



The AESHA Project Team opposes the Government of B.C.'s decision to further entrench the criminalization of drug users

The AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers' Health Access) Project Team opposes the Government of B.C. and Premier David Eby's federally-approved decision to further entrench the criminalization of drug users. The re-criminalization of people who rely on public space by banning drug-use in public places, including hospitals, parks, bus stops, door stops and other locations is not evidence-based and undermines the human rights of people who use drugs. The AESHA Project is a community-based and longitudinal research project which has been operating for the past 14 years out of the Centre for Gender and Sexual Health Equity (CGSHE) at the University of British Columbia. AESHA data consists of thousands of hours of quantitative and qualitative interviews with over 900 street-based and indoor sex workers, the majority of whom also use drugs.

Existing within the duality of two criminalized realities (sex work and drug use) means hundreds of AESHA participants are at grave risk of further policing-related violence and displacement. Factors such as experiences of housing precarity and stigma, both incredibly prevalent among AESHA participants, further entrench barriers to safe drug use and experiencing adverse outcomes, including violence and death ([Argento et al., 2015](#), [Goldenberg et al., 2020](#), [Collins et al., 2020](#); [Boyd et al., 2018](#)). The Premier's announcement to target people who use drugs and rely on public space is disproportionately aimed at those who are the most marginalized and struggling to maintain or are lacking housing all together. Framed under the guise of protecting "public health and safety", the BC provincial government is ignoring important peer-reviewed empirical evidence on the harms of criminalization and policing of people who use drugs. AESHA data has found 8/10 participants experience housing instability and 1/10 were evicted at least once, so the extent to which sex workers who use drugs in our study will be impacted by the re-criminalization of public drug use is stark ([Goldenberg et al. 2023](#)).

As documented in AESHA's Recommendations to the Legislative Assembly of BC's Select Standing Committee on Health, a staggering 68% of sex workers who use drugs reported barriers to harm reduction services due to policing ([Goldenberg et al., 2020](#)). Police barriers to harm reduction include police actively searching and harassing sex workers and confiscating harm reduction equipment, as well as ongoing police surveillance and intimidation outside community and harm reduction services. [Sex workers facing police barriers are 2 times more likely to report a recent overdose](#) ([Goldenberg et al., 2020](#)). As Minister of Public Safety Mike Farnworth announced, police will now be further empowered to search, seize and arrest anyone suspected of drug-use. As AESHA evidence demonstrates, such power [will deter sex workers who use drugs from safer use and harm reduction services due to further risk of police interference](#).



Among 506 sex workers who use drugs, over 90% reported carrying take-home naloxone kits between March 2017-March 2024, and this proportion has steadily increased over the course of the AESHA study. (Moreheart et al., 2024). Naloxone is a life-saving intervention, as are sex-worker friendly harm reduction services. Increased policing and criminalization of drug use means that sex workers who use drugs will be less likely to access these essential services.

Based on findings from the AESHA project we urge the Province to reverse its decision to criminalize drug-use in public places and;

- That the Province prevent policing practices that target sex workers who use drugs, including police enforcement of simple possession, public drug use and street-based trafficking offenses of criminalized substances
- That the Province divert police resources away from the enforcement and surveillance of sex workers who use drugs and invest in community-led initiatives that focus on non-carceral approaches to community safety
- That the Province support and scale up access to safe, regulated drug supply

References

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