

Pandemic Era Impacts on Drug Overdoses and Suicides

Pandemic era declines in drug overdoses and suicides were observed among inmates in federal custody.

Why we are doing this study

Over the course of five fiscal years, marked by the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21 and 2021-22, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) experienced a substantial decline (-1,392 or 10.1 %) in the federal in-custody population from 13,720 at year-end in 2019-20 to 12,328 in 2021-22. Exploring the differential impacts of the pandemic era on behaviours of concern such as overdosing and suicidal behaviour helps to better inform and improve active intervention strategies.

What we did

Historical federal incidents of overdoses and suicides as well as deaths in custody are recorded in CSC's Corporate Offender Management System (OMS). Data were extracted (May 28, 2022) to establish a five-year trend (2017-18 to 2021-22) of the overdoses interrupted, overdose deaths, suicide attempts and suicide deaths among federally sentenced (two years or more) offenders in custody.

What we found

As reflected in Table 1, official counts of the drug overdoses interrupted dropped during the two years of the pandemic era. Drug overdose incidents declined by 60 inmates or 41% from 148 in 2019-20 to 88 in 2021-22. Federal custody overdose deaths declined by 5 inmates or 83% from 6 in 2019-20 to one in 2020-21.

Table 1. Overdoses Interrupted and Deaths

	Overdoses Interrupted	Overdose Deaths
17-18	71	5
18-19	90	7
19-20	148	6
20-21	102	1
21-22	88	6

Source: OMS

In Table 2, the number of the suicide attempts also dropped during the two years of the pandemic era. Suicide attempt incidents declined by 31 inmates or 21% from 146 in 2019-20 to 115 in 2021-22. Similarly, federal custody suicide deaths declined by three inmates or 27% from 11 in 2019-20 to eight in 2021-22.

Table 2. Suicide Attempts and Deaths

	Suicide Attempts	Suicide Deaths
17-18	121	6
18-19	104	6
19-20	146	11
20-21	109	6
21-22	115	8

Source: OMS

What it means

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic period, it is clear that there was an overall downward trend in drug overdoses being interrupted with a more pronounced trend break in the first year of the pandemic (-46 and -14, respectively). Moreover, this appears to have translated into a substantial decline in-custody deaths due to overdose. In relation to suicide attempts, a substantial decline was observed in the first year of the pandemic with a slight rise in year two (-37 and +6, respectively). Similarly, suicide deaths had declined in year one of the pandemic then rose again (-5 and +2, respectively). Although there were some disruptions to normal operations during the pandemic period (i.e. visits, programs, temporary absences), CSC front-line staff continued to focus on these areas of concern and to provide critical services and interventions.

For more information

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