



**Building Back
Differently**

**MAY
2022**

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE OPIOID CRISIS

**HOW TO BUILD BACK
DIFFERENTLY**

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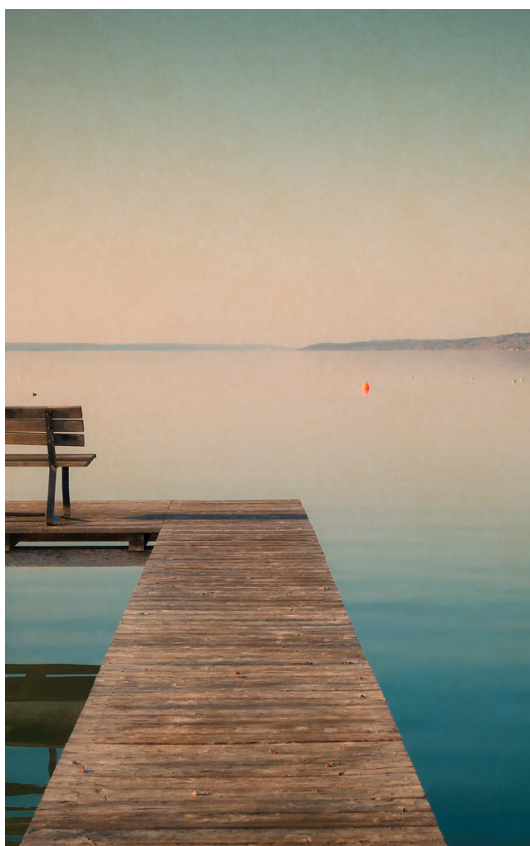
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THE OPIOID CRISIS BEFORE THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC

The opioid crisis has had a devastating impact on communities across Canada, with an alarming rise in poisoning and hospitalization rates that began several years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the local level, incidence of opioid-related harms has been increasing within the last 6 years. Peterborough has had nearly double the provincial rate of overdose-related emergency department visits each year since 2016, and higher rates of opioid-related deaths than the provincial average (Public Health Ontario, 2022). In addition to these documented cases, overdoses were commonly underreported due to societal stigma and distrust toward hospitals and healthcare providers that can lead people who use drugs (PWUD) to avoid seeking care. Lack of affordable housing and chronically full homeless shelters in Peterborough were exacerbating the challenges for PWUD, and service providers struggled to keep up with demand for services.



A similar picture was developing in the rural region north of Peterborough, where the town of Bancroft and its surrounding communities of North Hastings were experiencing a growing crisis with opioid use and homelessness. Few specialized addictions medicine services existed in this “cottage country” with a population of approximately 4000. Yet awareness of an emerging substance use epidemic had led service providers to collaborate via an outreach team, a methadone clinic that was serving over 150 people, and an outpatient treatment program. Approximately two to three drug-related deaths were reported each year in North Hastings prior to the pandemic. Additionally, with very limited affordable housing and no homeless shelter or warming room in the area, an increasing number of residents were precariously housed or unsheltered. For many people living with housing insecurity, substances were connected to either how they lost shelter or how they coped with the daily stressors of homelessness.

