

[†]Only categories not below the suppression threshold are shown.

Percentages do not add up to 100% as there were individuals who did not respond to this question; those responses are not shown.

Table 3. Travel outside your city/town to buy drugs for personal use in the last 30 days

	Bought drugs for personal use	Did not travel n (%)	Did travel n (%)	Did not answer n (%)	Prefer not to say (%)
Total	424	243 (57%)	68 (16%)	29 (7%)	84 (20%)
HA of survey					
Interior	119	59 (50%)	20 (17%)	10 (8%)	30 (25%)
Fraser	86	49 (57%)	19 (22%)	6 (7%)	12 (14%)
Vancouver Coastal	38	17 (45%)	9 (24%)	4 (11%)	8 (21%)
Island	96	61 (64%)	11 (12%)	6 (6%)	18 (19%)
Northern	85	57 (67%)	9 (11%)	3 (4%)	16 (19%)
Community Size					
Small population centre	142	85 (60%)	22 (16%)	10 (7%)	25 (18%)
Medium population centre	136	85 (63%)	14 (10%)	8 (6%)	29 (21%)
Large urban centre	146	73 (50%)	32 (22%)	11 (8%)	30 (21%)
Concerned about losing housing in the last 6 months					

	Bought drugs for personal use	Did not travel n (%)	Did travel n (%)	Did not answer n (%)	Prefer not to say (%)
No	157	90 (57%)	26 (17%)	13 (8%)	28 (18%)
Yes	237	141 (60%)	35 (15%)	14 (6%)	47 (20%)

Table 4. Frequency of getting drugs[^] for personal use in the past 30 days, by type of drug

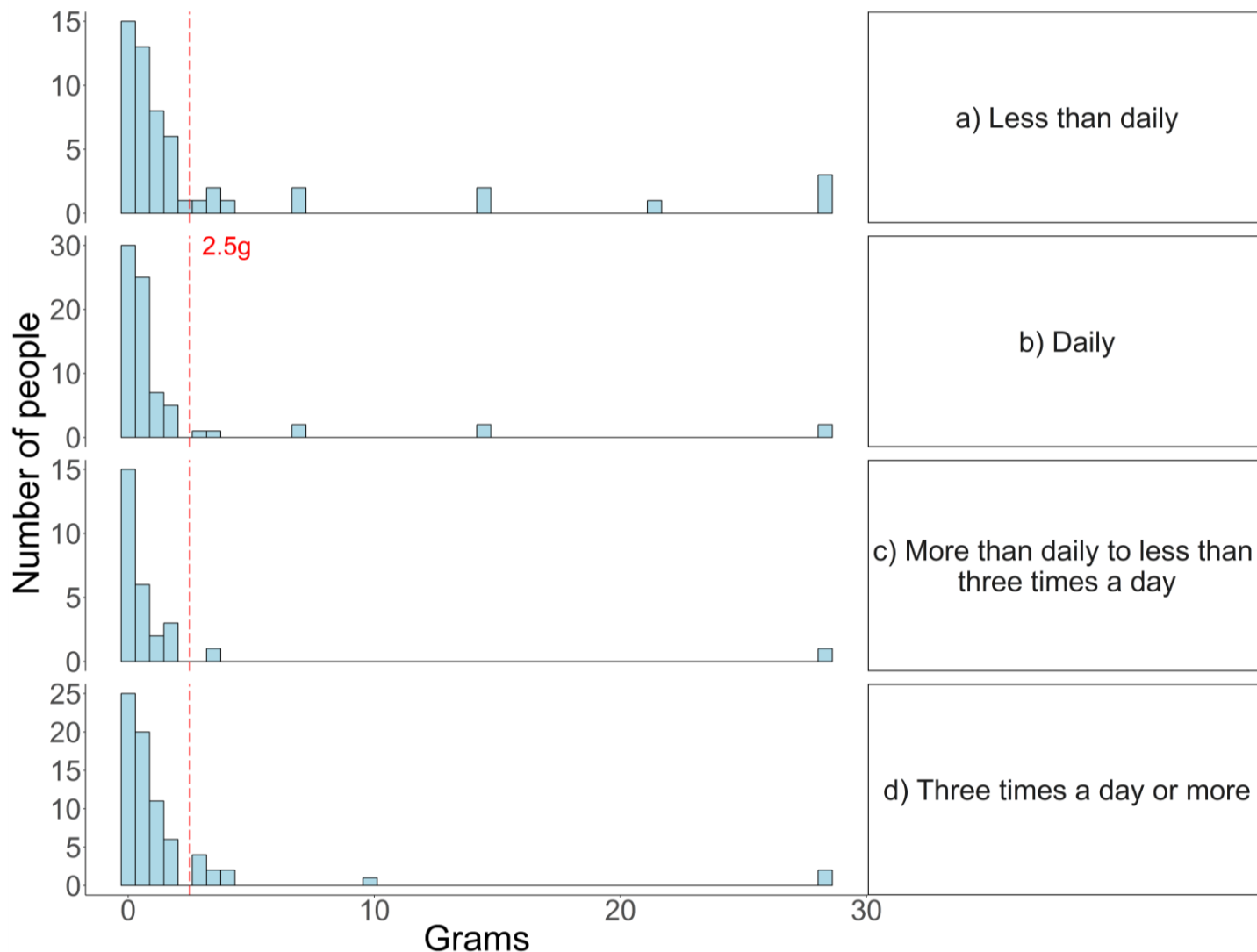
	Number who responded	Times per month Median (min, max)
Opioids	280	28 (2, 280)
Methamphetamine	279	28 (1, 196)
Crack cocaine	119	16 (1, 400)
Powder cocaine	60	8 (0.08, 140)

