



Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police
Association canadienne des chefs de police

Presentation to the House of Commons' Standing
Committee on Health

Study of the opioid epidemic and toxic drug crisis in Canada

Remarks by:
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Representing:
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Distinguished members of this Committee, I am pleased to have the opportunity to address you today on the drug crisis that continues to affect individuals and communities in Canada, particularly those in Indigenous, rural, northern, and remote communities.

Introduction

It is important to begin by noting that law enforcement agencies across the country acknowledge that the opioid crisis is a public health issue. While police have a critical role to play in terms of preventing illicit drug distribution, curbing supply, and safeguarding communities, we recognize the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses the social determinants of health. This requires coordinated efforts across government, healthcare, the justice system, police, and community organizations.

In July 2020, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police called for a broad societal response that includes prevention, education, support systems, and access to treatment for those affected by drugs. We also supported the decriminalization of simple possession of illicit drugs as an effective way to reduce the stigma of substance use disorders, reduce public health and safety harms, and divert individuals with substance use disorders away from the criminal justice system.

As you heard from my fellow co-chair of the CACP's Drug Advisory Committee, Deputy Chief Fiona Wilson, our early experience with formal decriminalization for simple possession of illicit drugs has had some unintended, but not completely unexpected, consequences.

Preliminary results of this pilot project have proven what police leaders have stated from the beginning: decriminalization of drugs for personal use is only one part of an integrated health-focused approach to addressing the opioid crisis and toxic drug supply in Canada.

Reaffirming our support for decriminalization

Today, the CACP reaffirms its support for a health-centered approach to address the opioid crisis, including the decriminalization of possession of illicit substances for personal use.

In the past four years, important procedural and legal reforms as well as training have been implemented. These have led to a significant shift in police and public perception of substance use disorders, as well as a decline in simple possession charges, thereby reserving criminal sanctions for the most serious circumstances.

The 3 goals of decriminalization

Decriminalization for simple possession was intended to achieve three key goals:

1. Prevent the unwanted criminalization of personal substance use, thereby reducing the stigma of substance use disorders.
2. Create a continuum of care that ensures persons who use drugs are better connected with health supports, thereby improving health outcomes, and reducing harms associated with illicit drug use – most importantly, overdose deaths.
3. Allow the police to focus on more serious illicit drug trafficking and production offences, particularly those linked to organized crime groups who profit by preying on Canada’s most vulnerable populations.

The pilot project implemented in British Columbia succeeds in achieving the first goal which is procedurally and fiscally the easiest to attain.

Creating a continuum of care is much more challenging to create, sufficiently resource, and sustain. But the successful achievement of goal #1 depends on the successful implementation of actions to support the achievement of goals #2 and #3.

From day one, police leaders emphasized the critical importance of having the appropriate health and social infrastructures in place **before** proceeding with changes to the legislative framework that would formalize the decriminalization for simple possession of illegal substances.

A multifaceted approach to substance use

The CACP believes in a multifaceted approach to substance use that includes prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and supply reduction.

Prevention is about minimizing the number of Canadians developing substance use disorders.

Harm reduction is about minimizing the number of Canadians dying from overdose.

Treatment is about minimizing the number of Canadians living with substance use disorders on an ongoing basis.

Supply reduction is about disrupting the illicit supply of harmful and toxic substances coming into our communities by targeting organized crime groups and individuals who import, produce, or distribute illegal drugs.

Timely and low barrier access to health, social and community supports are urgently required to provide those with substance use disorders with the assessment, stabilization, withdrawal management, and treatment services they require.

We also know that frontline police officers will always play a critical role in any diversion model because they are often the point of first contact and the ones who will assist individuals into pathways of care.

A comprehensive and multifaceted framework for responding to the overdose crisis is required to ensure that public health outcomes are advanced while maintaining and maximizing public safety.

Conclusion

From a public safety perspective, Canada's police leaders believe that the success of any strategy in response to the ongoing crisis and toxic drug supply should be measured based on its ability to:

1. improve health outcomes,
2. reduce the impact of organized crime, and
3. address property crimes and public safety issues that result from unaddressed substance use disorders.

The CACP believes that any strategy that is considered must be medically led, be based on empirical medical research, and provide increased health connections with medical professionals for people with problematic drug use.

The policing community continues to assess and evaluate the public safety elements of the opioid crisis. The CACP has reconvened its Special Purpose Committee on Decriminalization to update our perspective and approach in light of the new experience and knowledge acquired.

An understanding of decriminalization starts by recognizing that it is not a single approach, but part of a spectrum of principles, policies and practices that must be implemented through strong and ongoing connections and collaboration between health, community, social, law enforcement, and justice partners.

Thank you.