

Prior contact with the criminal justice system among people who fatally overdosed on illicit drugs in Surrey and in British Columbia, 2011 to 2016

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There is an ongoing opioid crisis in Canada. While the effects are being felt across the country, the crisis has been most acute in British Columbia, which reported the highest rates of apparent opioid deaths from January 2016 to September 2018, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada.

While current statistics capture the number of overdoses, not much is known about the socioeconomic characteristics of people most at risk of overdosing. To better understand the social and economic circumstances of people who died as a result of an illicit drug overdose, Statistics Canada has partnered with municipal and provincial organizations in British Columbia to launch a pilot project to collect administrative data on the social, economic and health characteristics associated with a person's circumstances prior to an illicit drug overdose death.

The present analysis is one in a series of articles to inform the situation of opioid use in Canada. These releases are the result of a partnership between Statistics Canada and the British Columbia Coroners Service, the City of Surrey, the Surrey Fire Service, the Surrey Royal Canadian Mounted Police Detachment, the Fraser Health Authority, BC Stats, the BC Centre for Disease Control, the British Columbia Ministry of Health and Public Safety Canada.

Using data from the British Columbia Coroner's Service, the study released today in *Juristat*, "[Prior contact with the criminal justice system among people who fatally overdosed on illicit drugs in Surrey and in British Columbia, 2011 to 2016](#)," explores the nature and extent to which individuals who died of an illicit drug overdose came into contact with the criminal justice system as a person accused of a crime. Previous analysis has focused on the [employment characteristics and receipt of social assistance among people who died of an illicit drug overdose](#).

Analysis of those who experienced a fatal overdose indicate that this at-risk population is a diverse group, presenting varied employment profiles and histories of contact with the health care and justice systems. This illustrates that the opioid crisis is not restricted to any particular group or population. More information on the socioeconomic characteristics of this population is needed to better understand the risk factors associated with overdoses, and to better inform the development of policies related to prevention.

Most people who died from an illicit drug overdose did not have a contact with police in the 24 months prior to their fatal overdose

The majority of those who died of an illicit drug overdose in British Columbia (66%) and in the City of Surrey (64%) from 2011 to 2016 had no contact with police for a criminal violation in the 24 months preceding their death. A contact with the police is defined as an occurrence where an individual is accused of a criminal incident.

While most people who died of an overdose did not come into contact with police, they were still more likely to have been accused of a criminal violation than the population as a whole. From 2011 to 2016, 34% of those who died of an illicit drug overdose in British Columbia, a rate of 337 people per 1,000, were accused of a criminal violation in the 24 months prior to their death. In comparison, for British Columbia overall, 30 people were accused of a criminal incident per 1,000 population in 2016.



People who fatally overdosed and who had a contact with police were less likely to have been consistently employed in the years preceding their death

Most people who died of an illicit drug overdose (66%) from 2011 to 2016 had held some form of employment in at least one of the five years preceding their death, regardless of any contact with police. That said, those who had contact with police were less likely to have been consistently employed over the five-year period.

One in five (20%) people who fatally overdosed and who had a contact with police had been employed in each of the five years prior to death, compared with 29% of those who did not have contact with police.

More than two-thirds (68%) of those who fatally overdosed and had come in contact with police received social assistance benefits in the five years prior to their death, a proportion that was significantly higher than that of their counterparts who had not been in contact with police (55%).

