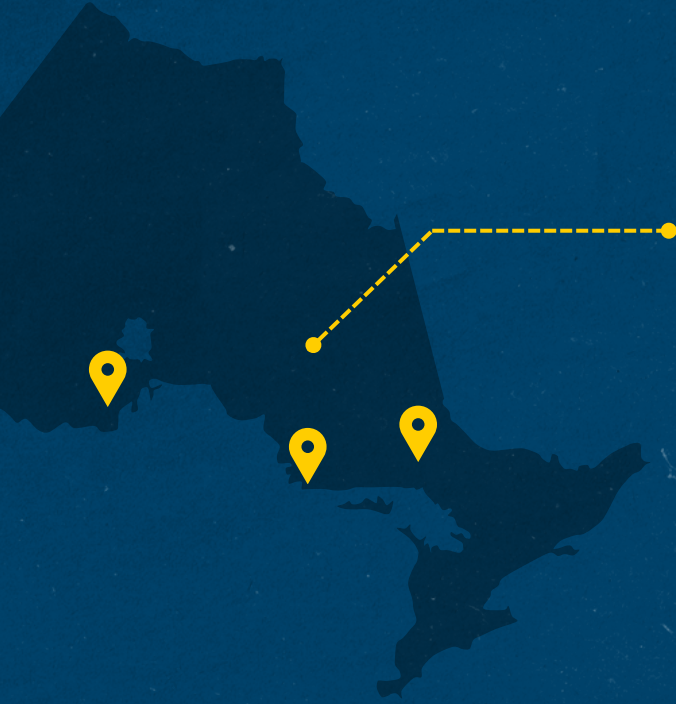


NORTHERN TOLL

THE IMPACT OF THE DRUG TOXICITY CRISIS IN NORTHERN ONTARIO CORRECTIONS



Northern Ontario is experiencing some of the highest drug poisoning mortality rates in the province, driven by an increasingly toxic drug supply and persistent gaps in access to care. In fact, drug poisoning deaths in Northern Ontario communities are more than double the provincial average.¹

Our report focuses on how those risks become even more dangerous for people involved in the justice system. It shows why the days and weeks after release are a critical window for preventing deaths, and why coordinated, health-focused supports are essential to saving lives and improving public safety.

What We Know



In Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, and Sudbury, drug toxicity deaths are among the highest in the province.²



The unregulated drug supply is increasingly toxic and unpredictable. Even experienced users cannot accurately gauge potency. Contamination is widespread and often fatal.



Indigenous people coming out of jail are nearly **30 times more likely to die from drug poisoning** than Indigenous people who have never been incarcerated.³



Systems are strained and fragmented. Communities face significant shortages of treatment beds, detox services, supportive housing, and primary care.



Drug toxicity is the leading cause of non-natural deaths in Ontario's correctional institutions.⁴

A review of coroner files from 2006–2013 found that **20%** of drug toxicity deaths in Ontario occurred within **one week of release**.⁵ In the first **two weeks after release**, the risk of drug toxicity death is **over 50 times higher** compared to the general population.⁶



Over 80% of people in Ontario provincial jails are awaiting trial, which makes consistent mental health and addictions treatment planning difficult.⁷

Why This Matters

When people cycle through custody and return to the community without stable housing or continuous healthcare, the risk of drug toxicity death rises sharply during an already high-risk period. For service providers, legal professionals, and community partners, this report highlights where prevention efforts should be focused. It underscores the need to improve continuity of care, coordinate reintegration planning across systems, and shift away from punishment toward public health supports that save lives.

What's Next

This report is a call to treat the toxic drug crisis in Northern Ontario as the public health emergency it is, with urgent attention to people who have been recently released from custody. Lives can be saved when systems work together so people are not returned to unsafe environments, but instead are met with immediate connections to healthcare, mental health and addiction supports, and housing.

Key takeaways include:



Make release planning a safety intervention to ensure people leaving custody have a clear discharge plan and the necessary supports to remain safe.



Improve continuity of care by strengthening collaboration between health, social, and justice systems, ensuring people do not fall through the cracks before, during, or after incarceration.



Invest in Indigenous-led organizations delivering culturally appropriate programs that address community needs and reduce systemic barriers.



Minimize reliance on criminalization and custody for low-risk individuals, while ensuring access to in-reach services that protect both individual and public safety.



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Everyone in the cross-sector of health and justice needs to know what the rest of the system is doing to effectively do their jobs. They need to be more connected to the consequences.

—Service Provider, Sault Ste. Marie



Sources

¹According to 2024 data from the Office of the Chief Coroner, Thunder Bay leads the list with 80 deaths last year – a rate of 69.14 per 100,000 people. Sault Ste. Marie follows with 38 deaths (48.36 per 100,000), Timmins records 18 deaths (40.74 per 100,000), and Greater Sudbury places seventh with 59 deaths (32.81 per 100,000). The provincial rate is 14.3 per 100,000 people with 2231 opioid-related deaths reported in Ontario last year. See also: Keena Alwahaidi, "Thunder Bay Tops Ontario's Opioid Death Rates for Another Year," CBC News, May 25, 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/thunder-bay-opioid-overdoses-1.7541435>; Fariyah Ali et al., "Client Experiences using a New Supervised Consumption Service in Sudbury, Ontario: A Qualitative Study," PLoS One 18, no. 10 (2023): e0292862, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10578573/>

² Ibid

³ Butsang, Tenzin, et al. "Opioid toxicity deaths in Indigenous people who experienced incarceration in Ontario, Canada 2015–2020: a whole population retrospective cohort study." *The Lancet Regional Health–Americas* 41 (2025)

⁴ Ontario Chief Coroner's Expert Panel on Deaths in Provincial Custody. (2023). *An Obligation to Prevent: Report from the Ontario Chief Coroner's Expert Panel on Deaths in Custody*. Available at: <https://www.ontario.ca/document/obligation-prevent-report-ontario-chief-coroners-expert-panel-deaths-custody>

⁵ Benedikt Fischer, Elnaz Moghimi, and John Weekes, "The burden of drug overdose deaths among correctional populations: implications for interventions," *CMAJ* 196, no. 43 (December 2024): E1414-E1416, <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.241661>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Statistics Canada (2024) Average counts of adults in provincial and territorial correctional programs. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3510015401&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.7&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=1982+%2F+1983&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2022+%2F+2023&referencePeriods=19820101%2C20220101>

About the John Howard Society of Ontario

For nearly 100 years, we've worked to keep the humanity in justice. Today we continue to build a safer Ontario by supporting the people and communities affected by the criminal justice system. Our local offices span the province and deliver more than 80 evidence-based programs and services focused on prevention, intervention and reintegration. We promote practical, equitable policies while raising awareness of the root causes of crime and calling on Ontarians to share responsibility for addressing them.

To learn more about us, visit johnhoward.on.ca

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