

## Skepticism in some as opioid related deaths in Alberta on the decline



An arrangement of pills of the opioid oxycodone-acetaminophen. THE CANADIAN PRESS/AP/Patrick Sison, File Copyright 2018 The Associated Press.

By Margot Rubin and Alejandro Melgar | Posted Oct 5, 2024 12:27 pm.

The Alberta government says opioid-related deaths are down in the province compared to 2023, but some remain skeptical of the province's efforts.

The **report on opioid-related deaths in the province** shows deaths and opioid-related EMS responses are down over 50 per cent year over year for June.

June 2024 saw 78 people die of overdose, the lowest in June since 2019, and a drop from 2023's 166 deaths in the same month. Substance deaths are down to 87 from 187 last June.

Opioid-related EMS calls are also down across the province, from 1,155 EMS responses in June last year to only 478 EMS responses in June of 2024.

Dan Williams, minister of mental health and addiction said in a statement they are cautiously optimistic about the downward trend.

"Our government knows that for anyone suffering from addiction, recovery is possible. That is why we are focused on the Alberta Recovery Model, creating a continuum of care with the right services to bring people out of addiction and into recovery. Alberta has led the way for several other jurisdictions looking to do the same," the statement reads.

However, not everyone is as optimistic about the government's recovery model.

University of Calgary assistant nursing professor Jennifer Jackson says there could be a variety of factors as to why the province is seeing a downward trend in opioid deaths, like the drugs possibly being less toxic than before.

"I anticipate the current government claims their policy resulted in this decrease, I would strongly dispute that point. There is a decrease happening across North America," she told CityNews.

She also says the government shouldn't be shutting down supervised consumption sites, they should be improving them.

"What we need to have for a supervised consumption site is a chair and proper healthcare professional. This is not going to be something that is going to take a lot of infrastructure," Jackson said.

"We could create lots of options so the net is catching everyone. It's not to keep someone where they are, it's providing them with the connections to see a better future for themselves."

### **Alberta's 2019 SCS report criticized by researchers**

The Alberta government has been moving toward a recovery-oriented model since it took office in 2019. It released a report in 2020 calling consumption sites in the province a "**system of chaos.**"

However, a **research paper from the Canadian Journal of Public Health** in 2023 called it "pseudo-science," with the authors adding the report is harming people and should be withdrawn.

It says the United Conservative-commissioned study is irredeemably flawed by bias against safe consumption sites, in which drug addicts can use illegal substances in a safe and supervised environment.

The report presupposed conclusions that consumption sites were harmful and selected evidence to reinforce that, the paper alleges. In addition, the government report was not peer-reviewed.

Another paper in the Harm Reduction Journal in 2021 says the government study distorted police data and relied heavily on public perception to suggest the sites help increase crime, despite findings in other peer-reviewed studies.

Over 1,800 died of opioids in 2023, which is a record high since 2016, the start of Alberta's substance use surveillance system.

The City of Calgary voted 9-1 in favour of further discussion on whether to shut down the city's only safe-consumption site. That discussion will happen later in October.