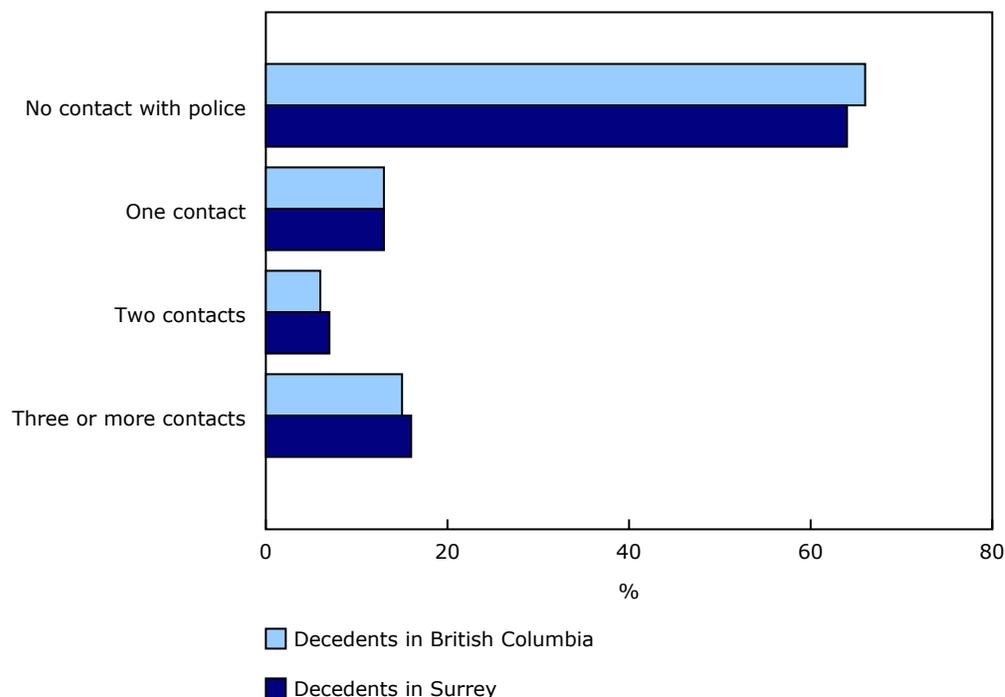
Those who had contact with the police also earned less than their counterparts who did not have contact with police in the two years preceding their overdose death. The mean total income for the last year they were employed was significantly lower among decedents who had contact with the police (\$15,325) than among those who did not (\$25,207).

One in seven people who fatally overdosed had three or more contacts with police in the 24 months before their death

Each contact with the police represents an opportunity to identify those at risk of overdose and potentially connect them to appropriate programs and services.

While most people who died of an illicit drug overdose did not have contact with police in the 24 months preceding their fatal overdose, many of those who did (34%) had multiple contacts. Overall, 15% of people who fatally overdosed in British Columbia and 16% in the City of Surrey had three or more contacts with police in the 24 months preceding their overdose death.

Chart 1
Frequency of contact with police in the 24 months prior to death, British Columbia and Surrey, 2011 to 2016



Note(s): Includes individuals who had a contact with the police in British Columbia in the 24 months preceding their overdose death.
Source(s): BC Coroners Service Data, 2011 to 2016; Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (3302), 2009 to 2016.

Contacts with police often occurred in the three months preceding a fatal overdose

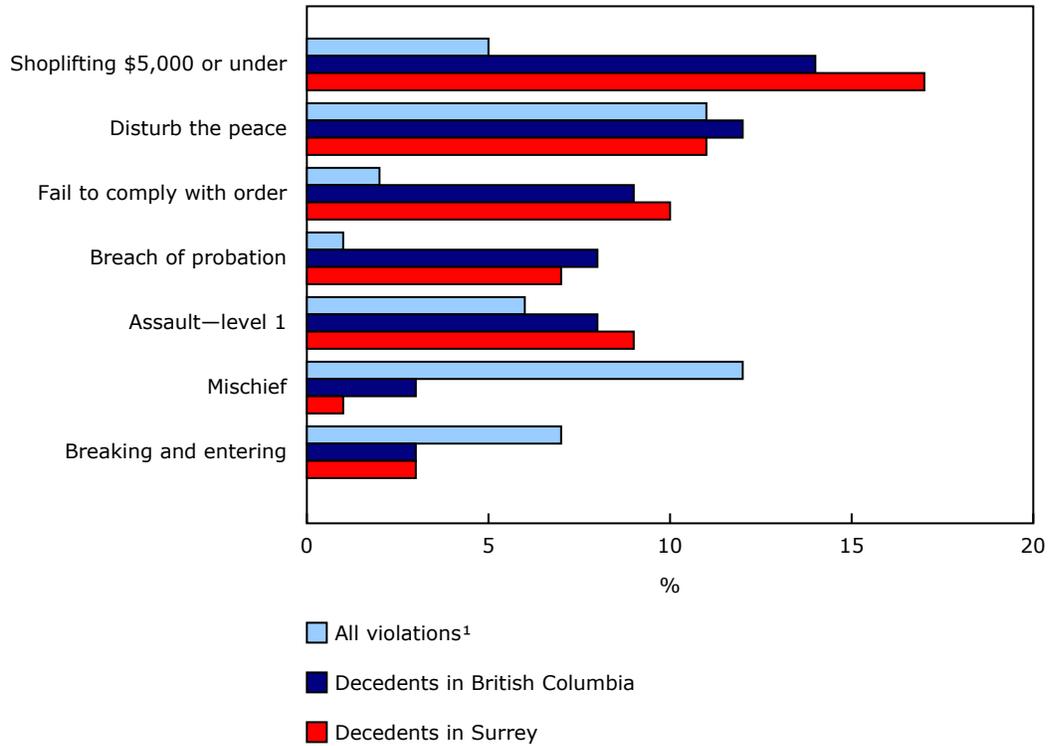
A disproportionate number of police contacts occurred in the months just prior to fatal overdoses. Among people who died of an illicit drug overdose and who had contact with police in the 24 months preceding their death, one-third (33%) in British Columbia and nearly one-quarter (24%) in Surrey had overdosed within three months of their most recent police contact.