[^]Note: Respondents who indicated they acquired a particular drug 0 times per month are excluded from that specific drug type row in Table 4.

Table 5. Usual quantity of drugs for personal use in the past 30 days, by type

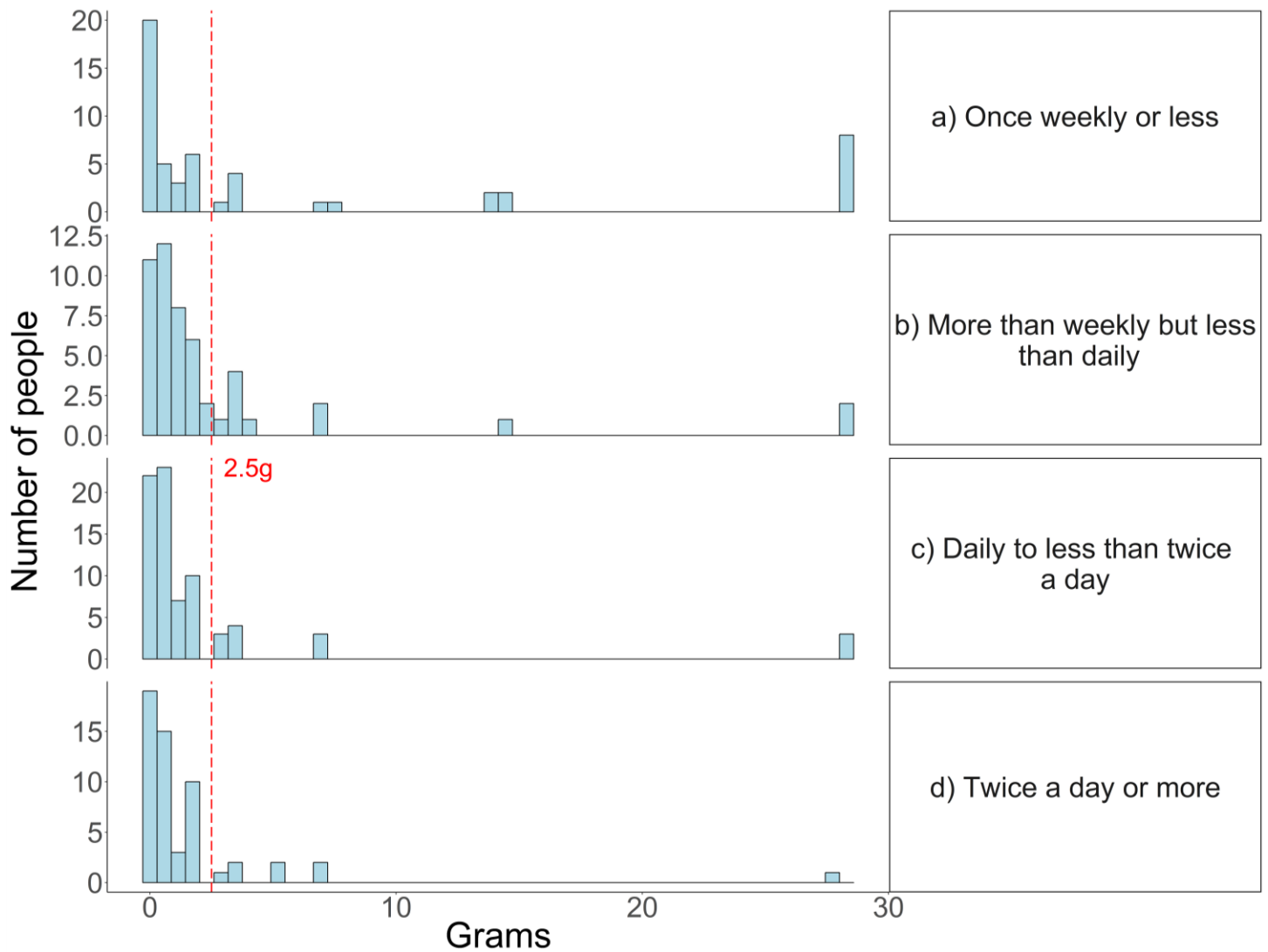
	Number who responded	Usual quantity per transaction, in grams Median (min, max)	Obtained at least one other substance n (%)
Opioids	233	0.3 (0.03, 85.1)	170 (73%)
Methamphetamine	236	0.5 (0.05, 56.7)	174 (74%)
Crack cocaine	86	1 (0.2, 56.7)	38 (79%)
Powder cocaine	48	1 (0.1, 28)	67 (78%)

