

Study: Employment and Social Assistance Receipt among Overdose Fatalities in British Columbia

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A new Statistics Canada study documents the employment histories and receipt of social assistance income among 3,128 people who died of illicit drug overdoses in British Columbia from January 1, 2007, to December 31, 2016. The study finds that the majority of those who died appear to have been in a position of economic vulnerability over a portion of their lives, but there are also important differences.

To date, information on the economic characteristics of overdose fatalities has been limited. This study addresses these gaps using data from the British Columbia Coroners Service and from administrative data files containing information on employment earnings and social assistance benefits. Of the deceased in the study, 77% were men and 23% were women.

The study finds that participation in the labour force, as indicated by the receipt of wages or salaries of \$500 or more in a calendar year, was lower among the deceased men and women in the study than the general population. In each of the five years prior to the year of death, about one-half of men (48% to 51%) and less than one-third of women (28% to 32%) had employment. In comparison, 77% of male British Columbian taxfilers aged 15 to 64 and 73% of their female counterparts had employment in 2015, according to the same measure.

Considerable heterogeneity was also found in the employment histories of the deceased. Over the five-year period prior to the year of death, 28% of men had employment in all five years. With average annual earnings of \$42,200, this group appears to have had substantial and sustained participation in the labour force. Conversely, 29% of men had no employment over that period.

Among women, 14% had employment in all five years prior to the year of death, with average annual earnings of \$22,000. Conversely, 51% of women had no employment over the period.

The study also shows that in terms of social assistance, 26% of the deceased males received social assistance in all five years prior to the year of death, while 45% did not receive social assistance income in any year over that period. Larger shares of women than men received social assistance. About 50% of women received social assistance in all five years prior to death and 23% did not receive it over this period.

The age at which individuals died was another dimension across which employment and social assistance receipt varied. For example, in the year prior to the year of death, 57% of men who died at age 25 to 34 had employment, while this was the case for 48% of men who died at age 35 to 44, and for 42% of those who died at age 45 to 54. In short, declining levels of labour force participation were observed. Conversely, social assistance receipt increased across these age groups.

To provide a longer-term perspective, the employment and earnings of the deceased males were tracked over the 18 years prior to their death, or back to age 20 for those who died before age 38. Their average annual unconditional earnings—calculated as the average annual earnings of all deceased regardless of whether or not they had employment—were compared with those of same-aged male British Columbian taxfilers. Average unconditional earnings provide a useful summary measure reflecting both the rate of employment and the average earnings received.

At age 20 to 24, the average annual unconditional earnings of the males who died at age 30 to 34 were within \$1,000 of the comparison group. By age 29 to 33 (that is, the year prior to the year of death) that difference had widened to over \$27,000. In slightly different terms, the average unconditional earnings of the deceased males declined from 95% to 38% of those of the comparison group over nine years.



Similarly, at age 22 to 26, the average annual unconditional earnings of the males who died at age 40 to 44 were about \$4,000 less than those of the comparison group. Over the next 18 years, that difference widened to \$36,000. In percentage terms, the average earnings of these deceased males declined from 77% to 34% of those in the comparison group.

This study is the result of a partnership between Statistics Canada and the BC Coroners Service, the City of Surrey, Surrey Fire Service, Surrey RCMP Detachment, Fraser Health Authority, BC Stats, the BC Centre for Disease Control, the British Columbia Ministry of Health, and Public Safety Canada.

This study is the second in a series of articles providing in-depth analysis of the social and economic circumstances of people who died of illicit drug overdoses in British Columbia. For further analysis, see the previous release, [Drug overdose crisis: Socioeconomic characteristics of those dying of illicit drug overdoses in British Columbia, 2011 to 2016](#).

The research article "[Employment and Social Assistance Receipt Among Overdose Fatalities in British Columbia](#)," which is part of *Economic Insights* (**11-626-X**), is now available.

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