

Canadians' knowledge and attitudes around drug decriminalization:

Results from a public opinion research survey



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Background on the exemption in British Columbia related to personal possession of certain illegal drugs

At the request of the Government of British Columbia, an exemption related to personal possession of certain illegal drugs has been granted for adults 18 years of age and older in the province. British Columbia (BC) refers to this exemption as a form of decriminalization.

From January 31, 2023 to January 31, 2026, adults are no longer subject to criminal charges or drug seizure if they're found in personal possession of up to 2.5 grams total of any combination of:

- + opioids
- + cocaine
- + methamphetamine
- + MDMA

Instead, they are offered information about health and social supports. This includes support with referrals to local treatment and recovery services, if requested.

Approach to monitoring attitudes around drug decriminalization

Health Canada is collecting data at a national level on Canadians' attitudes towards, and knowledge of, drug decriminalization. To do this, Health Canada has identified a set of indicators to monitor changes related to:

- + stigma
- + attitudes towards drug use
- + perceptions of public safety

A key source of data for this work will be information gathered from public opinion research (POR).



About the Public Opinion Research (POR) survey

The POR survey was conducted by the Privy Council Office. It used 2 separate random samples of 2,000 Canadian adults aged 18 and older. Questions on attitudes towards people who use drugs and decriminalization were run between February 27 and March 12, 2023. Questions on knowledge of decriminalization were run between April 17 and April 30, 2023. Respondents were randomly sampled with proportional representation from across Canada. Unless otherwise noted, results shown in this report are expressed as percentages and may not add up to 100% due to rounding or a “not sure” response to a given question.

Questions focused on both attitudes and knowledge about:

- + preferences for approaches to addressing substance use, including a focus on health and social services versus police enforcement
- + general attitudes around empathy for people struggling with substance use
- + general attitudes around level of comfort in talking to friends and family members about their substance use
- + perceived benefits and disadvantages of decriminalization
 - › This included a focus on improved access to relevant health and social services, reduced stigma, increased harms, and reduced community safety

The POR survey also included 4 true-or-false questions to test respondents' knowledge of the details of BC's exemption for personal possession.

Key highlights from the POR survey results

Attitudes

To address substance use, 49% of Canadians preferred a focus on access to health and social services rather than police enforcement, which represented 7% of respondents (**Figure 1**). However, 35% felt that both approaches were equally appropriate while 6% felt that neither approach was appropriate.

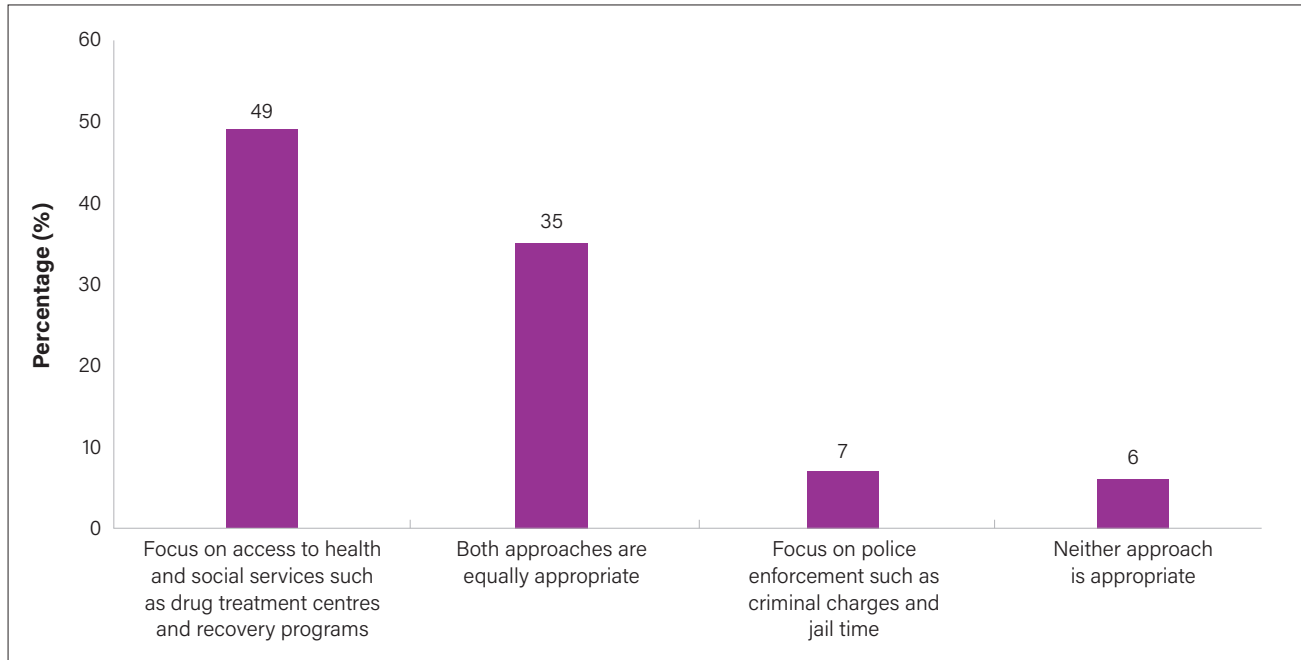
Women, those with higher education and income levels, and Canadian-born respondents were more likely to prefer a focus on access to health and social services to address substance use (**Figure 2a**).