Figure 1. Histogram of usual quantity of opioids for personal use in the last 30 days, stratified by frequency of getting drugs (n=231)^



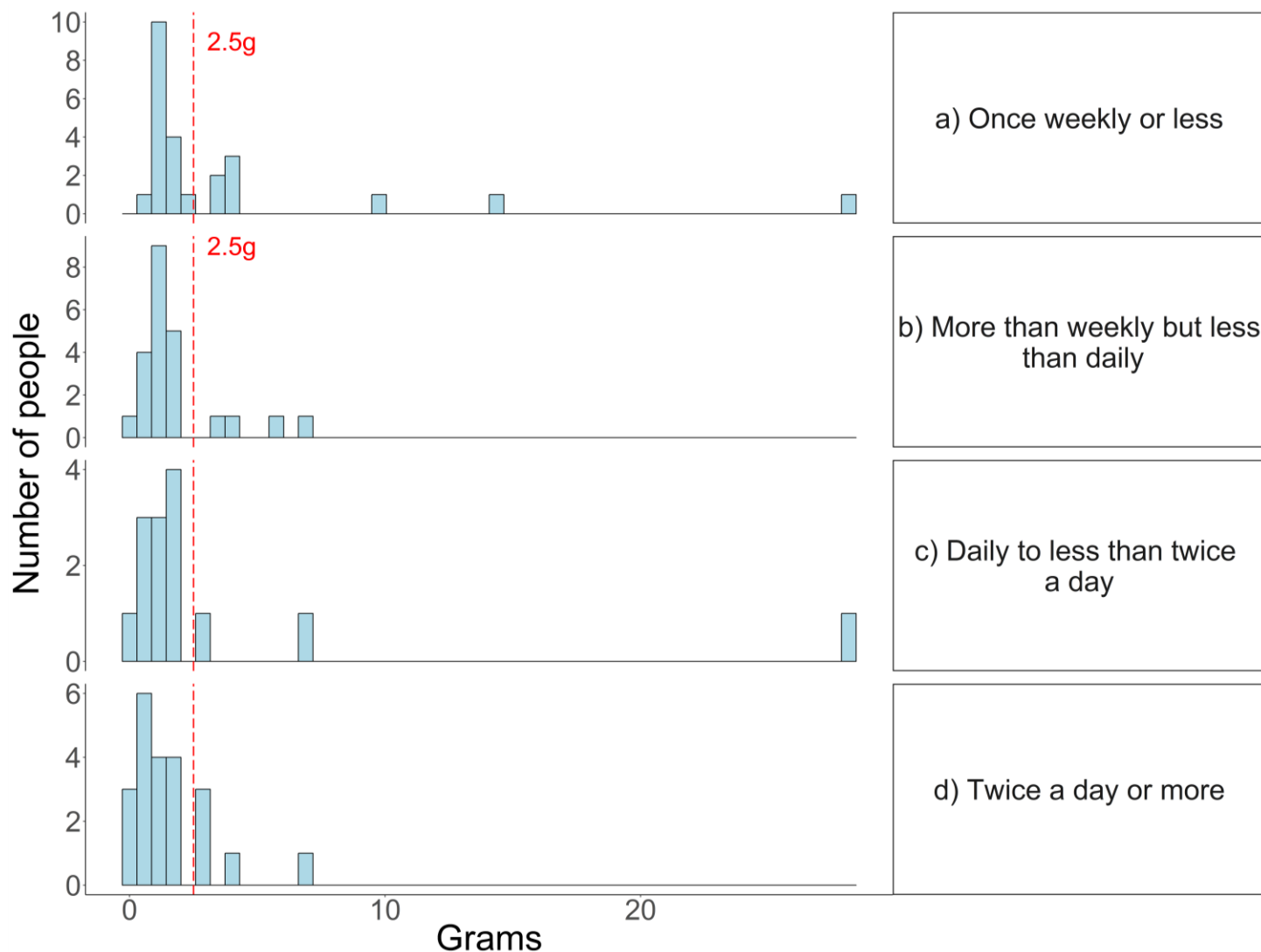
^Only values up to 28.35g (one ounce) are shown for ease of readability. For the full graph, please see the corresponding public report.

Figure 2. Histogram of usual quantity of methamphetamine for personal use in the last 30 days, stratified by frequency of getting drugs (n=233)^



