



EMERALD POINTS

# FRAMING THE OPIOID CRISIS IN CANADA

Divergent Issues in Public Debates

**AHMED AL-RAWI**



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Divergent Issues in Public Debates

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*This book is dedicated to Calvin Goertzen and all the victims of the opioid crisis in Canada*

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Ahmed Al-Rawi

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# INTRODUCTION

## ABSTRACT

*The opioid crisis in Canada is a multifaceted societal problem with historical roots in early drug policy, systemic racism, and public debates surrounding morality as a nation. Corporate greed by pharmaceutical companies alongside political anti-drug campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s further contributed to the current crisis as overprescription followed by over-policing of prescription opioids coincided with the continuation of the criminalization of opioids and the flourishing of the illicit synthetic opioid market. This chapter offers a brief overview of Canadians' public views on the opioid crisis, the history of opioids' manufacturing, policy changes in Canada, and the opioid crisis' impact on certain demographics.*

**Keywords:** Opioid crisis; Canada; Canadian politicians; illicit drug policy; opium; immigration

## INTRODUCTION

In Canada, we live today in an opioid crisis, and regardless of one's political affiliation, there is an agreement that this is a very serious crisis. In this respect, [Perrin \(2020\)](#) has observed that people from different backgrounds like police officers, frontline workers, and persons with opioid addiction themselves clearly recognize it as a crisis; hence, it is important to be familiar with the historical, cultural, and political context to better understand this issue. For many decades, Canada has failed the victims of the opioid crisis by swiftly criminalizing them, cutting funding, limiting safe injection sites, and

overlooking the fact that most of the available drugs on the streets are poisoned with fentanyl and other dangerous substances. As the review below shows, there are many misconceptions, misrepresentations, and a lot of misinformation about the efficacy of opioid drugs due to the role played by pharmaceutical companies and the subsequent policies that were enacted by different (provincial) governments and public health authorities. Hence, I argue that the opioid crisis is essentially a crisis of public communication as so many peoples' lives could have been saved if public communication by public health authorities and politicians was more timely, transparent, and emphatic.

The following section summarizes public opinions that explore Canadians' views on drug addiction and policies as well as safe injection sites. The findings highlight regional, demographic, and political differences in Canada, offering insights into how public attitudes have evolved over time and how some issues remain politically polarizing.

### Canadians' Priorities and Views on Drug Addiction (2017–2024)

According to some of the earliest polls in 2017 since the Canadian Government announced it was an opioid crisis, most Canadians, with six in ten people, believed the country was facing this serious issue. Meanwhile, three in ten felt that while the situation was serious, a full-blown crisis had not yet emerged at that time. Regional differences were apparent, with residents of British Columbia (BC) and Atlantic Canada being the most likely to acknowledge the crisis. Canadians were divided on the government's handling of the situation. Just over half (51%) believed that the government was taking the wrong approach, and this skepticism was especially strong in BC (63%), where concerns about the opioid crisis were most pronounced (Ipsos, 2017).

Further breaking down the above survey, women (66%) were more likely than men (56%) to see the opioid crisis as a current reality. Age was another factor, with those over 35 (65%) more likely to perceive it as a crisis compared to half of those under 35 (50%). While many Canadians recognized the opioid crisis, opinions varied by region and demographics, and there was no clear consensus on whether the government was taking the right steps to address it (Ipsos, 2017).

In 2018, public opinion on the severity of drug addiction (not explicitly the opioid crisis) as an issue in Canada was mixed, with 41% of Canadians viewing it as a very serious issue, while 38% consider it a moderately big problem. A smaller percentage of respondents saw it as a minor issue (18%) or not a problem at all (2%) (Coletto & Anderson, 2018). Demographic differences were notable too. Younger respondents (under 45) were less likely to perceive drug addiction as a major issue (36%) compared to 46% of those over 45 who saw it as a very big problem. Similarly, women (46%) were more likely than men (36%) to express strong concern. Regional variations also emerged, with 39% of respondents in Ontario and Quebec identifying drug addiction as a very big problem, compared to 43% in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba (Coletto & Anderson, 2018).