Although few Canadians prefer a police enforcement approach to address substance use, men and those with lower income and education levels were more likely than others to favour police enforcement (**Figure 2b**). Men, those with trade or college education, and immigrants were more likely to feel that both approaches were equally appropriate to address substance use (**Figure 2c**).

88% of Canadians responded that they would like their friends or family members who use drugs to feel comfortable talking to them about it and 81% had empathy for people struggling with substance use (**Figure 3**). Canadians with lower income and education levels were more likely to think decriminalization would increase harms associated with substance use and make their community less safe. Although 62% of Canadians felt that decriminalization would make it easier to access health and social services, 51% also thought it would increase harms associated with substance use such as overdoses.



Figure 1. Attitudes towards approaches to address substance use among people who use drugs



Question: Which of the following approaches do you feel is more appropriate to address substance use among people who use drugs?

Source: PCO Survey on Current Issues, February 27 to March 12, 2023

Base: All respondents (Canada: n = 2,000)

Figure 2. Attitudes towards approaches to address substance use among people who use drugs for specific populations

Figure 2a. Focus on access to health and social services

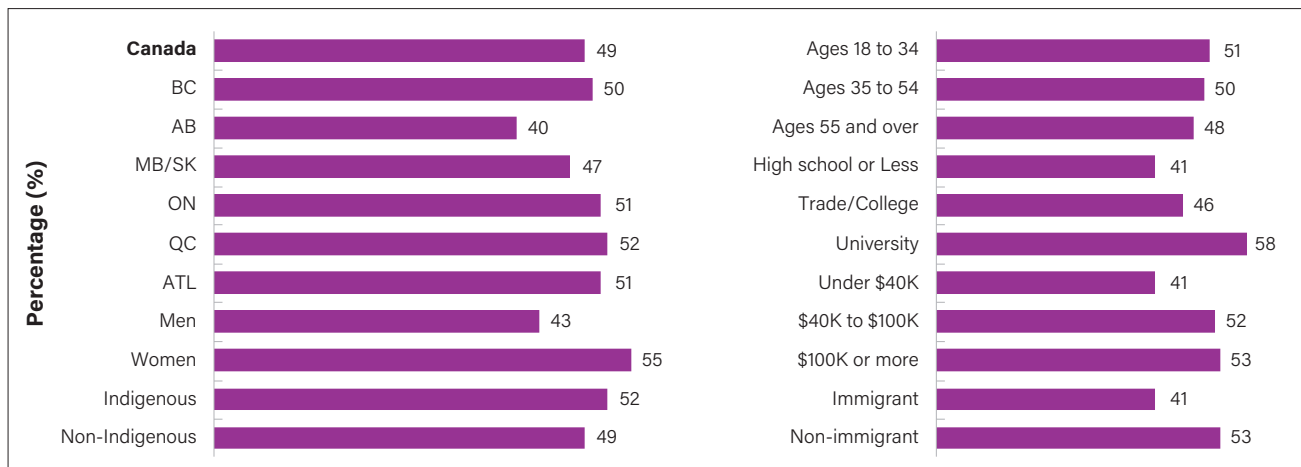




Figure 2b. Focus on police enforcement

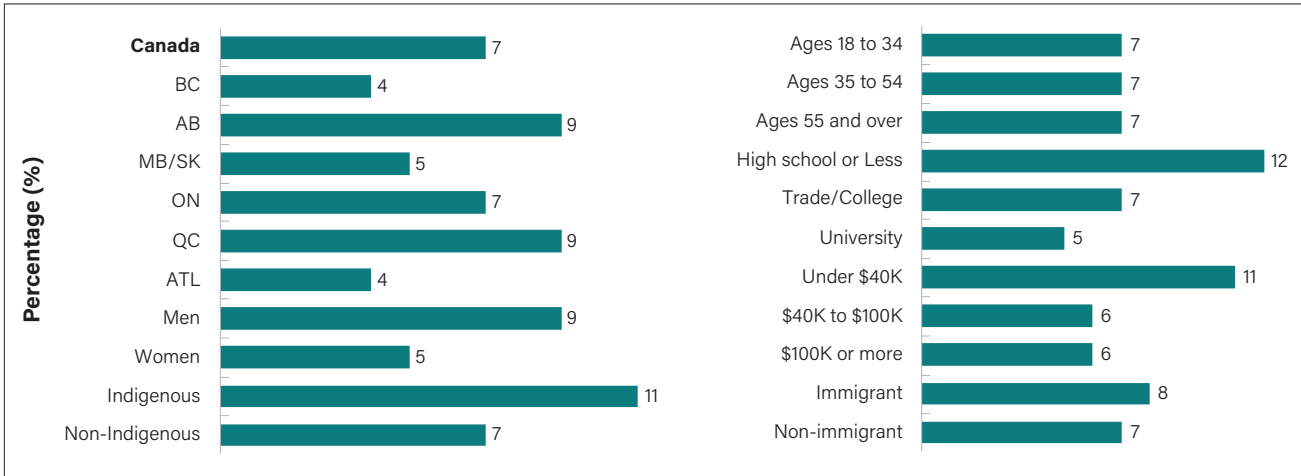
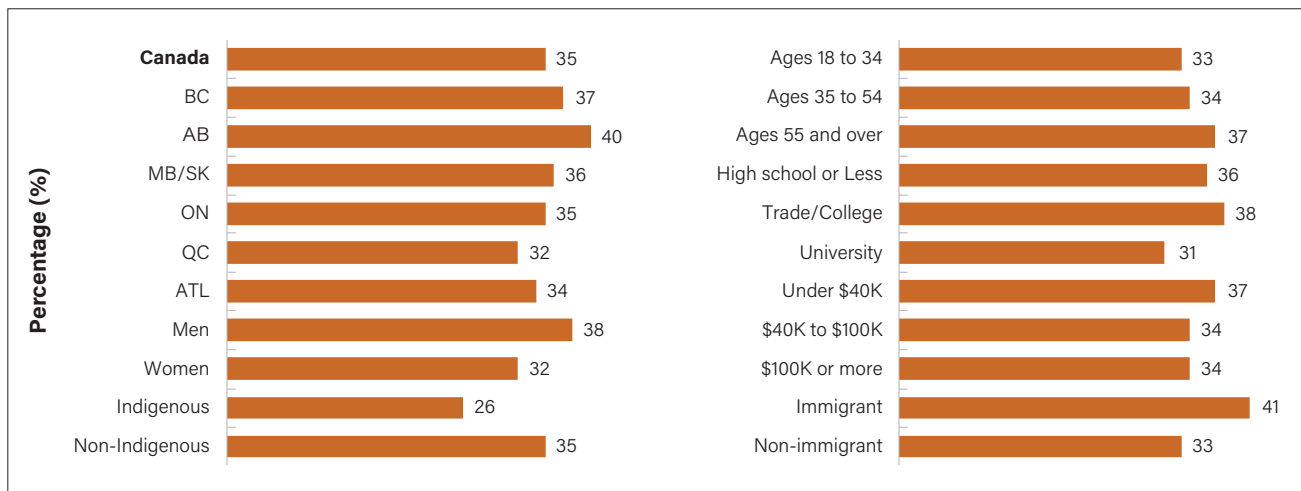


