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Picture: Darryl Dyck / The Canadian Press

Drug policy and drug reality in Canada: a deep dive into Vancouver

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Canada is associated with vast landscapes, bears, whales, and peacefully coexisting, very friendly people. Especially the West Coast city of Vancouver attracts millions of tourists annually. For many well-educated individuals, Canada is the ultimate destination for immigration. What many don't know is that Canada has been experiencing an uncontrolled drug crisis of alarming proportions. Thousands die from overdoses each year, and a part of Vancouver's historic downtown has been occupied by homeless people and drug addicts. While the country is making an effort to address the crisis on many levels the numbers tell a different story.

Dream City Vancouver

Vancouver, Canada's third-largest city, is a dream city. Watching orcas in the Pacific Ocean in the morning, hiking or skiing one of the local

mountains in the afternoon. A short drive along the scenic fjord leads to climbing paradise Squamish or the Olympic ski resort Whistler Blackcomb. For 20 years Vancouver has consistently ranked among the top five most

livable cities in the world, according to the Global Liveability Index by The Economist. The city scores high based on the assessment of stability, healthcare, environment, and infrastructure.

Between cruise ships and tourist attractions, one finds tent city

Walking through Vancouver's downtown reveals an unexpected sight. Right at the harbor, where cruise ships dock daily lies the historical Downtown Eastside (DTES). Thousands of people live on the streets here in their own tent city, trading black market goods. Most of them are opioid users. At any time of the day one can witness open drug consumption on the streets. Homeless individuals often sit at bus stops preparing their syringes or smoking crack. In the Western Canadian province of British Columbia (B.C.), to which Vancouver belongs, an average of 7 people die from drug overdoses every day. This is partly due to the relatively new drug Fentanyl. This synthetic opioid is 50 times stronger than heroin, much cheaper to produce, and many street drugs are now laced with it.

State of emergency in British Columbia since 2016

For the past eight years, the city has been experiencing this crisis. To address the sudden spike in drug-related deaths, the province declared a public health emergency in 2016 and created the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions as a first measure to build a seamless, coordinated network of mental health and addictions services that works for everyone in B.C. Initiating extensive data collection, the province also worked with former drug addicts to raise awareness about addiction and destigmatize drug users. Since then, supervised consumption sites have been established, and the city of Vancouver generously distributes the overdose-reversal medication Naloxone. According to an official report, these measures have prevented approximately 60% of all possible overdoses in British Columbia.

Despite all efforts, the drug crisis worsens

Since the declaration of the public health emergency, the situation has continued to deteriorate on many levels. While 994 people in British Columbia died from overdoses in 2016, more than twice that number, 2293, lost their lives in 2022. By comparison, Germany recorded 1990 drug-related deaths in the same year. Considering that British Columbia has a population of 5.4 million, on a per capita basis 18 times more people die from overdoses in the west Canadian province compared to Germany. These numbers have even led to a decrease in life expectancy for British Columbians. Despite multi-level efforts, the question looming is how this addiction crisis should be handled.

For years, governments have been waging a war on opioids and drug addicts, often resorting to harsh penalties. However, studies and testimonials suggest that the hardline approach does not seem to have an effect on drug addicts.

A new approach to drug policy: Respectful treatment and safe supply

British Columbia does not pursue the goal of drug abstinence. The province outlines a four pillars-drug strategy on its website: harm reduction, prevention, treatment and enforcement. Instead of encouraging addicts to stop using, the idea is to treat drug users with respect, prevent immediate health harm and ensure their survival while the police are responsible for maintaining safety and public order in the DTES. Vancouver cites Frankfurt, Geneva, or Zurich as role models.

An entirely new concept was introduced in B.C. on January 31, 2023: A pilot project was launched that decriminalizes the possession of any drugs in small quantities. Health Minister Carolyn Bennett justified this decision by stating that the "shocking number of lives lost requires bold actions and significant policy change." She hopes that addicts will no longer seclude themselves in closed spaces where no one can help them in the event of an overdose. Destigmatization would encourage more drug addicts to seek help.

Another measure of B.C. drug policy is prescription drugs. By introducing the so-called Safe Supply program, the province aimed to reduce the demand for illicit drugs, coined toxic supply. Certified physicians can provide drug addicts with a safer high by prescribing regulated drugs that are traditionally only accessible illegally. The approach was taken as an alternative route to withdrawal programs – which have only reached few people. Initial studies indicate that the Safe Supply program positively affects people's lifestyles and demonstrably prevents overdoses.

Impact on the city

While the city's priority is not to marginalize people with addiction problems, it clashes with the safety and well-being of residents and tourists. In November 2022, the Union of Bus Drivers demanded security personnel on buses. In January alone, 26 public transit buses in the DTES were shot with BB guns. The Gastown Business Improvement Society also appealed to the city, urging the relocation of the homeless and drug addicts because tourists no longer felt safe shopping in the historic Gastown district. The precarious security situation became the subject of a 2022 documentary titled "Vancouver is Dying."

B.C. Premier David Eby, from the social-democratic New Democratic Party, has long considered Vancouver's situation unacceptable. On October 5, he introduced a bill that would significantly restrict public drug consumption, including the decriminalization pilot. Consumption would no longer be allowed in parks, on playgrounds, at bus stops, or the beach. Police would have the right to apprehend those who do not cooperate. Since the start of the decriminalization pilot many communities in B.C. had expressed their concern about public consumption of illegal drugs. Residents no longer felt safe.

At the same time, the province released current homelessness figures: a total of 5,000 people are living on the streets or in cars in the greater Vancouver area, a drastic increase of 30% since 2020. 70% reported being drug-addicted. The

Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, an organization dedicated to the issue for years, noted that "the failure of many systems" is now evident.

Drug policy strategy not supported by the opposition

The political views on drug policy couldn't be more different. Opposition leader Pierre Poilievre of Canada's Conservative Party suggested allocating the budget for harm reduction measures exclusively to addiction treatment. In a debate in the House of Commons, he stated, "All levels of government - federal, provincial, and municipal - have endorsed the Safe Supply idea and decriminalization. We are told that giving out and decriminalizing hard drugs would reduce drug overdoses. These so-called experts are typically pie-in-the-sky theorists with no experience in getting people off drugs, or they are members of the 'misery industry,' those paid activists and public-health bureaucrats whose jobs depend on the crisis continuing."

On the other hand, Sonia Furstenuau of British Columbia's Green Party argued that decriminalization does not go far enough. People should be helped without forcing them into withdrawal, and easier access to the Safe Supply program should be granted.

The Liberal Party, led by Justin Trudeau, describes on a dedicated website that de-stigmatization of individuals with substance use disorders, combined with evidence-based treatment, is seen as a key to success, emphasizing that treatment by no means implies abstinence from hard drugs.

The drug crisis is not limited to the West Coast

The drug crisis is not an isolated issue in British Columbia. In Toronto, Canada's largest city with 6 million residents, drug policy was the primary focus of the mayoral election campaign in the summer of 2023. The candidates presented various approaches for the city, ranging from decriminalization to stricter law enforcement.

The western province of Alberta saw a tragic record of 990 drug-related deaths in the first six months of 2023. Politicians everywhere emphasize that addressing this situation is their top priority. A solution still appears to be out of reach.

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