

Fact sheet: Harm Reduction

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In Canada, there have been more than 12,800 opioid-related deaths since 2016

- None of these deaths have occurred at supervised consumption sites
- In 2018, one person died every two hours from opioid-related causes
- One study shows that in Alberta alone, within three months (January to March 2019), there were more than 94,000 visits to supervised consumption sites — the demand across Canada is undeniable

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Supervised consumption sites allow people to use drugs safely under the supervision of trained staff and volunteers. They offer many proven benefits, including:

- Preventing deaths from overdose and supply poisoning
- Facilitating entry into drug treatment services
- Reducing the risk of infection, including HIV and hepatitis C
- Connecting people to health and social services
- Reducing open drug use in public places
- Giving women and other marginalized people who use drugs a reprieve from street-based physical and sexual violence
- Educating people about unsafe drug use and safer consumption practices
- Saving lives

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Sites need a federal “exemption” from Canada’s drug laws to operate without risk of criminal charges

- The federal government is responsible for granting exemptions, turning a public health issue into one that is vulnerable to the changing political context
- Between 2003 and 2016, no new supervised consumption sites opened in Canada because the federal government at the time opposed them and therefore would not approve exemptions
- Without an exemption, staff, volunteers and clients are at risk of criminal prosecution for “possessing drugs for personal use”
- Exemptions are time-limited and range in length from 1–3 years, at which point individual sites must re-apply under a process that remains unnecessarily complicated
- The government has the power to grant a “class exemption” that would automatically provide staff and clients certain protections from prosecution to any facility that meets some basic minimum standards. Such an exemption would remove a significant administrative strain from overburdened service operators, allowing for more rapid response

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The first site to operate with a formal exemption, Insite, opened in 2003 in Vancouver

- It is a world-renowned model of successful harm reduction in action, and has been the subject of many studies that show an array of positive benefits for both the community it operates in and the people it serves. In 2018, there were 1,466 overdose interventions at this location alone



The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network is calling on the government to commit to saving lives and tackling the overdose crisis by 1) preserving the existing supervised consumption sites, 2) scaling up the number of supervised consumption sites, and 3) committing to provide adequate funding for these services.

Each and every day, the criminalization and stigmatization of people who use drugs cost lives and undermine health. Unless we see a marked shift in policy, including significant resources dedicated to harm reduction services, the body count will continue to grow.