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NORTHERN TOLL: NEW REPORT HIGHLIGHTS THE TOXIC DRUG CRISIS AMONG NORTHERN ONTARIO'S CORRECTIONAL POPULATION

Research finds the transition from custody to community is a dangerous period in the toxic drug crisis, with the risk of drug-related death more than 50 times higher in the first two weeks after release.

TORONTO – April 14, 2026 – 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 substance use disorder and mental health treatment and supportive housing. Drug poisoning is now a leading cause of accidental death in the province, and Northern communities have been hit especially hard with deaths more than double the provincial average.

Northern Toll, a new report from the John Howard Society of Ontario (JHSO) in partnership with the University of Toronto, finds that incarceration and the period immediately following release from custody are high-risk windows in the toxic drug crisis. People are over 50 times more likely to die from a drug-related cause in the first two weeks after release compared to the general population, and a coroner's review found that 20% of drug toxicity deaths occurred within one week of release. Across Ontario, approximately 88 people die due to drug toxicity in the year following incarceration, representing one in ten adult drug toxicity deaths.

These risks do not occur in isolation. The report makes clear they are influenced by the conditions people are returning to, and by the gaps in the systems meant to support them. Local experts, frontline social service workers, and people with lived experience in Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, and Sudbury described complex needs related to untreated mental health conditions, intergenerational trauma, poverty, and housing instability. These challenges are compounded by services that are stretched thin and disconnected. Correctional facilities are expected to respond to health and social issues they were never designed to address, while communities face limited supports that leave people at heightened risk, especially during reintegration.

"Approaches that rely on punishment are worsening harm and straining systems that are already under pressure," said Safiyah Husein, Director of Policy at JHSO. "We need coordinated solutions that bridge custody and reintegration to prevent drug poisoning deaths."

The report also documents how criminalization continues to hit Indigenous communities the hardest. In Ontario, Indigenous people are incarcerated at more than six times the rate of white Ontarians, and in Thunder Bay, approximately 72% of incarcerated people are Indigenous. These disparities continue after release. 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.

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This evidence illustrates how systemic barriers and limited access to care contribute to greater risk of drug poisoning deaths, not just for Indigenous communities but for all people navigating the justice system.

“Far too many people are released into unsafe conditions, and some may never have the chance to return to their families. These gaps in care have fatal consequences. That is why coordinated action across systems is urgently needed,” said Safiyah Husein.

The report highlights key needs in Northern Ontario:

- **Make release planning a safety intervention** to ensure people leaving custody have a clear discharge plan and the necessary supports to remain safe, including transportation, identification, and direct connections to housing and healthcare services.
- **Expand life-saving harm reduction, treatment, and recovery services** to meet substance use needs before a crisis becomes fatal.
- **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.

“We cannot separate justice from public health,” said Christin Cullen, Chief Executive Officer of the John Howard Society of Ontario. “Building solutions at every stage of the justice system is an opportunity to save lives, and Northern Ontario communities need the resources to make that possible.”

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 cycle through custody and back into the community. Lives can be saved when systems work together so that people are not released into unsafe environments, but are met with immediate connections to healthcare, mental health and addiction supports, and safe housing. Services need to be accessible where people live, including rural and First Nations communities, making a coordinated, community-led response essential to preventing drug poisoning deaths and supporting successful reintegration.



About the John Howard Society of Ontario

For more than 90 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 across the province. 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, please visit www.johnhoward.on.ca.

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