

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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International Overdose Awareness Day: B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth Urges Awareness, Compassion, and Action

Victoria – Nine years into B.C.'s toxic drug crisis, first declared a public health emergency by the Provincial Health Officer in 2016, children and youth remain among those most deeply impacted. On International Overdose Awareness Day (August 31), B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth (RCY) is raising awareness that young people are experiencing unique harms from increasingly toxic substances. They are losing parents, siblings, and friends to overdose, and carrying grief, trauma, and profound disruption in their lives.

"This crisis is impacting young lives every day," said Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth, B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth. "We need to stop imagining that the solution is simply to 'say no to drugs.' It is about building systems of support that meet young people and their families where they are, systems that understand the risks, reduce harm, and respond with compassion."

Charlesworth says International Overdose Awareness Day is about more than statistics. It is a time to remember lives lost, to confront stigma, and to commit to treating every person with compassion and dignity. It is also a call to strengthen our connections with one another, to listen to the voices of young people and families, and to foster a sense of belonging rather than shame. It requires a commitment to equity, ensuring that every young person has fair access to healthcare, harm reduction, and evidence-based support. And it is a demand for justice, addressing the systemic racism, poverty, and discrimination that leave young people more vulnerable to harm.

The Representative states that stigma keeps many young people silent, even when they need help most. For some, substance use becomes a coping mechanism in the absence of healing opportunities. It is deeply connected to mental health challenges, child welfare involvement, violence and exploitation, systemic racism, and structural poverty. Some young people are simply experimenting, like every generation before them has, and will continue to do, but the substances available today are often lethal and morphing daily.

Between 2019 and June 2025, 159 young people under the age of 19 died from toxic drugs, according to the B.C. Coroner's Service. Unregulated drug toxicity is currently the leading cause of death among youth aged 10 to 27 in B.C. In 2024, paramedics responded to 2,330 toxic drug poisonings among youth in British Columbia, the equivalent of six overdoses every day. This represents only the tip of the iceberg, says Charlesworth, as evidence shows many young people experience drug poisonings without ever receiving medical intervention.



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“These numbers remind us that this is not just about coroner’s counts,” Dr. Charlesworth said. “Every statistic represents a child whose life has been catastrophically altered through death, brain injury, or lifelong emotional harm. Families and communities are carrying these losses in ways that cannot be measured.”

The Representative’s office is working to address this crisis by meeting with more than 400 people across the province, including professionals, parents, and young people with lived and living experience. Insights from these conversations are shaping an upcoming report on the toxic drug crisis, to be released this fall.

RCY is calling on all British Columbians to be part of the change by challenging stigma, talking openly about substance use, listening with compassion, and supporting efforts to keep young people safe. Awareness begins with each of us, and together we can build a culture of care. Young people in B.C. deserve nothing less.

The Representative for Children and Youth is an independent officer of the B.C. Legislature who supports children, youth, young adults, and families in need of assistance with child- and youth-serving systems, and who makes recommendations to improve these services.

For more resources:

- The Representative for Children and Youth’s [Time to Listen: Youth voices on substance use](#). This 2018 report reflects the perspectives of 100 youth from across B.C. who participated in focus groups and completed surveys, offering their views on substance use and suggestions for changes that could make youth safer.
- First Nations Health Authority’s [With Open Arms: A Toolkit for Supportive Conversations about Substance Use](#). This resource is designed to help adults, caregivers, and professionals engage in open, compassionate conversations with young people. It emphasizes reducing stigma, listening without judgment, and supporting youth in ways that build safety and trust.
- The Provincial Health Officer’s [Alternatives to Unregulated Drugs: Another step in saving lives](#). This report explores the concept of enabling access to alternatives to unregulated drugs, with a focus on how models beyond the health-care system, as complements to prescribed alternatives, could help address BC’s ongoing unregulated drug emergency.
- [Mom’s Stop the Harm](#). Moms Stop the Harm (MSTH) is a network of Canadian families impacted by substance-use-related harms and deaths.

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