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BUILDING A **SAFE AND RESILIENT CANADA**



**Public Safety Canada  
2019 Law Enforcement Roundtable on Drugs  
MEETING SUMMARY**

SEPTEMBER 2019

Canada

## Introduction

The opioid crisis continues to be a public health and public safety issue that significantly impacts individuals, families and communities across Canada and beyond our borders. The implications of this crisis are far-reaching and have affected all demographics. In Canada alone, recent data indicate that more than 10,300 apparent opioid-related deaths occurred between January 2016 and September 2018, ninety-three percent of which were accidental. The magnitude of this crisis requires that urgent action be taken.

The Government of Canada is deeply concerned about the number of overdoses and deaths associated with opioids and illicit substances. The first priority of the Government of Canada is to protect the safety and security of Canadians. As such, Public Safety Canada actively works with federal, provincial and territorial governments, international partners, and key stakeholders to ensure that law enforcement have the tools they need to combat opioids and other illicit drugs.

To foster these partnerships, Public Safety Canada hosted the second-annual Law Enforcement Roundtable on Drugs on March 29, 2019, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This event provided a forum for representatives of law enforcement, academia, Indigenous communities, governmental and non-governmental organizations and individuals with lived experience to share experiences, perspectives and challenges in responding to the opioid crisis (see Appendix A for a list of organizations represented at the meeting).

This event was held in follow up to the 2018 Law Enforcement Roundtable on the Opioid Crisis, which was hosted by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction with support from Public Safety Canada. Building on the success of last year's roundtable, this year's event continued discussions on the following issues:

- International law and border security;
- The role of organized crime in the illicit drug trade;
- Information-sharing and data gaps;
- Enhancing collaboration between law enforcement and health care communities; and
- Strengthening response-capacity in Indigenous communities.

This year's event also included discussions about emerging drug trends and threats and the impact of gender and diversity in the illicit drug trade.

The objectives of the roundtable were to:

- Advance discussions on law enforcement responses to the opioid crisis;
- Explore emerging drug trends with an emphasis on methamphetamine;
- Support efforts in developing a law enforcement framework on drugs; and
- Share regional law enforcement perspectives in combatting opioids and illicit drugs.

## Opening Remarks

Trevor Bhupsingh, Director General, Law Enforcement and Border Strategies Directorate, provided the opening remarks on behalf of Ellen Burack, Assistant Deputy Minister, Community Safety and Countering Crime Branch, Public Safety Canada. He underscored that engaging with international and local law enforcement partners on the challenges and achievements experienced in combatting the opioid crisis and illicit drugs is critical to developing a path forward. The importance of viewing the illicit drug situation from a regional perspective was also highlighted as essential to understanding the scope of the issue.

## Highlights from Plenary Sessions

The roundtable agenda consisted of three plenary sessions and four breakout sessions where presenters shared their diverse experiences and expertise. Presentations were followed by a question and answer period.

### Plenary Session 1: The Role of Organized Crime and Criminality in the Illicit Drug Trade

This session examined the relationship between organized crime and the illicit drug trade and how law enforcement and intelligence agencies monitor, target and combat organized crime. Presenters emphasized that organized crime groups (OCGs) are increasingly involved in all aspects of the illicit drug supply chain and are using more and more sophisticated methods to commit drug-related crimes, which complicates detection and disruption efforts by law enforcement. OCGs are continually adapting and are often involved in other forms of crime (e.g. human trafficking, sex trafficking, money laundering and illegal firearms).

During the session, it was noted that the trafficking of illicit substances by transnational organized crime networks is on the rise in Canada. Specifically, OCGs originating in Mexico have been increasingly involved in the trafficking of illicit drugs, including methamphetamines and opioids, to North America.

OCGs are becoming increasingly involved in different drug markets, giving rise to poly-drug trafficking as well as increased trafficking of cocaine, methamphetamine, and fentanyl. With respect to the fentanyl market, the profitability and relative ease of entry into Canada attracts OCGs, leading to greater supply and potential for harm.

With respect to dismantling organized crime operations, it was noted that collaboration and intelligence-sharing amongst law enforcement partners, both domestically and internationally, is critical. Also important are relationships between law enforcement and non-law enforcement partners, including private industry, government and non-government agencies, and communities. Programs such as *Bar Watch* and *Restaurant Watch*, in Vancouver, British Columbia, are examples of private industry and law enforcement working together to promote community safety, while *Her Time* and *End Gang Life* provide education and resources to deter individuals from pursuing gang-related or organized crime lifestyles.