Based on a global comparison, Canadians perceived drug addiction as a more significant issue in the United States than in their own country. While 41% of Canadians believed drug addiction was a very big problem domestically, 68% thought it was a very big problem in the United States (Coletto & Anderson, 2018). This suggests that while drug addiction is widely recognized as a public concern, Canadians saw it as less severe compared to the same health crisis in the United States. Additionally, drug addiction was ranked fourth overall among a list of 11 other national concerns, falling behind issues such as cost of living but above racism (Coletto & Anderson, 2018).

Public perception of deaths related to substance use disorders, including drug and alcohol addiction, also appeared to be influenced by media coverage, according to a 2020 Ipsos poll. Canadians estimated that 8% of all deaths in the country were due to substance use, while the actual figure was only 1%. Despite this overestimation, Canada ranked 11th in accuracy among 32 countries surveyed, all of which overestimated their national rates of deaths related to substance use. This discrepancy suggests that media coverage of opioid-related overdose deaths may have contributed to public misperceptions about the scale of drug-related fatalities (Braid, 2020). In the same year, another Ipsos survey found that drug addiction ranked eighth among top provincial concerns, positioned below healthcare and housing affordability but still above the economy and climate change (Ipsos, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated substance use challenges. A 2021 survey found that 16% of Canadians reported struggling with addiction issues, including drugs and alcohol, more than they did before the pandemic. The issue was most pronounced among younger adults aged 18–34 (24%) and middle-aged Canadians 35–54 (20%), highlighting a generational

disparity in substance dependency. While the overall national number remained relatively stable (19% in November compared to 16% in February), some groups reported improvements over time, including men (from 24% to 18%) and parents (from 25% to 19%). Despite this, addiction-related challenges persisted, raising concerns that the opioid crisis and broader substance dependency issues may continue beyond the pandemic's immediate effects (Ipsos, 2017).

In 2023, opioid-related issues were low on the list of charitable priorities for Canadians, with only 6% choosing them as one of the top five causes they would support through financial donations. This places opioids second to last among 15 different causes, highlighting a lack of public urgency or prioritization despite the ongoing crisis. When looking at the demographic breakdown, men (8%) were slightly more likely than women (5%) to prioritize donations toward opioid-related causes. Younger Canadians, particularly Gen Z (10%), were also more inclined to support this issue compared to Boomers (6%), suggesting a generational difference in charitable priorities (Simpson, 2023). In contrast, nearly half of Canadians (46%) prioritized donating to physical health causes such as cancer, Alzheimer's, and heart disease. Mental health and food insecurity were also popular choices, each selected by 23% of respondents (Simpson, 2023).

In 2024, the opioid crisis continued to be a significant concern for Canadians, with 79% recognizing its severity. Similar to previous polls, perceptions varied by age, as 86% of older Canadians (60+) acknowledged the crisis as serious, compared to 72% of those aged 18–29. Overall, four in five Canadians considered the opioid crisis to be a pressing issue. Additionally, a majority believed the crisis was worsening, with 59% stating it further deteriorated over the past year. This sentiment was more pronounced among Conservative voters (66%) compared to Liberals (53%). Age was also a factor, with 64% of those aged 45+ believing the crisis has worsened, while fewer young adults (49% of those aged 18–29) share this view (Sheppard, 2024).

Perceptions about the ripple effects of the crisis extended beyond addiction itself. Half of Canadians (50%) attributed increased homelessness and poverty to the opioid epidemic, while 45% associated the crisis with rising addiction and overdose-related deaths. Additionally, 45% of Canadians perceived heightened crime rates and safety concerns as consequences of the opioid crisis. These concerns were more prominent among Conservative (49%) and NDP voters (48%) compared to Liberals (37%) (Sheppard, 2024).

Another 2024 survey conducted by Abacus Data revealed that drug addiction ranked as the fifth-highest priority across members of all political

parties in BC, with 19% of respondents identifying it as a key issue. While this placed addiction policy below concerns such as housing affordability, the healthcare system, and the rising cost of living, it remained a more pressing concern than issues like economic growth and climate change (Coletto, 2024).

