



Chief Medical Health Officer's Report on Substance Use and Health

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Vice-President and Chief Medical Health Officer

June 2025
City of Victoria

Territorial Acknowledgement

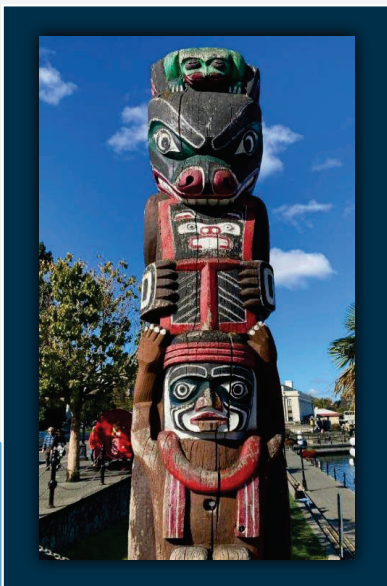
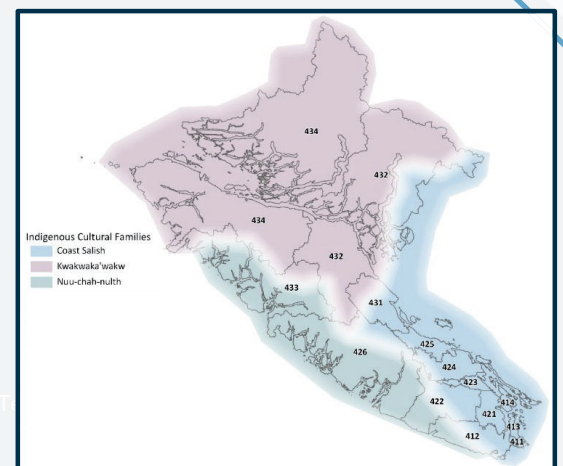


Photo by [Ronin](#) on [Unsplash](#)

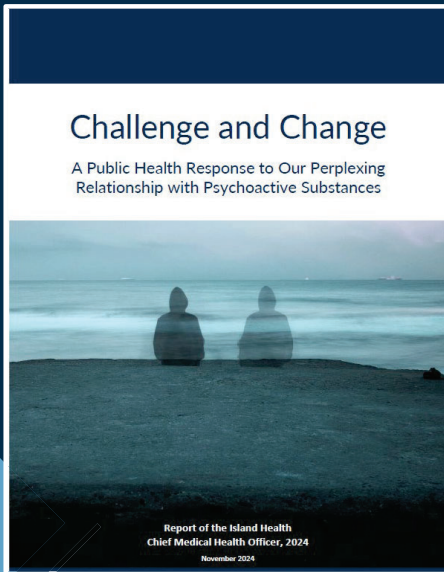
With respect we acknowledge the Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuu-Chah-Nulth and Coast Salish cultural families, upon whose homelands we occupy.

With humility, we commit to walk softly on this land, and to work together to uphold the self-determination and health of the Indigenous peoples and communities we serve.

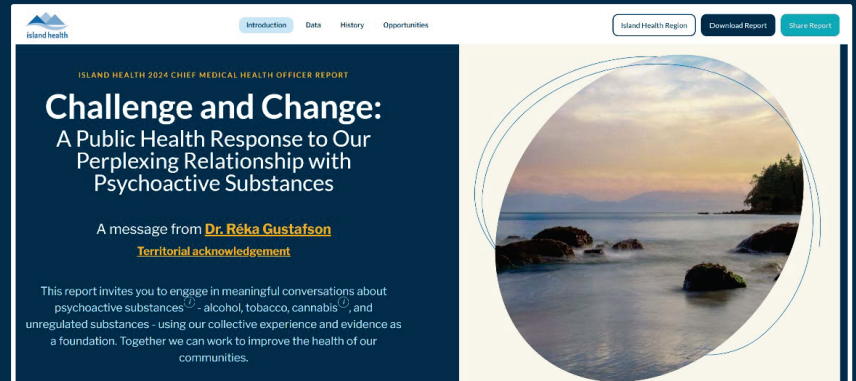


Challenge and Change

Full Report



Interactive website



cmho-report-2024.islandhealth.ca



Alcohol, tobacco, and illegally manufactured opioids are causing significant harm to our population.

We can make decisions to either increase or decrease harm

Why this report for Island Health?

