

Update from Chief Coroner regarding deaths due to toxic illicit drugs

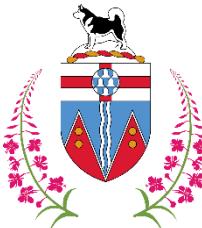
Yukon Coroner's Service (YCS) confirms that toxic illicit drugs have claimed the lives of 17 Yukoners since January 1, 2022. Strong evidence in three separate cases that are pending toxicological analysis suggest this number will increase. This follows the record-setting and catastrophic numbers seen in 2021, when 25 lives were lost over 12 months.

Deaths due to toxic illicit drugs represent 33% of all cases investigated to date by YCS in 2022.

Opioids in the form of fentanyl continue to be present in the majority of the fatalities. The Yukon has now recorded 71 opioid-related deaths since April of 2016. Each one of these deaths was preventable and our communities continue to struggle with the grief and pain associated with the loss of life from the substance use health crisis.

Within the 17 tragic deaths that have occurred in 2022 we see that:

- 14 of these deaths, or 82 per cent, occurred in Whitehorse;
- nine, or 53 per cent, were male and eight, or 47 per cent, were female;
- 12, or 71 per cent, were First Nation citizens and five or 29 per cent were non-First Nations citizens.
- ages ranged from 26-73, with the average age being 40;
- benzodiazapines, or “benzos” have been confirmed in six cases;
- cocaine and its use has been confirmed in 12 cases and;
- fentanyl has been involved in 14 cases



Yukon Coroner's Service

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The Yukon continues to lead the country with per capita toxic illicit drug related deaths, there are very few who have not been directly affected by this “crisis”. The Yukon took a positive step in acknowledging the devastation of these losses and taking action to make a difference by declaring a substance use health emergency in January of this year.

Since the Substance Use Health Emergency was declared earlier this year, the Safe Consumption Site in Whitehorse was renovated to support the use of inhalants, the most common method of substance use in the Yukon, and hours of operation were increased. Emergency medical services staff have also increased at 405 Alexander.

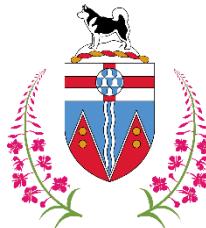
Additional staff and resources have also helped expand services through the Opioid Treatment Services Clinic. Providers can now prescribe safe supply and the Overdose Outreach Team recently launched. This team helps people who are at risk of overdose navigate the health system, access harm reduction education and connect with mental wellness and substance use services.

Almost 5,000 take-home naloxone kits have been distributed this year. Kits are easily accessible through emergency departments in Yukon’s hospitals, and both nasal and injectable naloxone kits are available across the Yukon at various health sites and through other system partners, like pharmacies. New Mobile Paramedic Specialists, who work closely with Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services and Blood Ties Four Directions, have been hired and will begin work early in September.

Quote:

Every life lost to illicit toxic drugs in the Yukon is a preventable tragedy. The Yukon continues to face on-going grief and heartbreak as these losses continue.

Earlier this summer B. C.’s bid for an exemption to remove penalties for possession (of limited amounts) of some hard drugs for personal use was granted. This encourages the shift of resources from a justice model to one that is health and social service based and acknowledges substance use to be a medical issue rather than increasing stigmatization through criminalization. As we have seen so often, this leaves many unable to access lifesaving supports and services, dying alone. YCS is encouraged by the Minister’s recent statement that Yukon is considering a similar move as was seen in B.C..



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In addition to decriminalization, YCS strongly advocates a means of providing access to a safe drug supply as we continue to see the impact of each lost life.

Chief Coroner Heather Jones

Contact

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