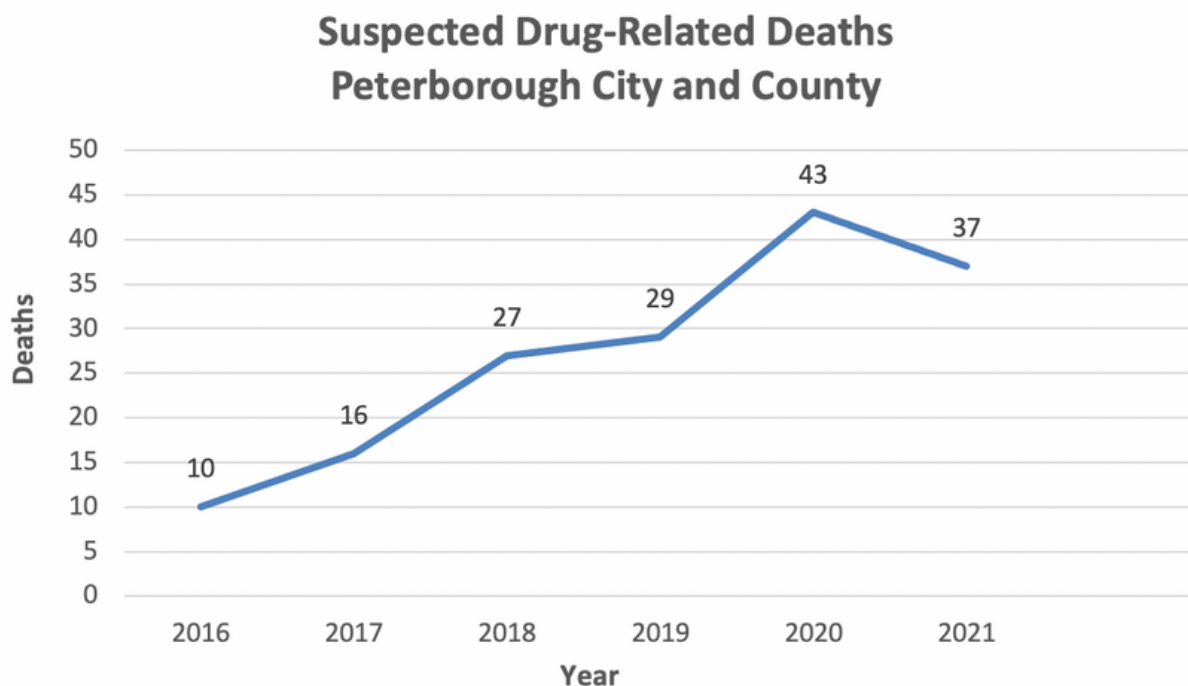
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

In both Peterborough and Bancroft, the pandemic led to closure of many services used by individuals living precariously and using substances, as providers shifted toward virtual or telephone care. This increased isolation and created new barriers to accessing supports for an already underserved population. In the Peterborough area, this reduction in services coincided with several physician retirements, and contributed to a fracture in service provision and a growing number of individuals with opioid use disorder who have no family doctor. Pandemic restrictions and physical distancing requirements further exacerbated the isolation experienced by people using substances, leading many to use alone and increasing the number of overdoses. This trend is consistent with the increase in opioid-related harms across the province, with people living in rural communities and individuals who are homeless experiencing disproportionate increases in harm (Friesen et al., 2021). In addition, powerful opioids such as fentanyl and its analogs, benzodiazepine analogs being mixed into the fentanyl supply, and polysubstance use in which opioids are used alongside stimulants like cocaine and methamphetamine, all contributed to the increase in harms associated with drug use including difficulty recognizing symptoms of opioid overdose and reversing overdose with Naloxone. Since the beginning of the pandemic, drug-related paramedic calls and emergency department visits have reached record levels (Davis, 2021), with an average of between 3 and 4 suspected drug-related deaths per month since January 2020, and a total of 94 suspected drug-related deaths from January 2020 to April 2022 in Peterborough City and County (Peterborough Public Health, 2022). Drug-related deaths in the Bancroft area total 10 probable deaths since the pandemic began with no data available for 2022 (Public Health Agency of Canada personal communication, Apr. 2022).



DRUG-RELATED DEATHS

COVID-19 EXACERBATED AN EXISTING CRISIS



- * Not depicted above are 14 drug-related deaths from January to April 2022 for a total of 94 suspected drug-related deaths in Peterborough City and County since the pandemic began.
- ** Technical note: PPH's suspected drug-related death data comes from Peterborough Police Services. It is updated if a death is confirmed or not attributed to opioids by the Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario. Suspected opioid-related death data is also received from the Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario, however it is typically delayed by two to three (2-3) months. Data received from the local police service is more timely.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