Regulated substances

Alcohol



report regularly consuming alcohol in the last year. (2023)



Cannabis



report cannabis consumption in the past year. (2020)



Tobacco



are current tobacco users. (2020)



Alternative tobacco products



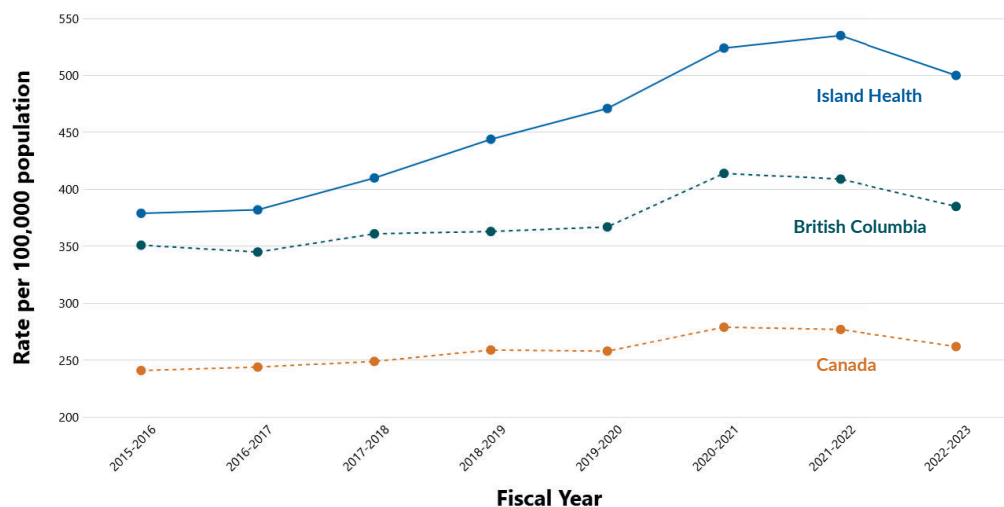
report using an alternative tobacco product in the past year. (2020)



Sources: BC Centre for Disease Control (2023). BC SPEAK Round 3 Survey; Statistics Canada. (2020). Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2020.

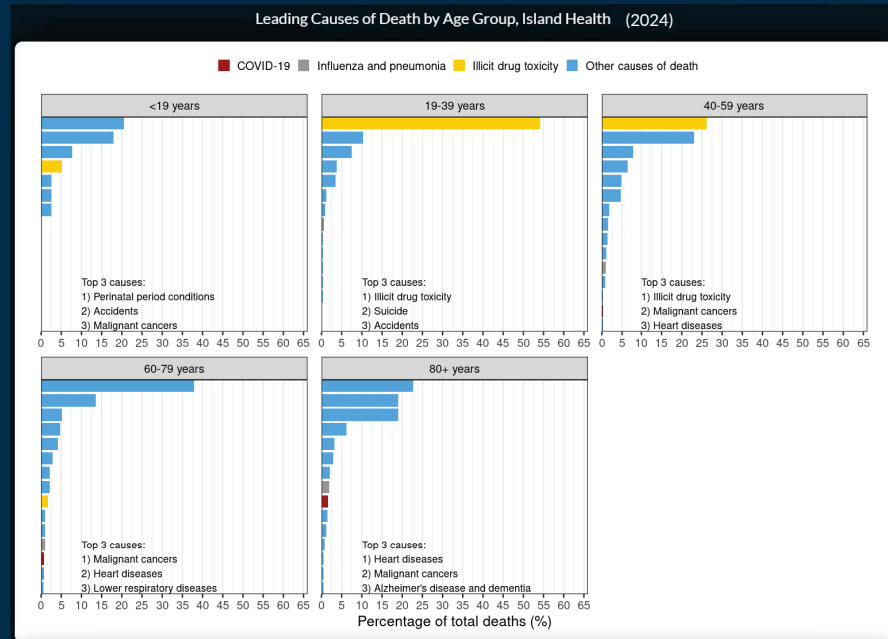
Why this report for Island Health?

Rate of Hospital Admissions Entirely Caused by Alcohol per 100,000 Population, Island Health, B.C., and Canada (2015-2023)



Source: Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2023, Your health system: Hospitalizations entirely caused by alcohol details for Island Health.

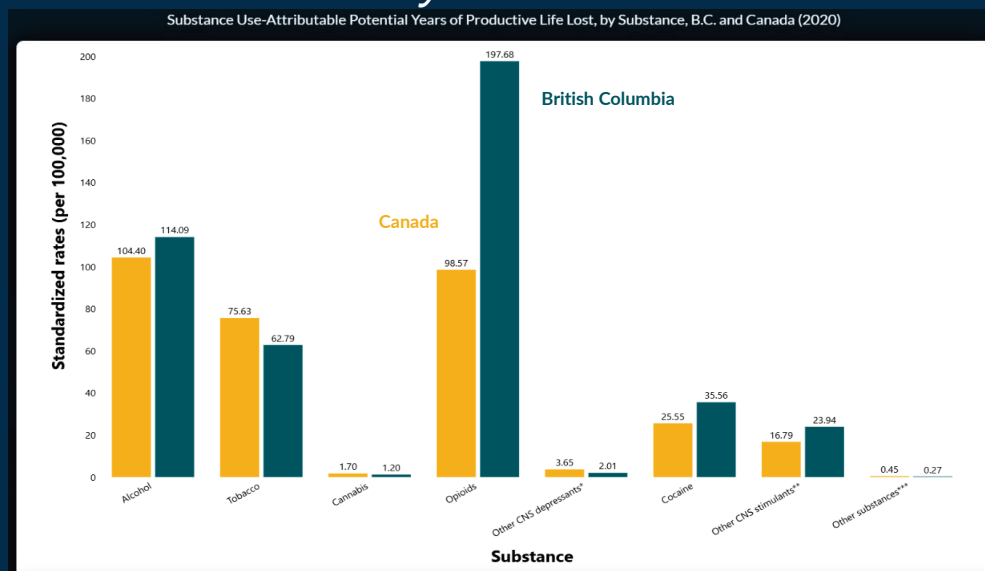
Why this report for Island Health?