## Public Opinion on Addressing the Opioid Crisis and Its Policies (2017–2024)

Public opinion on how the government should respond to the opioid crisis in Canada varies by region, gender, and age group. When asked whether the government should stop laying possession charges and treat opioid use as a public health issue rather than a criminal matter, responses differed across demographics (Nanos Research, 2017).

Regionally, BC in 2017 showed the highest support, with 61.5% of respondents favoring a public health approach, reflecting the province's ongoing struggles with opioid-related deaths and harm reduction efforts. Quebec and Atlantic Canada also showed strong support, at 54.5% and 52.5%, respectively, while Ontario was more divided, with 49.7% in favor. The lowest level of support was seen in the Prairies where only 37.9% backed the idea, suggesting greater regional differences in attitudes toward drug policy. Gender differences were also evident, with 53.5% of women supporting a public health approach compared to 47.5% of men. Meanwhile, younger respondents aged 18–34 (52.4%) and those over 55 (52.0%) were more likely to support decriminalization than those aged 35–54 (47.5%), indicating a slight generational divide (Nanos Research, 2017).

Overall, just over half of Canadians (51%) supported stopping possession charges and shifting toward a public health approach, while 39% believe the government should continue charging users of illegal opioids. A smaller segment, 10% of respondents, remained uncertain on the issue. These results indicated a strong but not unanimous push toward decriminalization, with significant differences in support depending on region, gender, and age. Provinces with higher opioid-related harm, such as BC, appeared to be more in favor of a health-focused response, while other regions remained divided on whether decriminalization is the best approach (Nanos Research, 2017).

A majority of BC voters (63%) believe that the government should do more to address opioid addiction, according to a survey by The Forum Poll in 2017. Of these, 51% think the government should have done more, while 12% felt it should do a lot more. In contrast, 27% believe that the government had done enough, and 11% were undecided (Forum Research, 2017).

These findings reveal a significant demand for more government action on opioid addiction in BC, particularly among younger, female, and wealthier voters, as well as NDP supporters. However, older men and Conservative and Liberal supporters were more likely to feel the current efforts were sufficient.

In 2018, another survey showed that six in ten Canadians (60%) supported the government's decision to invest over \$200 million in Canadian dollars over 5 years to combat opioid addiction in Canada, with 38% expressing strong support for this initiative. In contrast, one-quarter (25%) opposed the investment, including 16% who strongly rejected it. Only a small percentage (3%) were unsure about their stance on the issue ([Forum Research, 2018](#)).

A 2019 survey on Canadian voters conducted by The Forum Poll found that almost half (48%) of Canadians were dissatisfied with the federal government's response to opioid addiction, with 28% expressing they were not satisfied at all. Dissatisfaction was particularly high among men (51%), individuals earning \$20k–\$40k in Canadian dollars (56%), the least educated (57%), and those living in Manitoba or Saskatchewan (60%) and BC (60%). In contrast, 37% of respondents reported being satisfied with the government's efforts although only 9% felt very satisfied. Satisfaction was more common among those aged 35–44 (41%), people earning \$60k–\$80k in Canadian dollars (43%), individuals with a postgraduate degree (46%), and residents of Alberta (40%) and Quebec (39%). Overall, 15% of Canadians were undecided about the government's response to the opioid crisis ([Forum Research, 2019b](#)).

In 2020, Canadians were divided on the issue of decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of illicit drugs. Nearly half (47%) supported the idea, though only 16% felt strongly about it, while 53% opposed it, with strong opposition (26%) outpacing strong support by nearly two to one. Regional differences were evident too. BC showed the highest support (51%), but approval dropped in Alberta and Atlantic Canada (43%). Demographically, men (50%) were more likely to support decriminalization than women (44%), and younger Canadians (53% of those 18–34) showed the most support compared to 45% of those 35–54 and 44% of those 55 and older ([Simpson, 2020](#)).

However, when the discussion shifts to the decriminalization of drug use itself, public support dropped significantly. While decriminalizing possession focuses on removing criminal penalties for having small amounts of drugs, decriminalizing use suggested eliminating legal consequences for consuming them as well. Support for this was much lower in the above survey at 36%, while opposition rose to 64%, showing that Canadians were far less

comfortable with fully legalizing drug use. Support was highest in Saskatchewan and Manitoba (40%) and lowest in Alberta (31%). Similar to possession laws, men (42%) and those under 55 (41%) were more likely to support this broader decriminalization than women (31%) and older Canadians (28%). This distinction highlighted that while some Canadians were open to relaxing penalties for drug possession, many remained firmly opposed to fully decriminalizing drug use itself (Simpson, 2020). As will be shown below, this is especially evident along political affiliations, too.