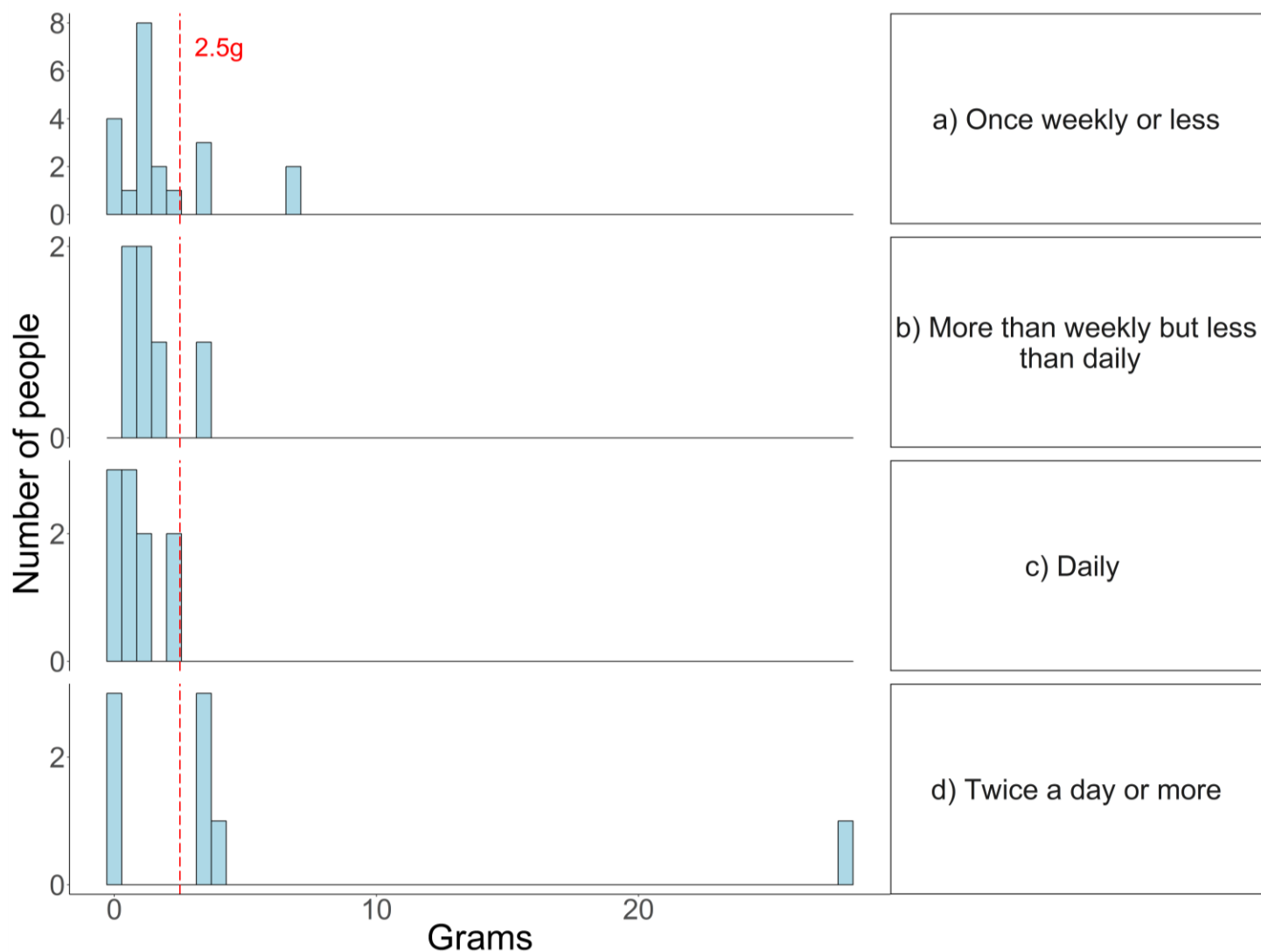
^Only values up to 28.35g (one ounce) are shown for ease of readability. For the full graph, please see the corresponding public report.

Figure 3. Histogram of usual quantity of crack cocaine for personal use in the last 30 days, stratified by frequency of getting drugs (n=83)^



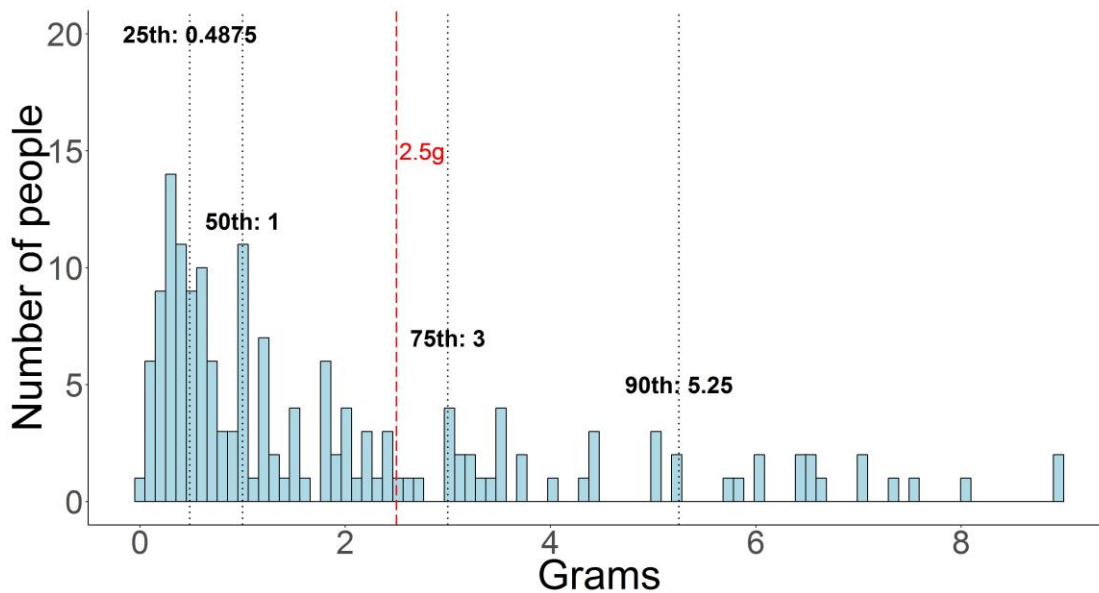
^Only values up to 28.35g (one ounce) are shown for ease of readability. For the full graph, please see the corresponding public report.