## **Plenary Session 2: Emerging Drug Trends and Threats**

This session discussed illicit drug trends that are increasingly visible to the law enforcement community. Discussions highlighted the current status of illegal drug threats, the challenges experienced by law enforcement in mitigating these threats, and action required to effectively address the harms posed by these substances. Presentations provided insight into trends observed nationally and regionally, with a focus on Nova Scotia and Manitoba.

At both the national and international level, an increase in demand for and consumption of synthetic drugs, such as methamphetamine, was identified. The method by which synthetic drugs are being sold and distributed was also noted to be shifting, such that a significant portion of synthetic drug transactions are now occurring online through the dark web. By extension, there is a growing trend of dark web vendors using the postal and courier systems to facilitate the movement of illicit drugs. This has led to concerns over the *Canada Post Corporation Act*, which prevents law enforcement from seizing, detaining, or retaining parcels or letters in the course of mail unless a warrant is obtained on the basis of a suspected national security risk. Moreover, the use, possession, and sale of domestic pill presses and designated devices for the production of illicit drugs continue to present challenges for law enforcement. Efforts to ensure that precursor chemicals are used for legitimate purposes, rather than for the production of illicit substances, such as methamphetamine, were also identified as a priority.

At the regional level, presenters shared their perspectives on illicit drug trends being observed by law enforcement in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Winnipeg, Manitoba. Consistent with national trends, methamphetamine was noted to be a significant threat in Winnipeg and other regions across the Prairies. Methamphetamine is cheap to produce, provides a longer “high” than other drugs, and is highly profitable, which has created a desirable market for OCGs and criminal entrepreneurs.

While methamphetamine does not present the same mortality risk as opioids, the impact on individuals and communities can be devastating. From a community safety perspective, the rise of methamphetamine consumption has been linked to an increase in property crime and violent crime. Moreover, unlike naloxone therapy to treat an opioid overdose, there is no antidote to counteract the effects of methamphetamine use. Participants learned of the difficulties that law enforcement and health care personnel face when interacting with individuals who use methamphetamine - particularly when the individual is in a psychotic state or “tweaking,” and the lack of available on-demand treatment options.

In Halifax, it was noted that crack cocaine is the street drug of choice, but that seizures of illicit drugs containing fentanyl are increasing. While initiatives such as the Nova Scotia Prescription Monitoring Program have led to a decrease in prescription drug seizures, they have also led to an increase in online illicit drug purchases. While enforcement and prosecution remain the key functions of policing activities in Halifax, the value of community education, outreach, and prevention in addressing the root causes of crime was highlighted. In addition, the importance of using a trauma-based approach to policing is not to be understated. The Halifax Regional Police have implemented a variety of specialized policing services that support a progressive community response model.

### **Plenary Session 3: International Perspectives and Border Security Enforcement**

This session explored challenges experienced by domestic and international law enforcement and border security personnel in detecting and interdicting opioids and other illicit drugs.

Throughout the discussion, presenters highlighted how criminal enterprises are using increasingly advanced methods to produce, smuggle, and traffic illicit substances. With respect to production, it was noted that criminal enterprises are leveraging scientific knowledge to develop or modify illicit substances. Specifically, the increase in illegal compounding of substances has resulted in the regular discovery of new chemical compounds, including fentanyl analogues. This creates challenges for intelligence to stay informed of the potential substances that may be encountered by law enforcement and border security officials.

Presenters also emphasized how OCGs and criminal entrepreneurs adapt to detection and interdiction efforts and develop alternative transportation and concealment methods. Consequently, drug enforcement efforts in both Canada and the United States must continuously evolve. For instance, Mexican-based OCGs were noted to present challenges for border security in the United States, with cartels diversifying their product lines and fractionalizing their organization to avoid disruption and dismantlement. These criminal enterprises exploit air, maritime and land-based transportation domains to smuggle and distribute illicit substances, including cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine.

Both domestically and internationally, the purchase and distribution of illicit substances has been facilitated by the dark web, which provides an ideal environment for purchasers and suppliers to operate with relative anonymity. Transcending international borders, the dark web provides a convenient marketplace for illicit substances to be distributed to foreign locations through postal and courier systems with limited detection. Increased intelligence and targeted investigations on dark web activities are required in order to both understand and disrupt the supply chain.