Source: BC Centre for Disease Control, 2025, BCCDC mortality context application. Figure retrieved from https://bccdc.shinyapps.io/Mortality_Context_ShinyApp/

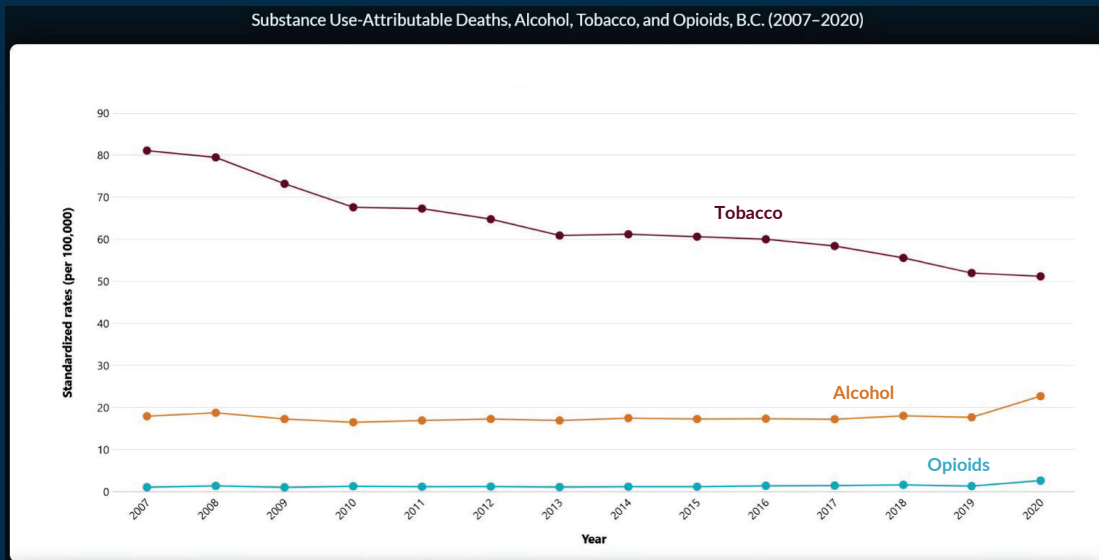
Focus on alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, and unregulated substances

Potential years of life lost



Source: Canadian Substance Use Costs and Harms Scientific Working Group. (2023). Canadian substance use costs and harms visualization tool, version 3.0.2 [Online tool]. Data retrieved from <https://csuch.ca/explore-the-data>

Deaths attributed to substance use

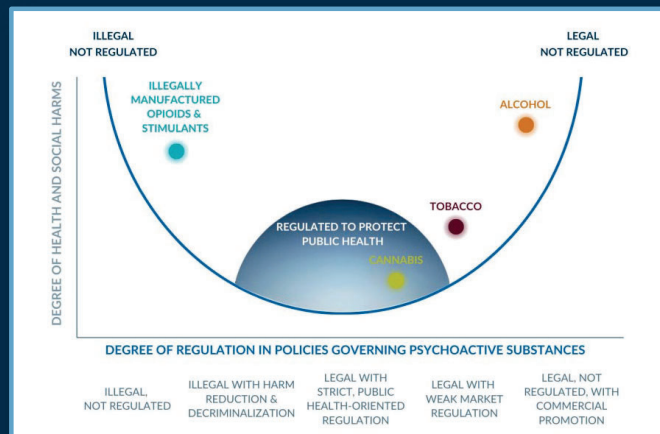


Source: Canadian Substance Use Costs and Harms Scientific Working Group. (2023). Canadian substance use costs and harms visualization tool, version 3.0.2 [Online tool]. Data retrieved from <https://csuch.ca/explore-the-data>