Figure 4. Histogram of usual quantity of powder cocaine for personal use in the last 30 days, stratified by frequency of getting drugs (n=45)^



^ Only values up to 28.35g (one ounce) are shown for ease of readability. For the full graph, please see the corresponding public report.

Figure 5. Histogram of cumulative one-day supply for people who use drugs daily (n=164). Percentile scores show the 25th, 50th, 75th, and 90th percentiles ^



^In consultation with people with lived experience, we developed criteria for what data to include and exclude in the daily drug purchasing analyses (Figure 5).

We included:

- People who obtained drugs at least once a day.
- The total (cumulative) amount of drugs that were purchased every day.

We excluded:

- Cumulative daily totals greater than 10g.
- People who used drugs every day that did not obtain drugs every day.
- Drugs that were not purchased every day. For example, if a respondent purchased 1g of down every day and 2g of powder cocaine once a week, we only included the information about purchasing down.

The estimate of cumulative amount of drug purchased daily may over- or underestimate people’s actual purchasing behaviours. Furthermore, total daily purchasing is not necessarily the same as amount held at once or the amount consumed in a day. While we asked respondents to tell us about drugs purchased for personal use, people may have reported larger quantities that they split or shared with others, or that they sold to others; this could result in an overestimate of total quantity. People may have underreported the quantity of drug or frequency of purchase for personal use, resulting in an underestimate of total quantity.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this analysis demonstrates the need to understand how the quantity of drugs people obtain and use compares to the cumulative 2.5g threshold.

Table 6. Do you have a stash spot where you currently live

	Responded to question	% Yes n (%)
Total	482	224 (47%)
HA of survey		
Interior	132	66 (50%)
Fraser	98	42 (43%)
Vancouver Coastal	49	26 (53%)
Island	103	55 (53%)
Northern	100	35 (35%)
Community Size		
Small population centre	168	76 (45%)
Medium population centre	153	55 (36%)
Large urban centre	161	93 (58%)
Concerned about losing housing in the last 6 months		
No	185	83 (45%)
Yes	264	131 (50%)
Age group		
19 - 29	73	37 (51%)
30 - 39	154	60 (39%)
40 - 49	121	58 (48%)
50 or older	124	64 (52%)
Sex/Gender		
Cis woman	175	91 (52%)
Cis man	276	117 (42%)

Appendix

Methodology for the Harm Reduction Client Survey

- The survey explores sociodemographic, geographic, and substance use characteristics, Prescribed Safer Supply access and preferences, factors associated with implementation of decriminalization, experiences with overdose, and interactions with police.
- Quantitative survey distributed at 29 harm reduction distribution sites in small, medium, and large population centres across the five regional health authorities (Interior: 7 sites, Fraser: 6 sites, Vancouver Coastal: 4 sites, Island: 6 sites, Northern: 6 sites)
- For responses to be included in the survey, participants must indicate that in the past six months they:
 - Are 19 years of age or older and
 - Used an illegal drug (other than cannabis, alcohol, or tobacco), took opioid agonist treatment (OAT), or took prescribed safer supply (PSS)
- Furthermore, responses were excluded after data collection if responses indicated participants:
 - did not use an illegal drugs in the last 30 days and
 - did not indicate receiving substitution treatment in the last six months and
 - did not have any opioid/stimulant substitution treatment preferences and
 - have not injected or smoked/inhaled (excluding tobacco and cannabis) any drug in the last six months
- Depending on the site, participants may complete the survey independently, or site staff may administer the survey
- Each site is allocated a specific number of surveys to complete
- Participants receive an honorarium for their time (\$15) and sites receive an honorarium for each participant (\$5)