The reduction in services, increase in isolation, and toxic drug supply have been accompanied by a rise in poverty and housing precarity. Many businesses temporarily or permanently closed, leaving some workers unemployed. Housing markets were heating up substantially as part of a longer term trend in which houses were sold to people moving into the area from larger cities, long term rentals were converted to Airbnbs, individuals with higher incomes entered the rental market, and vulnerable individuals and families were pushed out of their homes. Homeless shelters in Peterborough created minor increases in capacity that have not kept pace with the increased need. New federal funding as part of the pandemic response allowed for emergency housing to be established in a Bancroft motel where 17 people could physically distance. However, as time passed there was increasing police presence around the motel and the relaxing of lockdown measures meant visitors to the area were returning, which led the owners to bring the emergency housing project to an end. As the housing and homelessness crisis deepened throughout the pandemic, it became increasingly difficult for people to navigate a fractured system while struggling to meet their most basic needs.

A TOXIC DRUG SUPPLY AND INCREASE IN ISOLATION, POVERTY, AND HOUSING PRECARIETY WERE ACCOMPANIED BY FEWER SERVICES DUE TO COVID-19





RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOW TO BUILD BACK DIFFERENTLY

Substance use cannot be seen in isolation from the broader social determinants of health.

It is essential to increase access to safe, affordable housing and take a Housing First approach in which shelter is treated as the highest priority with other services such as mental health and addiction supports to follow.

Federal government support and system level intervention are required to **increase access to safe consumption facilities and safe supply options** that can reduce harms associated with substance use, while provincial investment is required to improve availability of **low barrier addictions and mental health treatment** and outreach. With the recent announcement regarding provincial funding for the Peterborough Consumption and Treatment Services Site (CTS), partners may now create a safe space for members of the community to use substances. There are high hopes the CTS will help prevent opioid-related harms and deaths in the community.

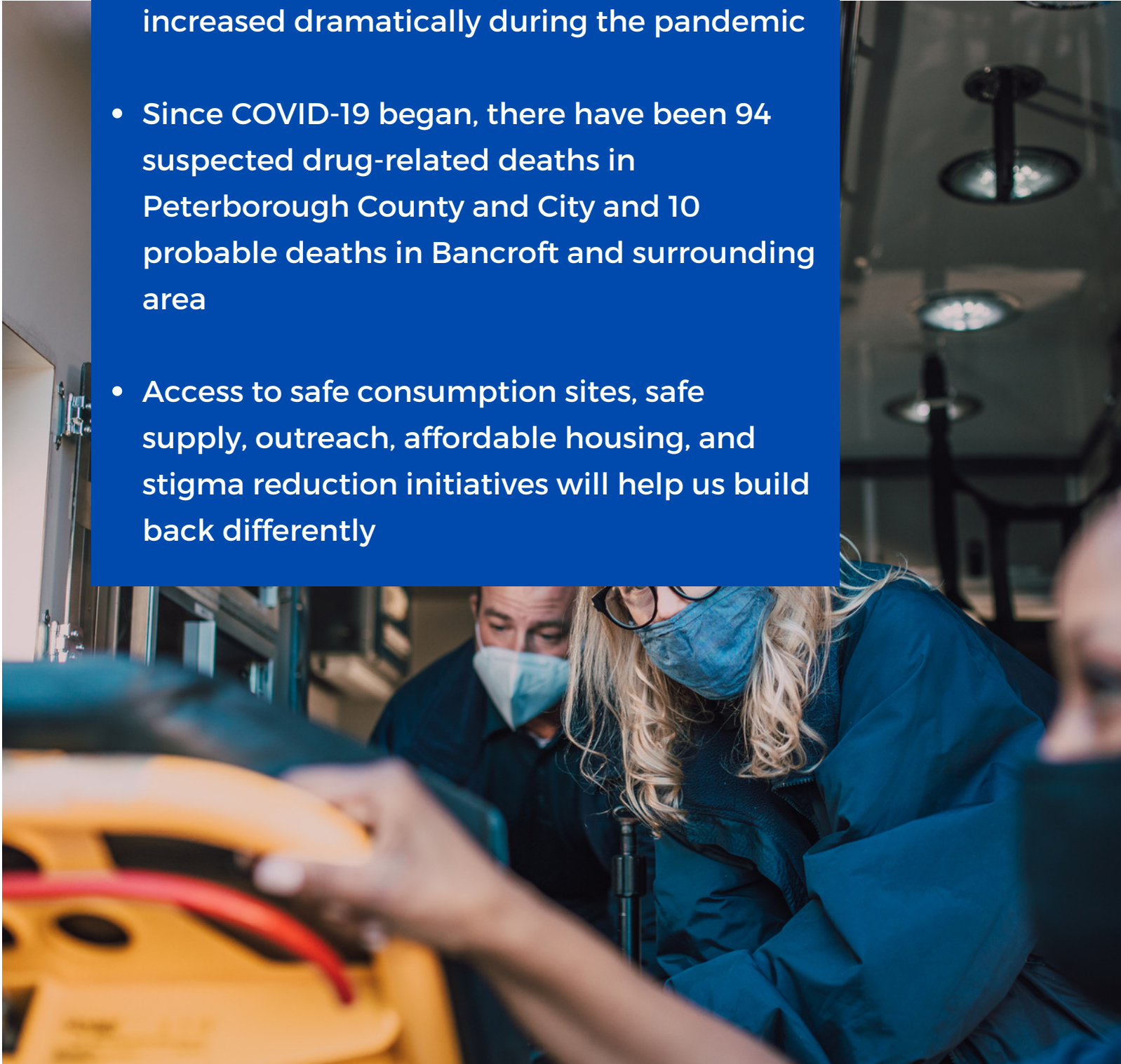
Intersectoral collaboration and investment by all levels of government is required to increase the supply of subsidized and affordable housing, while also raising income supports beyond a poverty wage, allowing us to shift our response from crisis intervention toward prevention of poverty, homelessness, and addiction.