Most people who came into contact with police prior to a fatal overdose were involved in non-violent offences

Most police contacts (83%) in the 24 months prior to a fatal overdose were for non-violent crimes, the most common violations being shoplifting (14%) and administration of justice offences (19%). Administration of justice offences are often referred to as the 'revolving door' of crime, as they are most often the result of an accused's prior criminal involvement and previous interaction with the justice system. Administration of justice offences include breach of probation and failure to comply with a court order, for example.

Overall, close to one in five police contacts were related to an offence against the administration of justice (19% in British Columbia and 17% in Surrey). Shoplifting and administration of justice offences were highly prevalent among people who died of illicit drug overdoses, compared with the provincial population as a whole.

Chart 2
Reasons for contact with police in the 24 months prior to death, selected offences, British Columbia and Surrey, 2011 to 2016



1. All violations in British Columbia.

Note(s): Includes individuals who had a contact with the police in British Columbia in the 24 months preceding their overdose death.

Source(s): BC Coroners Service Data, 2011 to 2016; Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (3302), 2009 to 2016.

Table 1
Socioeconomic characteristics of people who died of an illicit drug overdose in British Columbia, by previous contact with police, 2011 to 2016

	No police contact in 24 months prior to death	At least one contact with police in 24 months prior to death
	%	
Years employed in the five years prior to death		
None	34	34
One to four	37	47
All five	29	20
Years receiving social assistance in the five years prior to death		
None	45	32
One to four	25	34
All five	30	34
	mean (dollars)	
Income and social assistance received		
Total income for last year employed	25,207	15,325
Amount of social assistance most recently received	7,875	7,173

Note(s): Includes individuals who experienced a fatal illicit drug overdose in the period from 2011 to 2016 and who had at least one contact with the police in British Columbia in the 24 months preceding their overdose death. Percentages may not add up to 100% because of rounding.

Source(s): BC Coroners Service Data, 2011 to 2016; Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (3302), 2009 to 2016; linked Longitudinal Worker File, 1989 to 2015; and T5007 file, 2006 to 2015.

Note to readers

The analysis presented in this release is based on administrative data on illicit drug overdose deaths integrated with Statistics Canada's data on employment and social assistance, health and hospitalization, and contacts with the criminal justice system. Statistics Canada ensures the privacy, confidentiality and security of all data sources throughout the data integration process. Findings are available for the province of British Columbia, as well as for the City of Surrey, which reported the second highest number of overdose deaths after Vancouver.

More information

More information on the drug overdose crisis is available in [BC Coroners Service: Statistical Reports](#).

Resources available

Resources are available to people with problematic substance use on the [Health Canada](#) website.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey numbers 3302 and 3312.

The article "[Prior contact with the criminal justice system among people who fatally overdosed on illicit drugs in Surrey and in British Columbia, 2011 to 2016](#)" is now available as part of the publication *Juristat* (85-002-X).

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca).