



## Purpose

To provide a brief review of background, operational guidelines and evidence regarding overdose prevention services, policing, and drug policy during a declared public emergency and recriminalization of drug use.

## Background

Supervised consumption sites (SCS) and overdose prevention sites (OPS) are evidence-based public health services designed to prevent toxic drug deaths, prevent transmission of infectious diseases, like HIV and Hepatitis C, and connect people to health services<sup>i</sup>. People are less likely to die if they use an SCS when compared to others with less frequent use<sup>ii</sup>. SCS's and OPS's provide a safer space for observed use, immediate response in the case of an overdose while connecting people to health and social services, and providing safer use supplies.

Overdose prevention services do not promote drug use—evidence shows they can improve public disorder and reduce public use<sup>iii</sup>. Yet, they are often blamed for causing or worsening public disorder and drug use. To state it clearly and simply, blaming overdose prevention services for these problems is an extension of drug related stigma that shames and further marginalizes those who use drugs. This, in turn, drives people away from services, leading to a worsening of the health and safety problems that the services were designed to address.

In Canada, supervised consumption sites (SCS) and by extension overdose prevention sites (OPS) are endorsed by Canadian Public Health Association, Canadian Medical Association, Canadian Nurses Association, HIV/AIDS Legal Network, Canadian Association of Family Physicians and others. These endorsements are based on the understanding that for health and safety, substance use should be treated as a public health issue rather than a moral or criminal issue and that connecting people to services can prevent harm and death.

SCS and OPS are key interventions to prevent overdose deaths during an ongoing and declared public health emergency in BC. An emergency that is taking the lives of about four British Columbian citizens a day<sup>iv</sup>. In Greater Victoria, the rate of unregulated drug deaths in 2025 was 37.1 per 100,000, higher than the provincial average of 32.0.

### **SCS/OPS Operational Guidelines and Law Enforcement:**

The BCCDC guidelines<sup>v</sup> for operation of overdose prevention sites provide explicit direction related to local law enforcement as follows:

*"Local Law Enforcement: Criminalization of drug use is inconsistent with the goals of OPS since OPS focuses on drug use as a health issue. The key is to ensure that people feel safe to access OPS and are not targeted or subjected to increased criminalization by police or security because of using services. This creates distrust and increases mortality by forcing people to use in hidden spaces and alone. Public order outside of OPS sites can be maintained without use of enforcement or increased security measures. Staff, particularly peer staff, should be seen as a priority in hiring as a means to provide optimal services delivery."*

Further, to assist with implementation, police are encouraged to take a supportive role by referring people to an OPS or SCS rather than focusing on arrests for possession<sup>vi</sup>. Encouraging people to use an OPS or SCS can have benefits for police in that it reduces public drug use. In contrast, criminalization can paradoxically contribute to open drug use, unintentional overdoses and bloodborne diseases through isolation, rushed and unsafe use.

Following the lack of renewal of the decriminalization pilot, the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, issued the following statement:

*"Decriminalization of small amounts of unregulated substances is coming to an end in BC, with the final day of the exemption being January 31, 2026. Despite the end of this exemption, enforcement against possession in health-focused spaces is not a policing priority. These sites provide life-saving services and an alternative to public consumption; police officers can continue to encourage their use for these purposes."*

Both these guidelines and statements provide clear direction for balancing policing and public health approaches to address drug related harms and unintentional toxic drug deaths.

## Policing, Stigma, and SCS/OPS: A Brief Summary of Research Evidence

### *SCS and OPS effectiveness is undermined by policing in the proximity of services.*

As noted above, there is considerable research establishing the effectiveness of OPS and SCS. However, this effectiveness is undermined by policing in the proximity of services. Numerous research studies in Canada and internationally have documented the negative impact of law enforcement on use of SCS<sup>vii</sup>. Police presence acts as a deterrent to care when there are fears and realities related to arrests, mistreatment, harassment, surveillance, and targeting. Trust and safety are critical to effective OPS operations<sup>viii</sup>. Trust between service providers and users, which is key to access, is violated when police or security target these services. The consequence is that people will avoid services, reducing access to safer spaces and safer use supplies. This can perpetuate using alone in more isolated spaces with increased risk of overdose death and disease transmission.

### *Policing presence can impede access to supplies contributing to higher risks of overdose and disease.*

For example, sharing of equipment can increase transmission of disease and when smoking supplies are shared there can be unintentional exposure to fentanyl for those who use other substances<sup>ix</sup>.

### *Community and structural stigma are barriers to implementing and sustaining SCS/OPS.*

Individual level stigma that moralizes and blames individuals is a barrier to accessing services. Community stigma (masked as community concerns) politicizes and blames services for issues like public drug use and disorder despite the evidence. This obscures the role of SCS/OPS in reducing and moving public drug use indoors, and negates their function as a critical touch point to link people to health and social services<sup>x</sup>. When this stigma becomes codified into restrictive zoning, laws and policies, it is known as structural stigma, reinforcing criminalization and restricting public health. Community and structural stigma are barriers to implementation and operation of SCS and OPS<sup>xi</sup>.

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**Suggested Citation:** Pauly, B., Wallace, B., and Urbanoski, K., (2026). Practice Brief: Policing, Overdose Prevention Services and Drug Policy. Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research. [https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/colab/policing-harm-reduction-services\\_brief.pdf](https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/colab/policing-harm-reduction-services_brief.pdf)

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