Figure 2c. Both approaches are equally appropriate



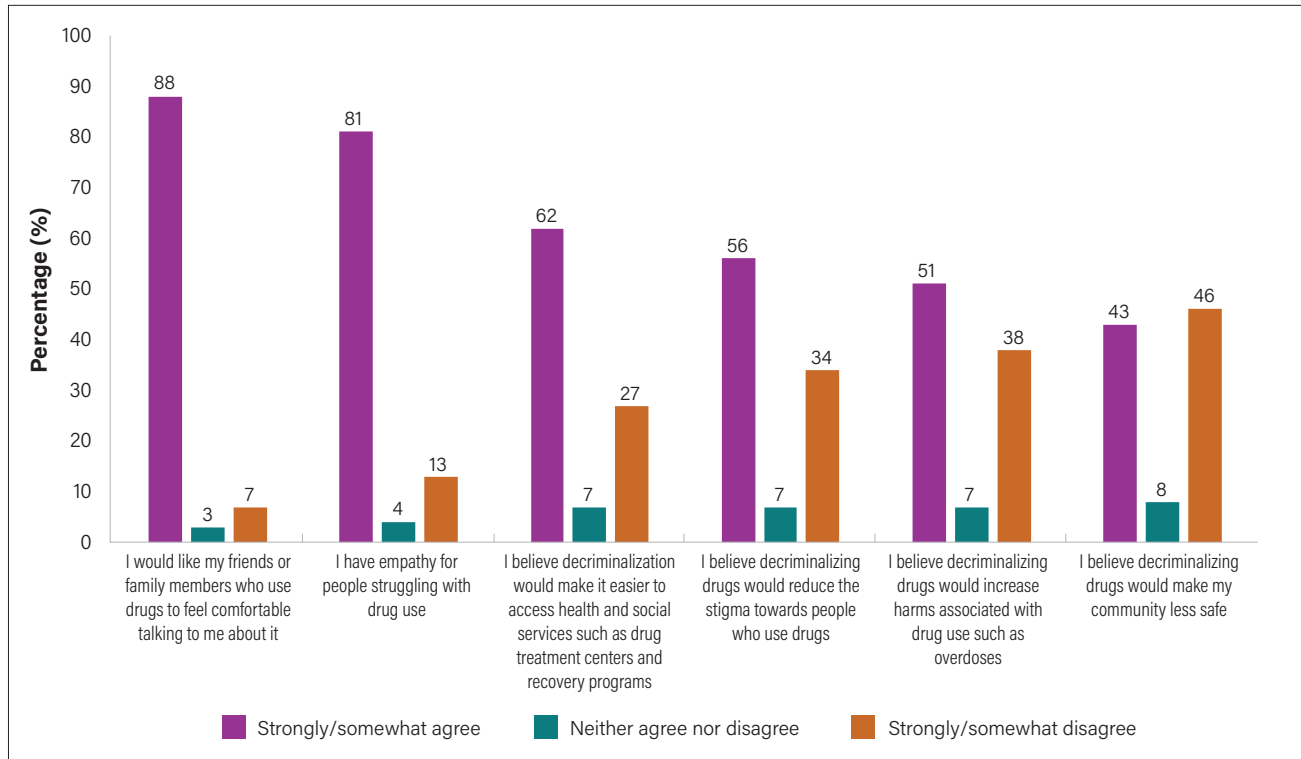
Question: Which of the following approaches do you feel is more appropriate to address substance use among people who use drugs?

