

Experiences of frontline workers with lived and living expertise of drug use during the COVID-19 pandemic

Interviews with a National Working Group of people with lived and living expertise of drug use who worked on the frontlines of the toxic drug crisis during Covid-19 (May 2020 – June 2021)

CALLS TO ACTION

- Center the voices of people with lived and living expertise in all decisions impacting people who use unregulated drugs, during and beyond public health emergencies.
- Support and scale drug-user-led solutions, recognizing their effectiveness and community impact.
- Leverage Canada's proven ability to mobilize quickly, calling for a coordinated national response to the toxic drug crisis that addresses its root causes (e.g., criminalization, housing insecurity, systemic racism).

STUDY FINDINGS

Early Impacts of COVID-19 [May 2020–July 2020]

- Service cuts led to job loss, isolation, and moral distress for frontline workers.
- PPE and physical distancing requirements strained relationships, leaving workers feeling they were "abandoning" their communities.
- Inconsistent, paternalistic government responses deepened distrust: support came only when people who use drugs were seen as a public risk.

"I get a lot of joy out of [outreach], and I think that's a lot of the reason why I crashed so hard too because I wasn't able to do it [while] being locked down"

"We support and look after the people who we take care of, our service users. But then we, as workers, who do we get support from? We don't get support from anybody other than maybe our coworkers [and only] if they're not too burnt out at the end of the day..."

Societal Abandonment & Collective Grief [May 2020–July 2020]

- COVID-19 measures overshadowed the toxic drug crisis, worsening overdoses and making workers and their communities feel expendable. One worker described a sense of "cumulative PTSD."
- Grief piled up without space to mourn: gathering bans and lack of mental health supports left many without help.
- Workers faced cumulative trauma and burnout as they were expected to continue providing care, with limited institutional support or recognition.

Navigating Shifting Emergencies [Oct 2020–July 2021]

- Burnout intensified as workers juggled dual public health crises, with many reporting emotional numbness.
- Displacement, death, and disconnection eroded community networks, leaving workers overwhelmed and demoralized.

"I was talking to somebody the other day and they told me 'man, I know more dead people than I know living people'. Like pretty much all the people that held your story, that could affirm you are pretty much gone. And it's this numbness to death and to the absence of people in your life."

"The Government of Canada is saying 'we're open to hear, we want to hear from you' like 'what do you need?' and I feel like this is a unique opportunity because it hasn't been offered like this before It might not be long-lasting... but we have a unique opportunity to figure out 'how do we shape a post-COVID for people who use drugs?'"

Leveraging Lived Expertise to Drive Change [May 2020–July 2021]

- Frontline workers launched grassroots solutions in to fill service gaps: offering wellness checks, groceries, medical supplies, and harm reduction resources.
- Workers with lived and living experience played a crucial role, using their trust and insight to respond quickly and effectively where formal systems failed.
- Government officials began engaging with lived-experience workers, recognizing their leadership and calls for lasting, meaningful policy change.