Similarly, the distribution of illicit substances through the postal system and express consignment carrier facilities (such as FedEx, UPS, and DHL) is a significant issue in both the United States and Canada. Exploited for their low cost, low risk of detection, and high level of anonymity, the postal and courier systems are increasingly used to distribute illicit substances around the world. These methods of distribution also support a recent trend in micro-trafficking, in which numerous small-scale shipments have replaced larger shipments in order to decrease detection and interception.

To reduce the flow of illicit substances into Canada, the importance of leveraging both domestic and international partnerships to bolster intelligence-sharing and support investigations was emphasized. Presenters also highlighted the need for federal partners and law enforcement to work with private industry. While several initiatives exist and significant achievements have been realized through conducting multi-agency investigations and leveraging existing partnerships, it was noted that operational collaboration could be enhanced.

## Highlights from Breakout Sessions

In addition to the plenary sessions, a series of four breakout sessions provided an opportunity for attendees to engage in focused discussions on gender and diversity; Indigenous perspectives; intelligence and information sharing; and enhancing collaboration between law enforcement and health care communities. The following section summarizes the key messages shared by presenters and participants during the breakout discussions.

### Breakout 1: Gender and Diversity

- The gender gap related to problematic substance use is narrowing, with females becoming increasingly involved in the trafficking and problematic use of illicit substances.
- Gender-specific barriers have been observed when individuals seek treatment for problematic substance use. Specifically, females are less likely to access treatment due to concerns regarding stigma, lack of childcare options and social support systems during treatment, and fear of potential intervention by Child Protective Services during or following treatment.
- Social and economic determinants of health go beyond gender and must be considered when addressing barriers to treatment for problematic substance use.
- Understanding the interrelationship between gender and diversity factors and the opioid crisis and illicit drug trade is essential to developing effective policy and programming options.
- Multi-disciplinary stakeholder involvement, including community and social services engagement, is critical to ensuring a comprehensive approach to addressing problematic substance use.

### Breakout #2: Indigenous Perspectives

- Lack of funding for First Nations policing services is an ongoing issue. Substance use in Indigenous communities continues to pose challenges for First Nations police services, which are inadequately resourced to keep pace with demand.
- Illicit substance use is divergent across First Nations communities. For instance, methamphetamine use is increasing among Indigenous communities in Manitoba, while some communities in Alberta are disproportionately affected by the opioid crisis.
- The increasing incidence of methamphetamine on reserve has contributed to a rise in gun violence, violent crime, and inter-community conflict.
- OCGs and criminal entrepreneurs are cognizant of law enforcement capacity issues and capitalize on these shortages by targeting First Nations communities.
- A revised approach to First Nations law enforcement that is community-driven is necessary to influence change. Empowering First Nations communities with better policing options is essential to reconciling the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.
- Participants heard about the “Healing to Wellness Program” of the Saginaw Chippewa Tribal Court. This initiative offers an alternative sentencing program that allows participants to utilize a variety of services to assist in achieving a lifestyle that is free from problematic substance use. The program employs culturally-based teachings and approaches to medically-assisted treatment with the objective of reducing recidivism and addressing family violence and harms caused by substance use disorder.

### **Breakout #3: Leveraging existing data and addressing information gaps**

- Lack of real time data is a major impediment in addressing the opioid crisis. In the context of the overdose epidemic, having timely and accurate data can save lives.
- While multiple parties are collecting data regarding the opioid crisis, there is a lack of cohesiveness across datasets, making it difficult to understand the “whole picture” of the opioid crisis.
- Establishing effective information-sharing networks is the key to developing a clear understanding of the scope and evolution of the opioid crisis.
- Two examples of projects that demonstrate the importance of timely data and information-sharing were presented: the Canadian Substance Use Costs and Harms (CSUCH) online tool and the Surrey Opioid Data Collection and Community Response Project:
  - The CSUCH online tool was developed in partnership by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction and the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research. Employing a wide range of vital statistics, the tool illustrates the economic, health, and social costs and harms that are fully or partially attributable to substance use. The information assembled by this tool may be used to support government in making policy, funding and resource allocation decisions with respect to substance use.
  - The Surrey Opioid Data Collection and Community Response Project was undertaken by the City of Surrey, Statistics Canada, Public Safety Canada and key stakeholders and data providers to address the growing opioid crisis in Surrey, British Columbia. It focuses on the collection and analysis of data for the purpose of developing evidence-based interventions and informing program and policy options on the opioid crisis.

