CHANGES IN THE UNREGULATED DRUG MARKET FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA (BC), CANADA

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Background

Within the last decade, the unregulated drug market in BC has undergone dramatic transformations, marked by a surge in overdose deaths and an evolving supply of highly potent synthetic opioids. Since the declaration of a public health emergency in 2016 in response to escalating overdose fatalities, BC continues to experience rapid shifts in the drug supply that create immense challenges for public health policy.

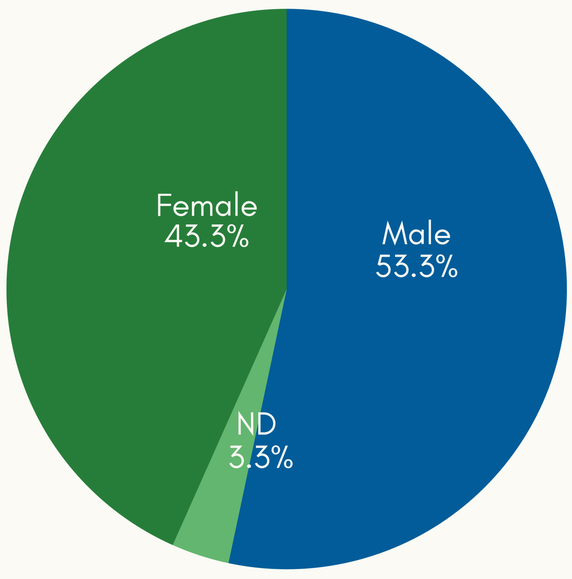
Purpose

1. Explore drug user knowledge related to key safety and danger signals in unregulated drug markets.
2. Identify policy and harm reduction recommendations to enhance safety for people accessing the unregulated drug supply.

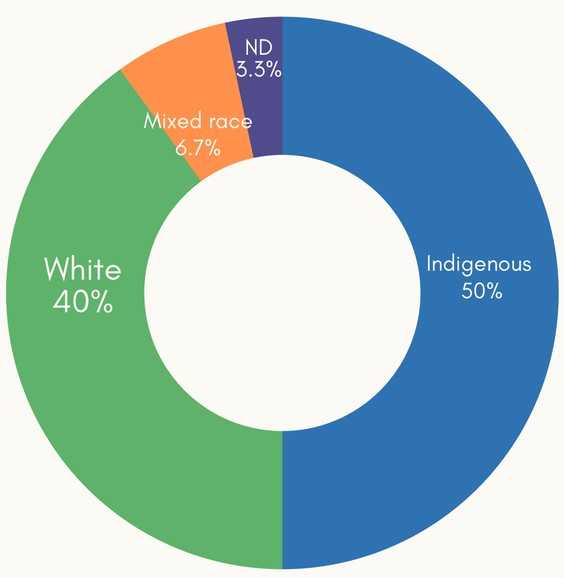
Methods and Participants

Qualitative interviews (n=30) with individuals across BC who had been de-prescribed from their safer supply medication.
Data was collected using the Consolidated Framework for Implementation (CFIR) and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic approach.

Gender



Racial Identity



Findings

Regional Volatility

"Coming from [city] to [city] it's a total shell shock. Because the product, the street supply here is totally different from [region in BC]" (142i)

Volatility in the local supply

"I live right downtown on [street] but I also work at [organization]. I would never buy anything downtown because it's all probably cut with benzos or xylazine or something like that suspect" (6250)

Harm reduction variability

"But drug checking doesn't translate well into communities because we don't have FTRI machines in every community. By the time samples are tested is too late" (HPP07)

Consistent Source

"I work really hard to find a safe supply and a steady supply. It's someone who provides the same stuff at the same toxicity and a stable dose. That to me is safe" (4034)

Safe Spaces

"Being housed helps with that. I'm never using in a situation where I feel like stressed out or I need to do it right now in the street, which is I think when people get into trouble" (6250)

Drug Checking

"They're just two people that go around to the different organizations and they do drug testing. You can also take your drugs down to the hospital and they'll have them tested there" (7719)

Sources of Instability

"They [police] are doing sweepings. And it doesn't give your supplier one spot to sort of stay in. And so, it's just difficult to find a consistent –a safe– supply" (5004)

Safety is a "Shot in the Dark"

"It's pretty much a fully loaded revolver, and you're playing with all rounds inside. Being safe is really a shot in the dark" (142i)

Policy Implications

1. Ongoing, proportional harm reduction responses are needed to address the volatility and unpredictability of the unregulated drug supply.
2. Policy interventions such as regulation and expansion of safer supply are needed to support community interventions to build safety.
3. Policies and programs that support larger determinants of safety and stability, such as social housing, are needed.
4. Involvement of user perspectives into surveillance and policy can improve capacity to understand and respond to drug market volatility.

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