

BACKGROUNDER

Bill C-216

"The Health-Based Approach to Substance Use Act"
Gord Johns, Member of Parliament (Courtenay-Alberni)

Why is a health-based approach to substance use needed?

- Across Canada, too many families are tragically losing loved ones to toxic drug overdoses.
- From downtown neighbourhoods to our most remote areas, no community has been untouched by these highly addictive and dangerous drugs.
- Over the last six years, nearly 25,000 Canadians have died of apparent opioid overdoses due to a toxic drug supply.
- Opioid-related deaths have increased every year of the Liberal government's mandate, and thousands of Canadians will continue to lose their lives according to current government projections.
- As possession of illicit drugs is a criminal offence, most users are afraid to seek support in addressing the trauma that often causes drug use through treatment or other services.
- The burden of a record of criminal conviction for simple drug possession is another barrier for many Canadians when seeking employment, housing, child custody or travel.
- The supply of illicit drugs in Canada has become so toxic - so poisoned and tainted with fentanyl - that we cannot hope to address the escalating death toll without providing access to a safe, regulated drug supply.
- The availability of trauma-based treatment for substance use along with other recovery services does not meet the need from coast to coast to coast.
- The criminalized approach to drug policy in Canada has proven to be ineffective in the prevention of substance abuse while exacerbating its harmful effects, especially in marginalized communities.
- Canada will never adequately address the ongoing toxic overdose crisis if it continues to stigmatize users and those who are addicted to substances.
- It's time to treat substance use and the toxic drug supply as a health issue, not a criminal justice one.

How will Bill C-216 make a difference?

- The bill decriminalizes simple possession of drugs listed in the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act so substance users don't fear criminal charges when seeking support;

- It provides a path for expungement of conviction records for those convicted of simple possession so they no longer face discrimination because of past convictions; and,
- C-216 develops and implements a national health-based strategy to: manage the risk of overdose of poisoned substances through access to a regulated safer supply of drugs; and, expand trauma-based treatment programs throughout the country.

What are the experts saying?

Health Canada Expert Task Force on Substance Abuse (June 21, 2021):

1. Canadian policy on substances must change significantly to address and remove structural stigma, centre on the health of people who use substances, and align with current evidence.
2. Bold actions are urgently needed, including decriminalization, the development of a single public health framework which regulates all substances, and the expansion of safer supply.
3. We need made-for-Canada solutions that are tailored to the specific historical, cultural, social, political, and geographic contexts of Canada's diverse population groups.
4. National leadership is essential to ensure that there are standards for the array of supports and services that people in Canada who use substances should be able to access.
5. Canada must make new and significant investments so that the impacts of substance use can be adequately addressed.

"Shifting from a punishment and stigmatizing regime to a decriminalized, health-focused model is also a critical step to reduce suffering and save lives." While everyone agrees on the goals of treatment, rehabilitation and housing – more investments are necessary – the immediate disaster is the number of people dying every day. Street drugs are more toxic than ever. Addiction isn't solved in 30 days, and rehab offers nothing to a person long struggling with a drug misuse disorder who dies of a preventable overdose.
- Lisa Lapointe, B.C.'s Chief Coroner

"Criminalizing drug possession has disproportionate effects on Indigenous and Black populations who are more often over-criminalized for the prosecution of simple drug offences. ... Criminalization of drugs has not been effective in reducing either the supply or the demand for drugs. And moreover, the unregulated drug supply is becoming more toxic and unpredictable, causing overdoses and other harms." - Dr. Eileen de Villa, Toronto's Chief Medical Officer

"Decriminalization of the simple possession of all drugs – combined with the scale-up of prevention, harm reduction, and treatment services – is a more effective way to address the public health and public safety harms associated with substance use." - Chief James Ramer, Toronto Police Chief

“Our present societal approach to psychoactive substances is illogical and inconsistent, as well as being ineffective and historically based on racist stereotypes rather than having any basis in pharmacology, economic theory of supply and demand, or human behaviour. ... Access to a regulated supply of stimulants and opioids of known quality and consistency would not only save lives, it could also remove the financial incentives that drive the present criminal market.” - Perry Kendall, B.C. provincial health officer

Punitive drug laws and policies aimed at ending illegal drug use have failed; and worse, they have done catastrophic harm to communities and society. These laws have fuelled stigma; epidemics of preventable illness and death; poverty; homelessness; and widespread, systematic, and egregious violations of human rights.

--Canadian Drug Policy Coalition

Necessary supports including safe supply, affordable housing, healthcare, harm reduction services, and culturally-safe programming can and should be scaled up—but they must be made accessible without the counter-productive and illegitimate involvement of police, bylaw officers, and courts as conduits or gatekeepers. -- Pivot Legal Society

What does Gord Johns say about the overdose crisis?

“The data released from the B.C. coroner's office is absolutely staggering. and heartbreaking. It has never been clearer that the Liberal's failure to act on the overdose crisis is costing thousands of lives, leaving families here in B.C. and across Canada without their loved ones. 2021 was the deadliest year of the opioid crisis in B.C. with 2,224 deaths from toxic drug supply.

“The Liberals need to urgently address this emergency, so no more lives are needlessly lost. They can't continue to ignore calls from public health experts urging on them to take a different approach. We're hopeful the Liberals will finally hear reason and support the bill that I have put forward to decriminalize the personal possession of drugs and take meaningful steps to address the toxic supply of street drugs that are killing Canadians by the thousands.

“Despite the undeniably dire situation, the Liberal government hasn't shown the political will to take action. There was no mention of this devastating crisis in the Speech from the Throne, nothing in the mandate letter to the Minister of Health and it ranked sixth in the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions' mandate letter.

“Last year, the cities of Vancouver and Toronto and the province of B.C. applied to the federal government for the decriminalization of drugs for personal use, a step that was recommended by the Liberal government's own Expert Task Force on substance use. Their applications have yet to be approved.

"New Democrats are listening to the experts, advocates and Canadians affected. New Democrats will continue to prioritize an urgent response to the overdose crisis." - Gord Johns, Member of Parliament (Courtenay-Alberni), February 10, 2022

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIFtYNZjtsM>

ATTACHED: Bill C-216 for "A Health-based Approach to Substance Use Act"

Gord Johns, Member of Parliament
Courtenay-Alberni
March 2, 2022