Policy affects substance use harms

Unregulated Opioids

Illegal, unregulated—
policies → increased toxicity



Alcohol

Legal and loosely regulated—
policies encourage
consumption

Cannabis

Legal, regulated since 2018
with health central

Tobacco

Legal, strictly regulated →
reduced consumption and
health harms

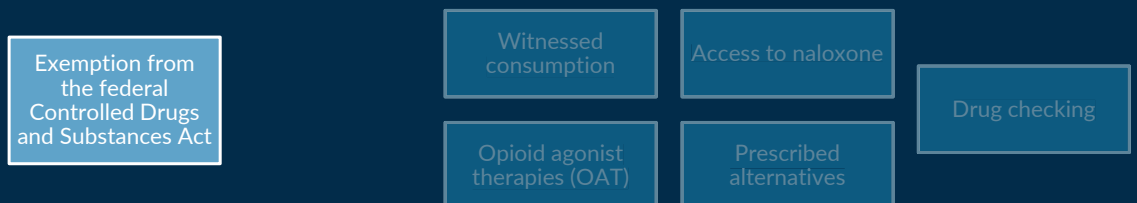
Effective policy tools

Legal substances



Effective policy tools

Illegal substances

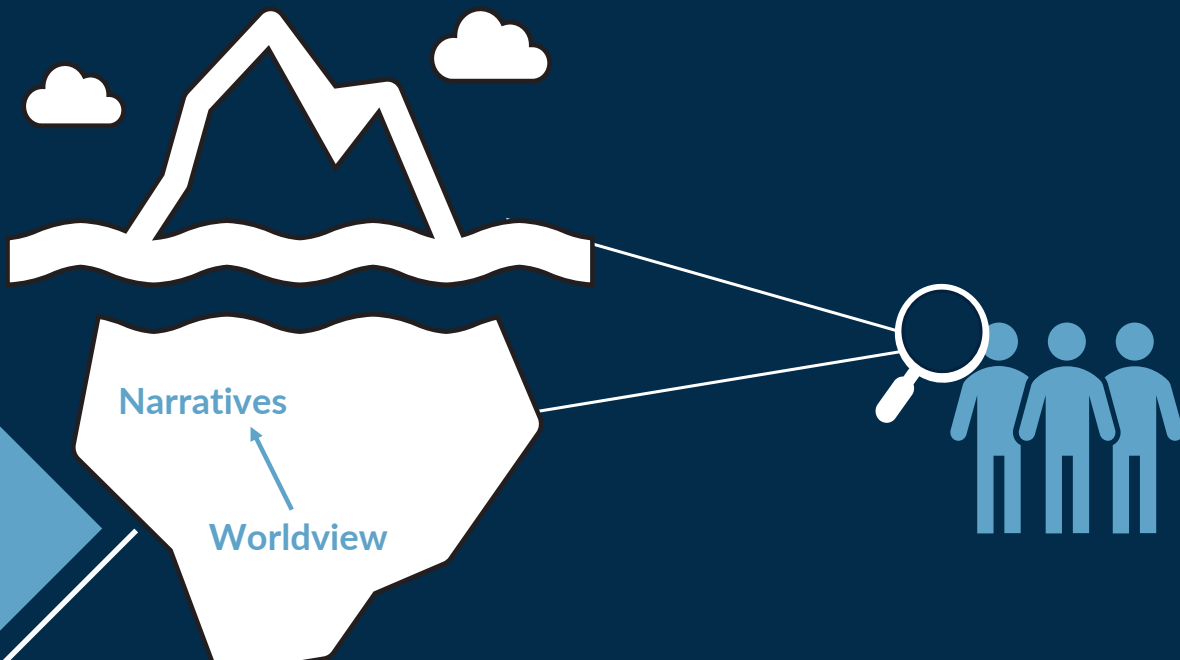


Legalization with strict regulation opens the door to a range of policy tools that are highly effective in reducing harm.

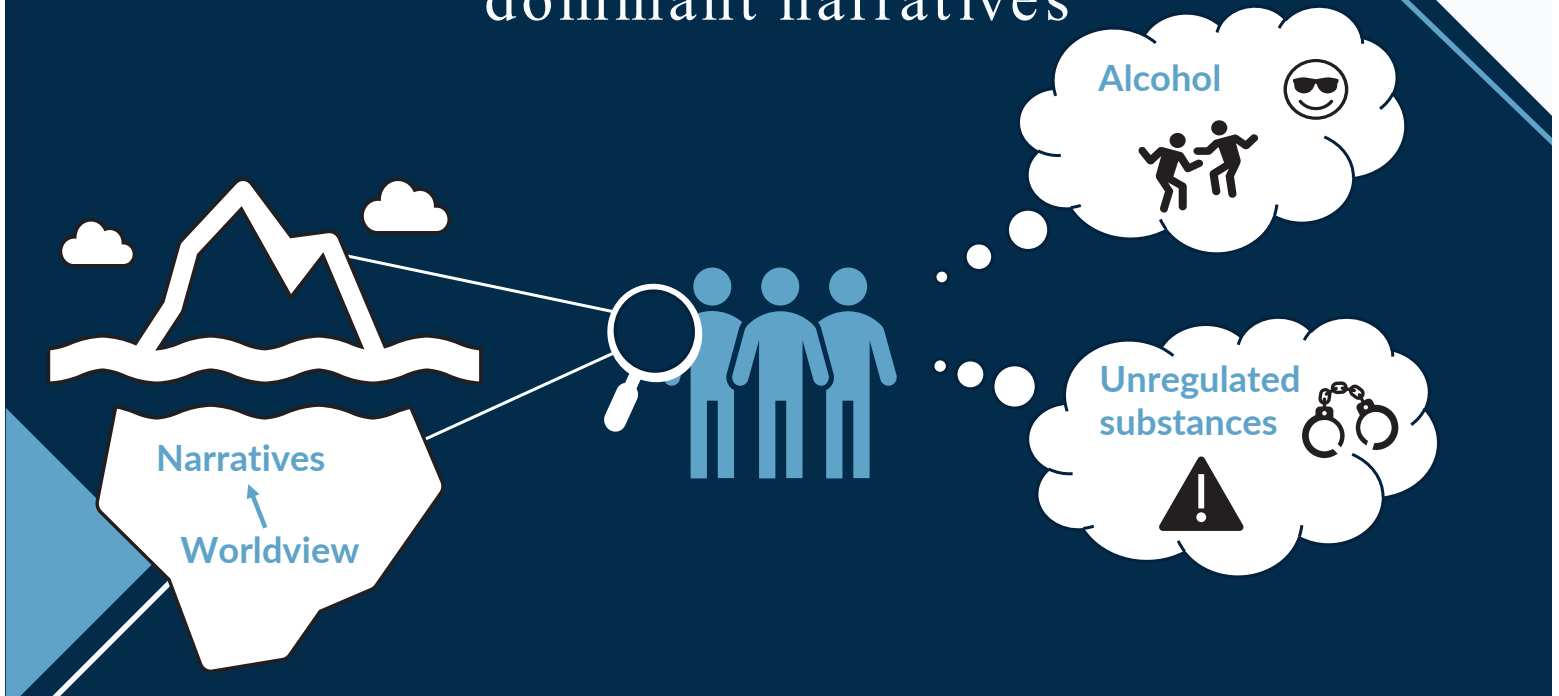
When a substance is illegal, we lose opportunities to use these effective policy tools.

There's a gap between
what works
&
what we do

Policy is affected by
dominant narratives



Policy is affected by
dominant narratives

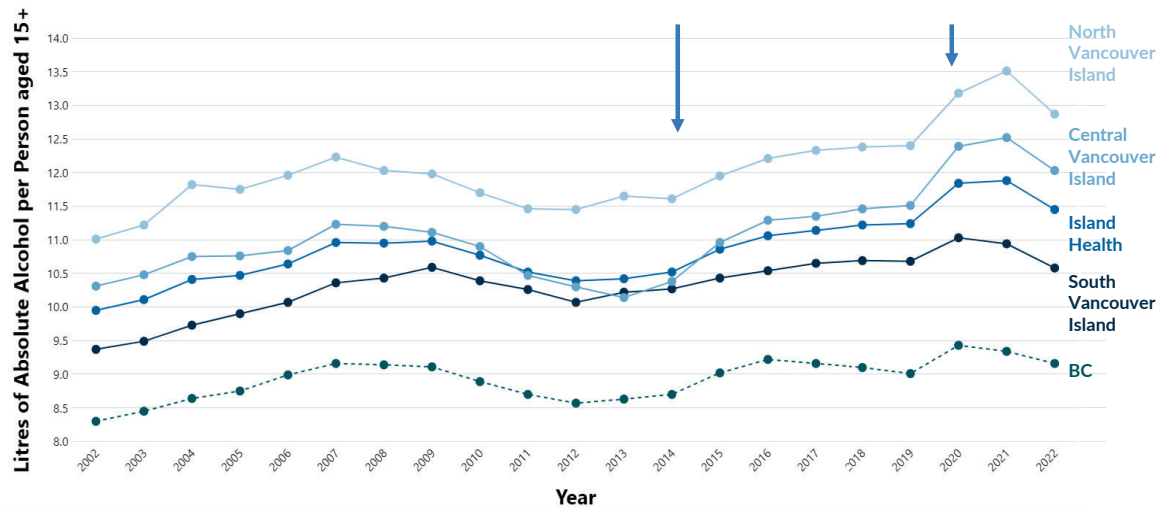


How did we get here?

Many decades of incremental policy decisions,
based on norms and opinions.

