

## Compassionate intervention is the lifeline Canada's addiction crisis needs

When someone is in the grips of addiction, they often cannot recognize their own need for help. Failing to intervene isn't respecting their rights — it's condemning them to further harm, or worse, death.

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*Syringes are seen on the ground in Montreal, Tuesday, Sept. 19, 2023. (Christinne Muschi/The Canadian Press)*

Canada's addiction crisis is worsening, claiming more lives each day and straining communities across the country. Families are watching helplessly as loved ones fall deeper into addiction, and public resources are stretched to the breaking point.

While voluntary treatment options are available, they often aren't enough for those who are too far gone to seek help on their own. It's time for a new approach—one that includes involuntary treatment (compassionate intervention) to save lives and prevent further tragedies. This solution is gaining momentum in conversations about how to fight addiction in a meaningful way, and Canada must take bold action.

The tragic story of 13-year-old Brianna MacDonald from British Columbia underscores just how urgent this issue is. Brianna's family knew she needed help as her mental health and addiction spiralled out of control. Despite their pleas for involuntary treatment, Brianna was discharged from care. Her parents were powerless to intervene, and Brianna tragically died of a suspected overdose in a homeless camp. Her death is a heartbreaking reminder that for those too young or too ill to make rational decisions, the current system is failing.

Brianna's story is not an isolated one. In communities across Canada, addiction is wreaking havoc, and the scale of the crisis is staggering. In Peel Region alone, between 2020 and mid-2024, Peel Regional Police responded to over 33,891 mental health and addiction-related calls. In just the last two and a half years, police spent more than 153,000 hours and \$12.5 million in officer time, including over 30,000 hours waiting in hospital. This strain on both law enforcement and healthcare systems is overwhelming public resources and leaves the core issues of addiction unaddressed.

These numbers reveal a deeper truth: voluntary treatment is not enough for everyone. Addiction alters a person's ability to make rational decisions, and for many, waiting for them to voluntarily seek help is not realistic—it's

deadly. On a more routine basis, scenes like Marcus Gee described in his recent column in the *Globe and Mail* about a Toronto streetcar ride—people visibly struggling with mental illness and addiction, wandering the streets or public transit—have become all too common. These aren't just random occurrences; they're symptomatic of a larger crisis that needs urgent attention.

However, momentum is growing for more open discussions about addiction and how we can truly fight it. For too long, addiction has been stigmatized or ignored, but more Canadians are beginning to acknowledge that the current system isn't working. Leaders and advocates are coming forward, demanding new strategies, including involuntary treatment, to help those who are unable to help themselves. These conversations, once confined to the sidelines, are becoming more mainstream, driven by a recognition that we must act before more lives are lost.

Countries like Portugal and Sweden provide a roadmap for Canada. In Portugal, addiction is treated as a public health issue rather than a criminal one, and involuntary treatment is part of a broader strategy that includes strong social services like housing and counselling. Sweden has seen success pairing involuntary treatment with long-term rehabilitation services, helping individuals reintegrate into society. These systems have shown that involuntary treatment, when done right, can break the cycle of addiction and lead to real recovery.

Critics often raise concerns about human rights when it comes to involuntary treatment, and those concerns must be taken seriously. Safeguards are essential to ensure that individuals are treated humanely and that no one is held longer than necessary. However, we cannot allow these concerns to prevent action. When someone is in the grips of addiction, they often cannot recognize their own need for help. Failing to intervene isn't respecting their rights — it's condemning them to further harm, or worse, death.

The growing momentum for change reflects a deeper shift in how Canadians are thinking about addiction. We are beginning to see addiction not as a moral failing, but as a medical condition that requires urgent, compassionate intervention. As these conversations gain traction, Canada must lead by implementing policies that provide care and recovery options for those too far gone to ask for help.

Brianna MacDonald's family, like so many others, begged for their daughter to be held for treatment because they knew she wasn't capable of making that decision herself. The system didn't listen, and now Brianna is gone. We cannot allow more families to face this kind of loss. On October 9th, Brampton City Council unanimously passed a motion requesting for the province to permit a pilot project in our City for compassionate intervention. The time for action is now. Involuntary treatment offers a lifeline to individuals trapped in the cycle of addiction and mental illness, and it's up to Canada's provinces to take the lead.

*Patrick Brown has served as mayor of Brampton since 2018. He's a former leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario (2015-18) and a former Conservative MP for Barrie (2006-15).*