### **Breakout #4: Enhancing Collaboration between Law Enforcement and Health Care Communities**

- Presenters at this session noted the importance of strengthening relationships between the health care and law enforcement communities, as well as empowering individuals experiencing substance use disorder.
- Stigma is present across prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and enforcement services. Addressing stigma and negative stereotypes associated with substance use is essential to moving forward on a path to wellness.
- Participants were informed of the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion Program (LEAD) which is a community-based, harm-reduction intervention program operating throughout the United States. The program provides participants involved in low-level criminal offences with a less punitive approach to the criminal justice process (arrest, prosecution, and incarceration). LEAD program participants are provided with a range of support services to address public health needs, including problematic substance use. The program has resulted in improved police-community relations, reduced recidivism rates, increased cost-savings and participant empowerment.
- Participants also learned about the Community Addictions Peer Support Association (CAPSA), a nonprofit charitable organization which endeavours to empower individuals impacted by problematic substance use. With the objective of creating a safe environment for those in recovery, CAPSA provides peer support initiatives and community engagement projects to facilitate an individual’s integration into the broader community.

## **Key Outcomes**

Over the course of the day, a number of overarching themes and key messages emerged, including:

- Emerging drug threats pose significant challenges for law enforcement, especially with respect to the rise of methamphetamine.
- OCG involvement in the illicit drug trade is increasingly sophisticated, which has created challenges for intelligence and enforcement efforts.
- Enhancing collaboration between the law enforcement and health care communities is critical in developing effective approaches to address drug-related harms.
- Collaboration and timely information sharing among partners, both within and beyond our borders, is essential to understanding the scope of, and maximizing efforts in combatting, the opioid crisis and illicit drug trade.
- Policies and practices aimed at addressing opioids and illicit drugs require an approach that is considerate of gender and diversity.
- Funding for First Nations police services is an ongoing issue and has led to a lack of infrastructure, services, and resources to effectively address substance use issues among Indigenous populations.
- Leveraging the dark web and postal/courier systems for trafficking of illicit substances has created numerous challenges for supply reduction and interdiction efforts.

## **Conclusion**

The wealth of information and perspectives provided during the roundtable reinforced the complexities associated with combatting opioids and illicit drugs. Discussions held over the course of the day demonstrated that, despite the efforts undertaken to combat opioids and illicit drugs, more action needs to be taken to reduce the harms associated with these substances. In addition to advancing the dialogue on the opioid crisis, the noted rise of methamphetamine underscored the need to monitor and respond to developing drug issues before they escalate. The value of sharing information and insights on best practices at the regional, national, and international level was emphasized as a means to multiply, rather than duplicate, enforcement efforts. Also highlighted was the need to increase law enforcement capacity within Indigenous communities and advance collaboration efforts between public and private stakeholders. These discussions will be advanced at future roundtable events.

The event concluded with remarks from Trevor Bhupsingh, who reiterated the Government of Canada's commitment to address the complex social, public health, and public safety issues posed by opioids and illicit drugs. He noted the importance of building and maintaining working relationships among participants in developing a path forward. To maintain the momentum generated by the roundtable discussions, he announced the development of a national law enforcement framework on drugs and stated that the next roundtable would be held in fall 2019.



## **Appendix A: Organizations Represented at the Roundtable**

Alliance for Safe Online Pharmacies (ASOP)  
Canada Border Services Agency  
Canada Post  
Canadian Armed Forces  
Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction  
Canadian Police Association  
Calgary Police Service  
Cape Breton Regional Police Service  
Charlottetown Police Service  
Community Addictions Peer Support Association  
Dalhousie University  
Department of Homeland Security, United States  
Drug Enforcement Agency, United States  
Edmundston Police Force  
Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States  
First Nations Chiefs of Police Association  
Halifax Board of Police Commissioners  
Halifax Regional Police  
Health Canada  
LEAD National Support Bureau  
New Glasgow Regional Police  
Nova Scotia Association of Police Governance  
Nova Scotia Department of Justice  
Ontario Provincial Police  
Public Health Agency – Nova Scotia  
Public Prosecution Services of Canada  
Public Safety Canada  
Royal Canadian Mounted Police  
Saginaw-Chippewa Indian Tribe  
Statistics Canada  
Truro Police Service  
Winnipeg Police Service  
Vancouver Police Department