At the local level, **building trusting relationships** between service providers and PWUD is essential to improving the health and wellbeing of this marginalized group. **Addressing stigma** through education and sensitivity training for health care providers is especially important in the hospital setting where PWUD often describe negative experiences that discourage them from seeking care. Education is also essential for the broader community to encourage anti-stigmatizing language and remind them that PWUD are people first (members of our families, colleagues, friends, and neighbours).

Within the community, services and supports should **build capacity and involve PWUD in decision making and program development** in a way that increases autonomy and emphasizes “doing with” rather than “doing for”. Central to each of these initiatives is treating people who have addictions with dignity, compassion, and respect.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Harms associated with substance use have increased dramatically during the pandemic
- Since COVID-19 began, there have been 94 suspected drug-related deaths in Peterborough County and City and 10 probable deaths in Bancroft and surrounding area
- Access to safe consumption sites, safe supply, outreach, affordable housing, and stigma reduction initiatives will help us build back differently



HELPFUL RESOURCES

More Information:

Public Health Ontario's Interactive Opioid Tool:

<https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/data-and-analysis/substance-use/interactive-opioid-tool>

Opioid related deaths and health care use during the COVID-19 pandemic:

<https://odprn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Opioid-Related-Toxicity-Deaths-and-Healthcare-Use-Infographic.pdf>

Local Resources:

Peterborough Drug Strategy: <https://peterboroughdrugstrategy.com/>

PARN: <http://parn.ca/>

Peterborough Public Health: <https://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/>

North Hastings Community Trust (Bancroft):

<https://northhastingscommunitytrust.org/>

Stigma Reduction:

Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction - Stigma:

<https://www.ccsa.ca/stigma> and Primer on Overcoming Stigma:

<https://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2019-09/CCSA-Language-and-Stigma-in-Substance-Use-Addiction-Guide-2019-en.pdf>

Public Health Agency of Canada - A Primer to Reduce Substance Use Stigma in the Canadian Health System: https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/primer-reduce-substance-use-stigma-health-system.html#_5 (Includes a section called Promising system-level interventions)

Canadian Substance Use Resource and Knowledge Exchange Centre (SURE) - Beyond Stigma: <https://substanceuse.ca/beyond-stigma>



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For More Information:

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