Role of policy and the environment

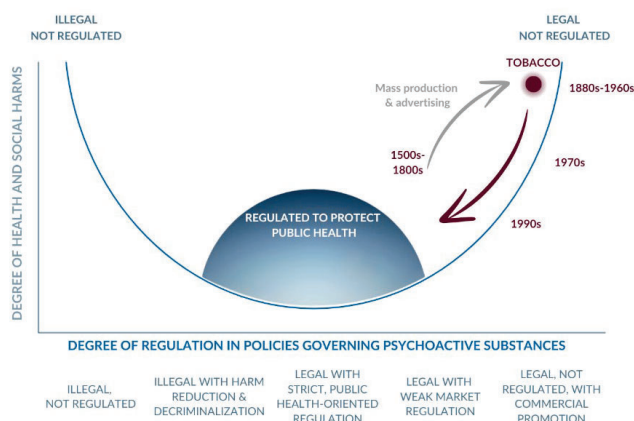
Annual per Capita Alcohol Consumption (Litres) by Year (2002–2022)



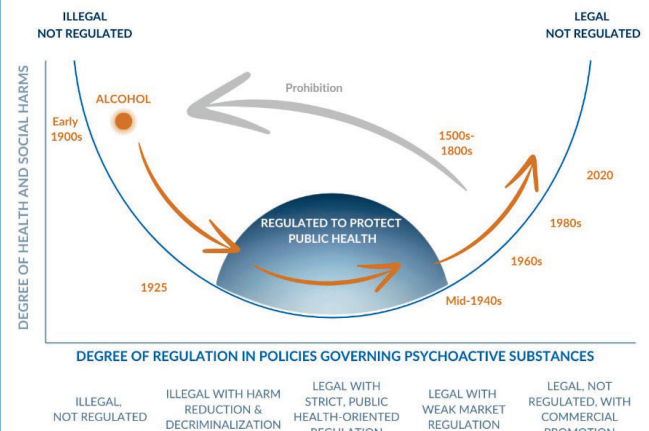
Source: Data from Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research. (2022). Interactive data visualization tool. <http://aodtool.cisur.uvic.ca/aod/tool.php>; compiled by Island Health Population Health Assessment, Surveillance and Epidemiology

How did we get here? *Historical context of policy decisions*

Tobacco

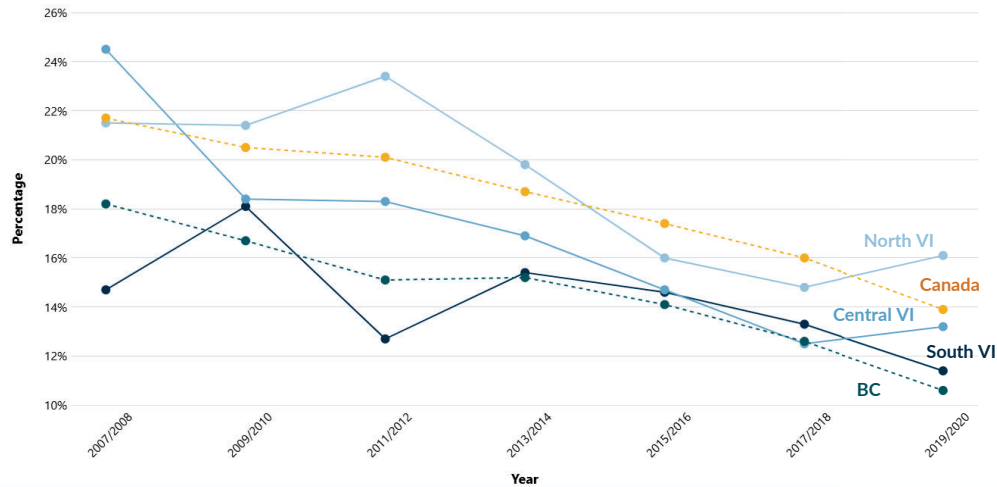


Alcohol



Decreasing smoking in Island Health

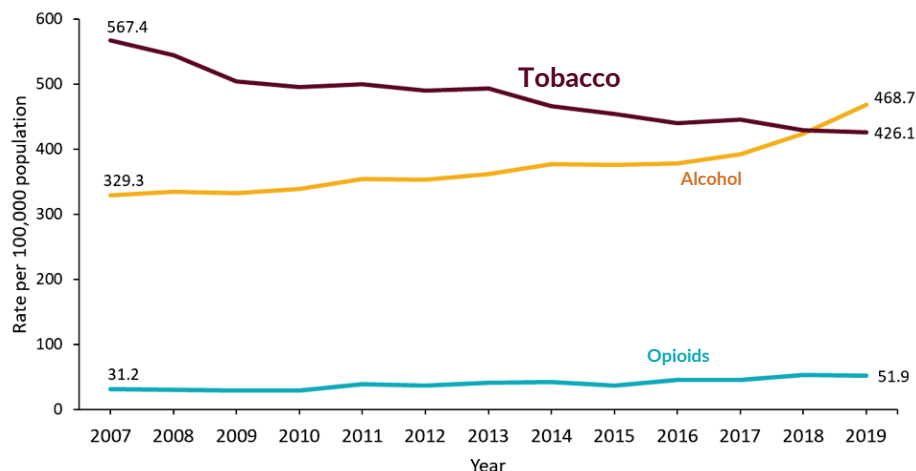
Proportion of Respondents Who Reported Daily or Occasional Smoking of Cigarettes, Island Health, B.C., and Canada (2007–2020)



