

Yukon Coroner's Service (YCS) reports that the tragic loss of lives due to drug overdoses continues to rise in the Yukon at an alarming rate. It is both heart breaking and staggering that as of November 26, 2021, YCS confirms **21** lost lives due to toxic illicit drug use since January 1st of this year, (with more currently under investigation). **All of these deaths involved opioids** in various formats of fentanyl and a large percentage also involved cocaine. Alcohol and benzodiazepines ("benzos") are also seen in some of these fatalities.

The Yukon, like most other Canadian jurisdictions, has suffered greatly under the strain of what has been deemed "the opioid crisis", which found its way to us in the Spring of 2016. Since that time and to date, **54** individuals in the Yukon have lost their lives to the **illicit use of opioids**. 85% of those total deaths have involved fentanyl. *(A further 10 individuals have died as the result of non-opioid drug overdoses during that time-period. **The Yukon has lost 64 lives to drug overdoses since Spring 2016**).*

Since the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, **32** drug-overdose deaths occurred in the Yukon. **29** of these involved opioids and all but one of these deaths were fentanyl related. During this time we have seen the drug supply become more and more toxic and unstable. 73% of these deaths have occurred since January of this year, with numbers tragically increasing over these past three months. We are on a frightening trajectory.

According to national data compiled from Chief Coroner and Chief Medical Examiner offices across the country, Canada currently (2021) has what is referred to as "a crude rate" (deaths per a population of 100,000) of **19.4** deaths due to opioids. Since this crisis began in 2016, British Columbia has consistently led the country with the highest "crude rate" for opioid deaths. Data indicates that the current "crude rate" in B.C. has sky-rocketed to **40.4** deaths. With the recent confirmed deaths in the **Yukon our "crude rate" has surpassed this to become the highest in the country with an astounding 48.4 deaths due to opioids per 100,000 people**. For this office, and most certainly all of us, this is shocking. Opioid deaths now represent over 20% of all deaths investigated by Yukon Coroner's Service from January 1 to November 26, 2021.

This must be seen as a medical crisis. These deaths for the most-part are people who are dying alone in their homes. And when Naloxone (a temporary antidote to the effects of opioid overdose) can be administered it appears that it is becoming less and less effective against the increasing toxicity of the drugs.

As these numbers continue to grow so too does the burden of grief and unimaginable losses felt throughout our Territory. These drugs are killing our children, our parents, our aunts and uncles, sisters, brothers, nieces and nephews, our grand children and yes, our grand-parents. We have seen, many times now, that no part of our society is unaffected. These deaths are occurring in young people barely out of their teens and to those well into their 70s. More and more Yukon families are being left with a devastating reality in the wake of these lost lives. We simply cannot continue to stigmatize those suffering addiction and drug use issues; those affected are friends, colleagues, neighbours – all loved contributors to all of our Yukon communities. Sadly, it is safe to say that most Yukoners do not have to look very far to find some connection to the devastating impact this crisis is having.

Yukon Coroner's Service is mandated to speak for the dead and bring to light messaging that can inspire us all to make a difference. The hope continues that we will all take the time to listen and really hear what these deaths are telling us; to be moved to turn and face this crisis head-on; to find the wisdom and compassion to support well thought-out initiatives and to embrace those struggling with substance use.

In these extraordinarily challenging times we need to dig deep to find that important element of kindness; to hold each other up. It is my belief and hope that when working together we can much better honour the voices heard through these deaths and work with greater strength towards making the necessary difference.

Yukon Coroner's Service continues to send deep condolences to the families and communities who have been so profoundly impacted by these 21 deaths.

Heather Jones  
Chief Coroner for the Yukon Territory

*November 29, 2021*