

# Changing Circumstances Surrounding Opioid-Related Deaths in Ontario during the COVID-19 Pandemic



**Physical distancing measures** introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in reduced service levels for pharmacies, outpatient clinics, and harm reduction sites that provide care to people who use drugs. Consequently, despite the intention to reduce the impact of COVID-19, these measures also **increased risks of drug-related overdose and death**.

Note: This infographic compares circumstances of opioid-related deaths occurring **pre-pandemic** (March 16, 2019 – December 31, 2019) and **during the pandemic** (March 16, 2020 – December 31, 2020).

**2,426 opioid-related deaths occurred in 2020, a 60% rise from 1,517 deaths in 2019**



There was a **79% increase** in monthly opioid-related deaths in 2020, from **139 deaths in February 2020** to **249 deaths in December 2020**.



**30%** of opioid-related deaths among people employed during the pandemic occurred among those working in the **construction industry**. This was similar to pre-pandemic trends.



**1,109** opioid-related deaths during the pandemic occurred among **people aged 25 to 44**, representing an increase of 501 deaths compared to before the pandemic.

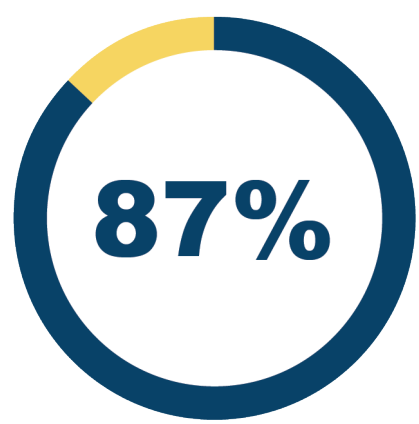


**76%** of opioid-related deaths during the pandemic occurred among **men**, rising from 71% of deaths during the pre-pandemic time period.



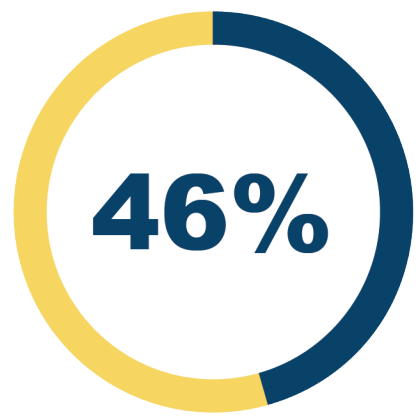
**73%** of opioid-related deaths during the pandemic occurred when **no one was present to intervene**. This was similar to pre-pandemic trends.

## Drugs Involved in Opioid-Related Deaths



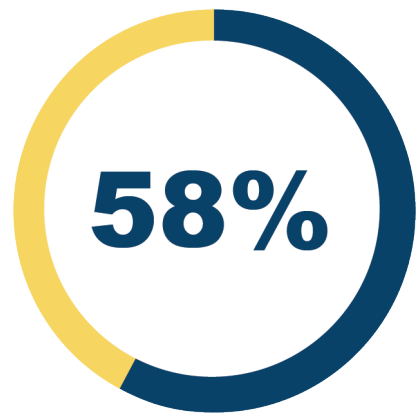
**Fentanyl** directly contributed to 87% of opioid-related deaths during the pandemic, compared to 75% before the pandemic.

The involvement of all other opioids, particularly **methadone**, **hydromorphone**, **oxycodone**, and **morphine**, did not increase during this time.



**Benzodiazepines** were detected in nearly half of opioid-related deaths during the pandemic, compared to only 30% before the pandemic.

This was largely driven by a **10-fold increase in the detection of etizolam** in opioid-related deaths, a benzodiazepine not approved for use in Canada.



**Stimulants** directly contributed to significantly more opioid-related deaths during the pandemic (58% vs. 50% before the pandemic).

This was largely driven by increases in the involvement of **cocaine** and **methamphetamines** in opioid-related deaths.

## Deaths among People Experiencing Homelessness

**Almost 1 in 6**

opioid-related deaths during the pandemic occurred among people experiencing homelessness.

Opioid-related deaths among people experiencing homelessness increased by **139%** during the pandemic:

**135 deaths** pre-pandemic → **323 deaths** during the pandemic



Nearly **1 in 10** of these deaths occurred within shelters or supportive housing.



**1 in 7** of these deaths occurred within hotels providing emergency shelter services.

## Location of Opioid-Related Deaths in Ontario



Rates of opioid-related death rose significantly in **half** of Ontario's public health units during the pandemic.

The highest rates of opioid-related death during the pandemic occurred in **Sudbury and Districts**, **Porcupine**, and **Algoma** public health units.

This may be due to **lower availability of services in rural and remote regions**, making it difficult to reach those at highest risk of overdose.

Corresponding Author:  
Tara Gomes, info@odprn.ca

Gomes T, Murray R, Kolla G, Leece P, Bansal S, Besharah J, Cahill T, Campbell T, Fritz A, Munro C, Toner L, Watford J on behalf of the Ontario Drug Policy Research Network, Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario and Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). Changing Circumstances Surrounding Opioid-Related Deaths in Ontario during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Toronto, ON: Ontario Drug Policy Research Network; 2021.