Source: Statistics Canada. Canadian Community Health Survey. 2019/2020 obtained from data from Statistics Canada. Table 13-10-0113-01 Health characteristics, two-year period estimates; data includes respondents ages 12+ who reported current daily or occasional smoking

Decreasing hospital admissions due to tobacco

Hospital Admission Rate for Tobacco, Alcohol, and Opioids, Island Health (2007-2019)

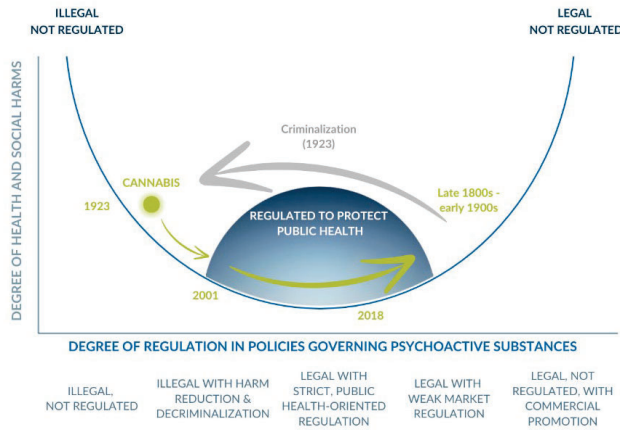


Source: Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, 2022, Interactive data visualization tool.

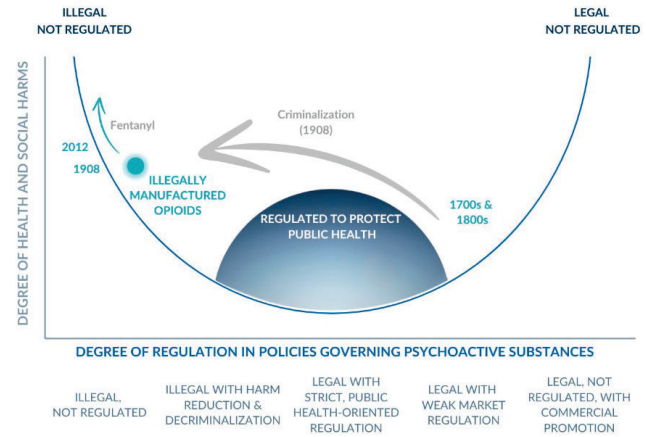
How did we get here?