In 2023, nearly half of Canadians (49%) believed that the best way to address substance use was by improving access to health and social services rather than focusing on police enforcement (7%). Meanwhile, 35% felt that a combination of both approaches was appropriate, and 6% believed neither approach was effective. Women, individuals with higher education and income levels, and Canadian-born respondents were more likely to support the health and social services approach. In contrast, men and those with lower income and education levels were slightly more inclined to favor police enforcement. Additionally, men, individuals with trade or college education, and immigrants were more likely to see both approaches as equally appropriate (Health Canada, 2024).

A 2024 survey showed that there was a high level of empathy and openness regarding substance use in Canada, with 88% of Canadians wanting their friends or family members who use drugs to feel comfortable discussing it and 81% expressing empathy for those struggling with substance use. Opinions were divided on the impact of decriminalization. While 62% believed it would improve access to health and social services, 51% feared it could increase harms associated with substance use, such as overdoses. Canadians with lower income and education levels were more likely to believe that decriminalization would increase harm and reduce community safety (Health Canada, 2024).

Another 2024 survey revealed that Canadians remained divided on the best approach to addressing the opioid crisis. A slight majority (54%) supported an enforcement-focused strategy that included stricter penalties for drug trafficking, relocating or reassessing safe injection sites, and enhancing law enforcement efforts. This stance was particularly strong among Conservative voters, 66% of whom favored this approach. Conversely, 46% of Canadians advocated for a harm-reduction approach that prioritized increased funding for addiction treatment, public health initiatives, and the expansion of safe injection sites. Liberal and NDP supporters were more inclined to support harm reduction, with 53% of Liberals and 58% of NDP voters favoring this approach (Sheppard, 2024). Despite this division, a

broader consensus exists around a compassionate, public health-oriented response to drug addiction, with 59% of Canadians supporting such an approach. This sentiment was especially pronounced among Liberal (66%) and NDP (68%) voters. In contrast, 41% of Canadians endorsed a punitive, enforcement-based response, a perspective most commonly held by Conservative voters (55%) (Sheppard, 2024).

### Public Opinion on Safe Injection Sites (2016–2024)

Safe injection sites will be further discussed in this chapter and other ones in this book; hence, it is important to highlight Canadians' views about these important venues. A majority of Toronto voters (57%) in 2016 approved of safe injection sites for persons with opioid addiction in downtown Toronto, according to a Forum Poll™ survey. In contrast, 32% disapproved of the idea, and 13% remained undecided. This represented a significant shift in public opinion compared to two years earlier when approval and disapproval were evenly split at 43% (Forum Research, 2016).

Similar to other issues discussed above, we could find some demographic differences. For example, support for safe injection sites was strongest among younger voters (62%), men (57%) compared to women (53%), and the wealthy (69% among those earning \$80K–\$100K in Canadian dollars). It was also higher among downtown residents (66%) and those with the highest levels of education (63% among those with postgraduate degrees). This marked a shift from 2014, when support was more common among Boomers (47% among those aged 55–64) and the very wealthiest (55% among those earning \$100K–\$250K in Canadian dollars). The increase in approval suggested growing acceptance of safe injection sites as a public health measure in Toronto (Forum Research, 2016).

Another survey conducted in Toronto in 2019 showed that 46% believed that safe injection sites were used regularly to access addiction services information, while 23% think they are rarely used for this purpose. Supporters of safe injection sites were more likely to believe they were used for addiction services, while opponents were more skeptical. While many acknowledge the benefits of safe injection sites, there was a reluctance to have them located within their own neighborhoods (Forum Research, 2019a).

This aforementioned kind of division has continued for years. For example, a 2022 poll showed that public attitudes toward safe injection sites remained divided, with many Canadians recognizing their role in saving lives while others expressed a preference for redirecting resources toward addiction