How Many People in British Columbia Are At Risk From Unregulated Opioids?

BC Centre for Disease Control
Provincial Health Services Authority

Estimating the number of people at risk of experiencing harms from unregulated toxic opioids.

Since British Columbia (BC) declared a public health emergency in 2016 over the unregulated drug supply, over 17,000 people have died from drug poisoning. The BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) has built a mathematical model to estimate how many people in BC are at risk of harm from unregulated opioids. This information can help communities plan better services, make sure help is there when needed, and take action to prevent harm.

Using health data from June 2020 to 2023, the model estimates that in June 2023:

~191,000 people in BC were **at risk** of **experiencing harms** from toxic unregulated opioids

What harms are people at risk of experiencing?

- **Overdose** (drug poisoning)
- **Brain injury** if oxygen gets cut off during an overdose
- **Death** from a severe drug poisoning
- Becoming **dependent**, leading to cravings or withdrawal

About **3 in 4 people**

- Had no opioid use disorder diagnosis
- Didn't get medical care for their opioid use

Most people harmed by unregulated opioids don't have a diagnosed opioid use disorder

ANYONE CAN BE AT RISK

You can help someone at risk. Carry naloxone.

- Get training on how to use naloxone. Know the SAVE ME steps.
  - Get trained online with Naloxone 101 through towardtheheart.com
- Pick up naloxone:
  - Individuals can get naloxone at a community health centre or pharmacy.
  - Eligible non-profits can get it through the Facility Overdose Response Box program from the BCCDC.
- Check in with your friends and listen without judgement.

Last update: January 2026

Questions and answers about this work

These estimates are based on data from 2020 to 2023. Are they still useful today?

Yes - the unregulated drug supply in BC is still toxic and unpredictable. While drug poisoning deaths have gone down in 2024 and 2025, people who use unregulated substance are still at risk of being seriously harmed or dying.

How did the model estimate the number of people at risk of experiencing harms from opioids?

The model used data from many sources including surveys, health records, and other published research. Health records came from sources like Medical Services Plan, National Ambulatory Care Reporting System, Discharge Abstract Database, BC Emergency Health Services Patient Care Records, BC Coroners Service, and BC Vital Statistics. The surveys used include the BCCDC Harm Reduction Client Survey, BC SPEAK, Health Canada's Canadian Alcohol and Drugs Survey (2019) and Canadian Substance Use Survey (2023).

The model estimated the number of people at risk in 3 groups: people diagnosed with an opioid use disorder (OUD), people who don't have an OUD but used health care for an opioid-related reason, and people who use opioids but didn't use health care for this reason.

How did you identify people diagnosed with an opioid use disorder (OUD)?

We identified people diagnosed with an OUD using information from primary care visits, hospital records, and prescription data. This approach counts people whose opioid use has affected their lives and got medical help for it. It does not include people who meet the criteria for OUD diagnosis but did not get medical care for it.

Are all 191,000 people at the same risk of experiencing harms from unregulated opioids?

No, some people are at higher risk than others. People who use opioids often may be at greater risk because they use more of it at a time and more often. People who use only once in a while are at high risk each time they use because their bodies aren't used to opioids.

Do you account for possible biases in the data?

Yes, the models accounts for possible biases in the data, such as:
- Information that was recorded incorrectly or collected with errors
- People from outside of BC included in the data
- People whose identity could not be confirmed

Does this model include Indigenous Peoples and people living in rural and remote communities?

Most of the data in the model include people from all areas of BC. However, the results are not broken down by Indigeneity, so they do not reflect the experiences of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples or communities. People living on reserves or in institutions full-time were not included in the 2019 Canadian Alcohol and Drugs Survey.

Next Steps

BCCDC is preparing a manuscript for a peer-reviewed journal. We are expanding the model to estimate people at risk of opioid-related harms by sex and age group, and to estimate how many people use stimulants, inject, or inhale (smoke) substances.

Any questions?   admininfo@bccdc.ca