Historical context of policy decisions

Cannabis

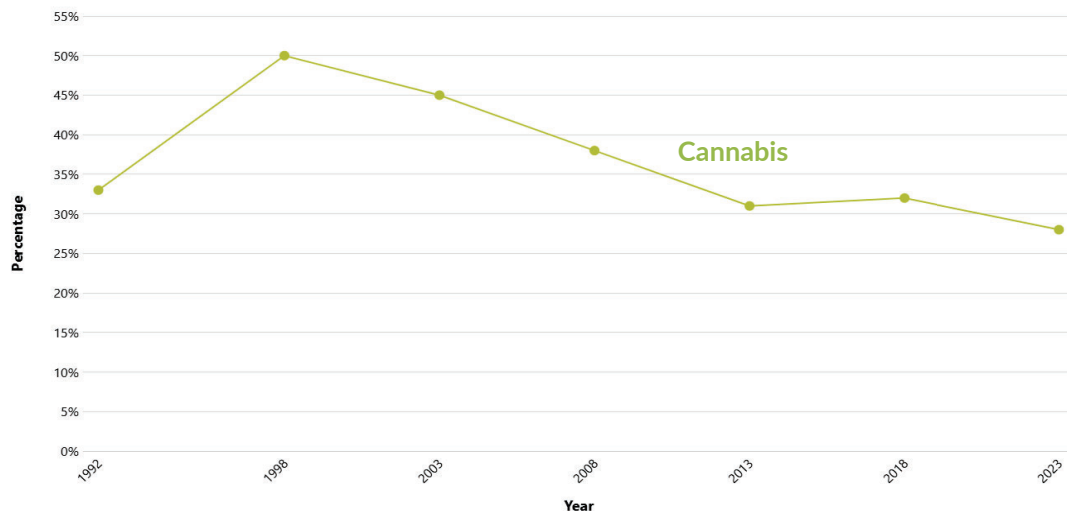


Unregulated Substances



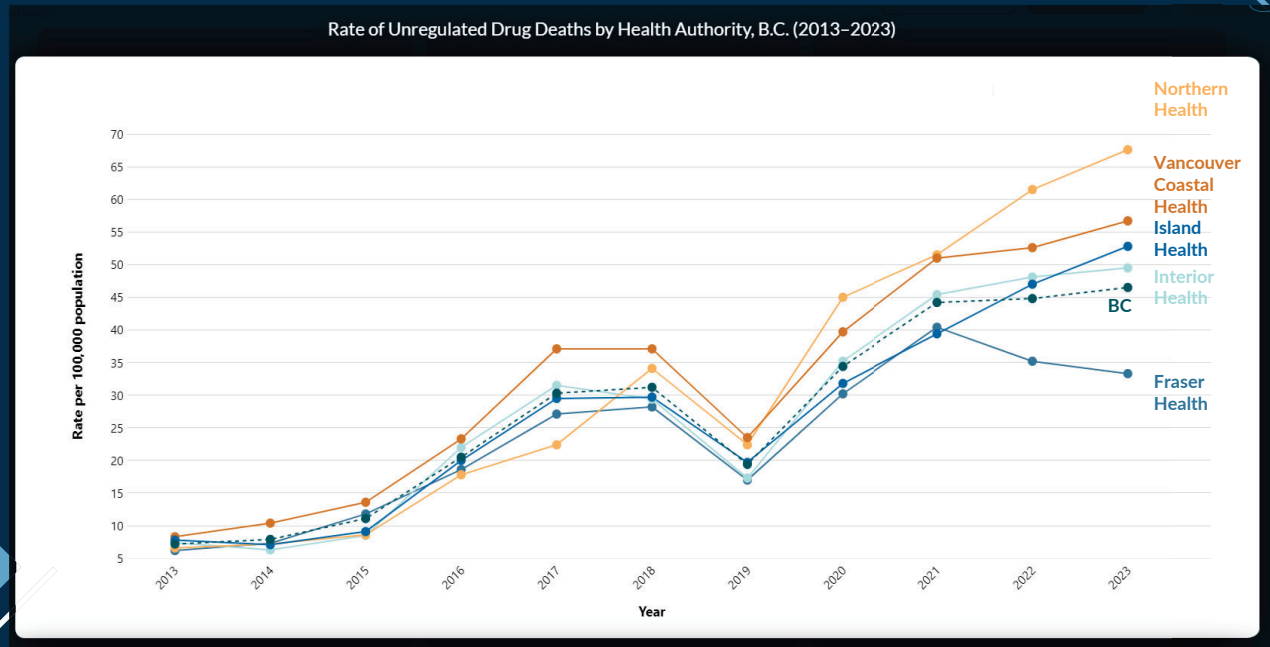
Fewer youth ever using cannabis

Youth Who Have Ever Used Cannabis, Island Health (1992–2023)



Source: Data provided by McCreary Centre Society, BC Adolescent Health Survey, 1992 through 2023

Increasing drug poisoning deaths

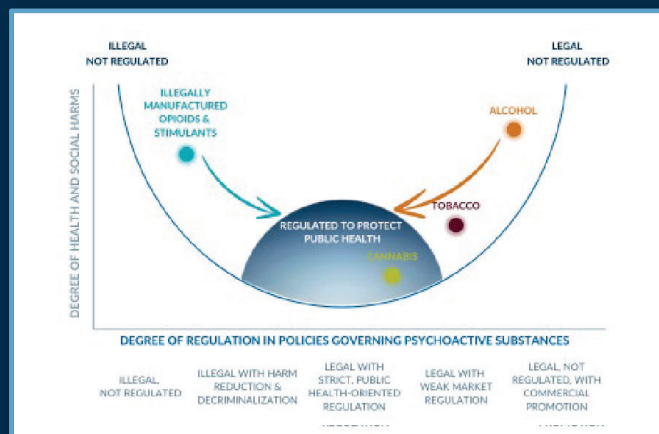


Source: BC Coroners Service, 2024, Unregulated Drug Deaths Dashboard.

Toward Better Health

Unregulated Opioids

Illegal, unregulated—
policies → increased toxicity



Alcohol

Over-available
Under-regulated
→ encourage consumption

What can we do?



No substance is morally good or bad



Legalization is a tool for health-focused regulation



Regulation changes the environment, affecting use



Play the long game



De-normalize alcohol



Connection is prevention

City of Victoria has already taken meaningful steps to reduce alcohol-related harm.

We can build on that momentum.

City of Victoria

Leadership in alcohol policy

Liquor License Policy
(LLP)

Business License
Bylaw (Section 32)

Liquor Retail Stores
Rezoning Policy

City of Victoria

Possible next steps

Consolidate existing policies

Strengthen evaluation criteria

Promote alcohol-free & low-alcohol environments

Maintain & protect progress

Continue creating and enhancing spaces for
social connection

Takeaways

Alcohol, tobacco, and illegally manufactured opioids are causing significant harm to our population. We can make decisions to either increase or decrease harm.

There's a gap between what works & what we do.

How did we get here?
Many decades of incremental policy decisions, based on norms and opinions.

The City of Victoria has already taken meaningful steps to reduce alcohol-related harm. We can build on that momentum.

Thank you

Dr. Réka Gustafson

*VP, Population and Public Health and
Chief Medical Health Officer,
Island Health*

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