

DECRIMINALIZATION OF DRUG POSSESSION TO PROTECT YOUTH USING SUBSTANCES

In 2015, 1 in 9 deaths among youth (aged 15-24) in Ontario were opioid-related. In 2019, Tara Gomes of the Ontario Drug Policy Research Network (ODPRN) stated:

“I just re-crunched the numbers. In 2018:

- **1 in every 73 deaths in Ontario can be attributed to an opioid overdose**
- **1 in 6 deaths among youth (age 15-24) were opioid-related**

Let that sink in...”

That is a health care issue, not a criminal justice issue. Put another way, if your child had a potentially terminal illness, you would want them to be:

- a) arrested; or
- b) treated?

Us too.

Many do not realize that addiction is a pediatric illness, with 90% of the cases beginning to develop during adolescence. Between 70% and 90% of addicted youth have other mental health conditions. Our children should receive treatment, not punishment, for being ill. Instead, our current system prioritizes the criminalization of our youth. Their medical conditions are only made worse when burdened with a criminal record.

We wrote to each Liberal MP in 2018 requesting support at the Liberal Party Convention that year for the resolution to address the opioid crisis through a public health approach, including the decriminalization of drug possession for personal use. The resolution was adopted at that convention but was rejected by the Liberal government, as it continues to be today.

It's painful to see how quickly society can mobilize to deal with the COVID pandemic (which disproportionately affects the elderly) when the response to the opioid overdose epidemic (which disproportionately affects our youth) has been so slow. When it comes to COVID-19, our governments have been following the advice of our public health officials. Unfortunately, [the same is not true for the opioid overdose epidemic](#). Overdoses have increased during the pandemic.

Criminalizing people for drug use stigmatizes them and prevents those with problematic use from seeking treatment resulting in the progression of their illness at great expense to Canadian taxpayers. In 2018, the Toronto Board of Health adopted the recommendations of the Toronto Medical Officer of Health in [A Public Health Approach to Drug Policy](#) to request the federal government to decriminalize the possession of drugs for personal use and to create a task force to look at the regulation of all drugs. The Canadian Mental Health Association also issued [Care not Corrections](#) in 2018 supporting decriminalization. In 2019, the BC Chief Medical Officer of Health issued [Stopping The Harm: Decriminalization Of People Who Use Drugs In BC](#) requesting decriminalization. [BC's Chief Coroner](#) has joined the chorus of health officials requesting decriminalization.

The [City of Ottawa](#) called on the federal and Ontario governments to fund more safer supply initiatives. In June, 2020 with the overdose epidemic worsening in a number of provinces, the Toronto Board of Health adopted the recommendations in the [Toronto Overdose Action Plan: Status Report 2020](#) from the Toronto Medical Officer of Health, renewing the request to the federal government to decriminalize,

at least during the pandemic, and to fund a safer supply of opioids for those who are dependent. Families for Addiction Recovery (FAR) supported these recommendations in a [deputation](#) before the Board.

In the past few weeks, we have seen these organizations and a provincial premier call for the decriminalization of drug possession for personal use:

- [The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police \(CACP\)](#)
- [The Globe and Mail](#)
- [The Toronto Star](#)
- [The National Post](#)
- [170 Organizations](#), including FAR, represented by the HIV/Aids Legal Network
- [BC Premier John Horgan](#)

Other organizations calling for an end to the war on drugs include the World Health Organization (WHO), the Global Commission on Drug Policy, the Lancet Commissions, the American College of Physicians, the Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) and the Canadian Society of Addiction Medicine (CSAM) among others.

The key premise of criminalization, that it will protect our people, has been exposed for the fallacy that it is. We are asking you to follow the lead of our public health experts, addiction physicians, chiefs of police and those most affected by our harmful drug policies and support the decriminalization of drug possession for personal use.

Families for Addiction Recovery (FAR) is a grassroots Canadian charity founded by parents whose children have struggled with addiction from their teens. FAR was founded in 2016 because the needs of our families are not being met.

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