Source: PCO Survey on Current Issues, February 27 to March 12, 2023

Base: All respondents (Canada: n = 2,000)



Figure 3. Attitudes towards people who use drugs and decriminalization



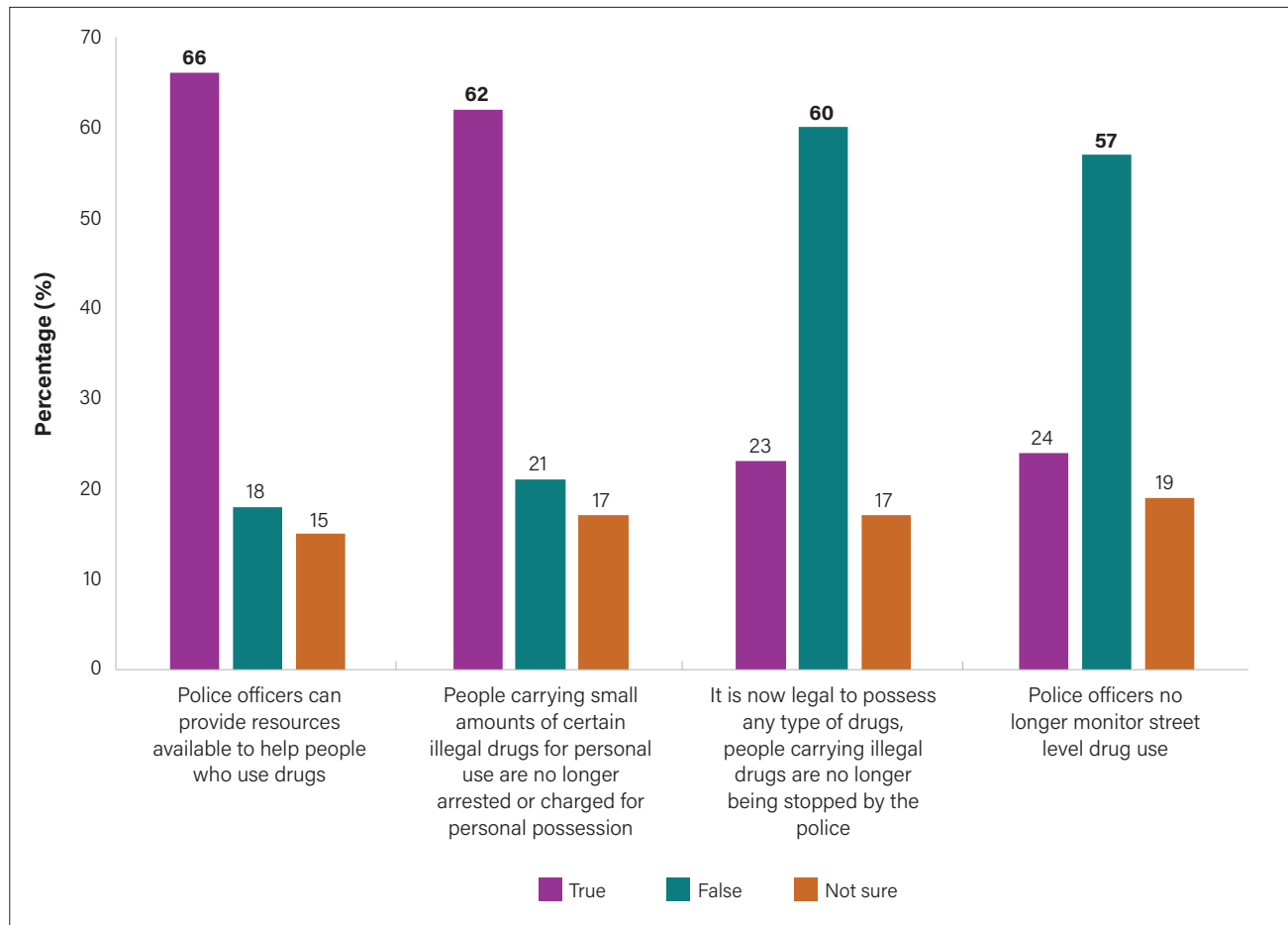
Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Source: PCO Survey on Current Issues, February 27 to March 12, 2023

Base: All respondents (Canada: n = 2,000)



Figure 4. Knowledge of the details of BC's exemption



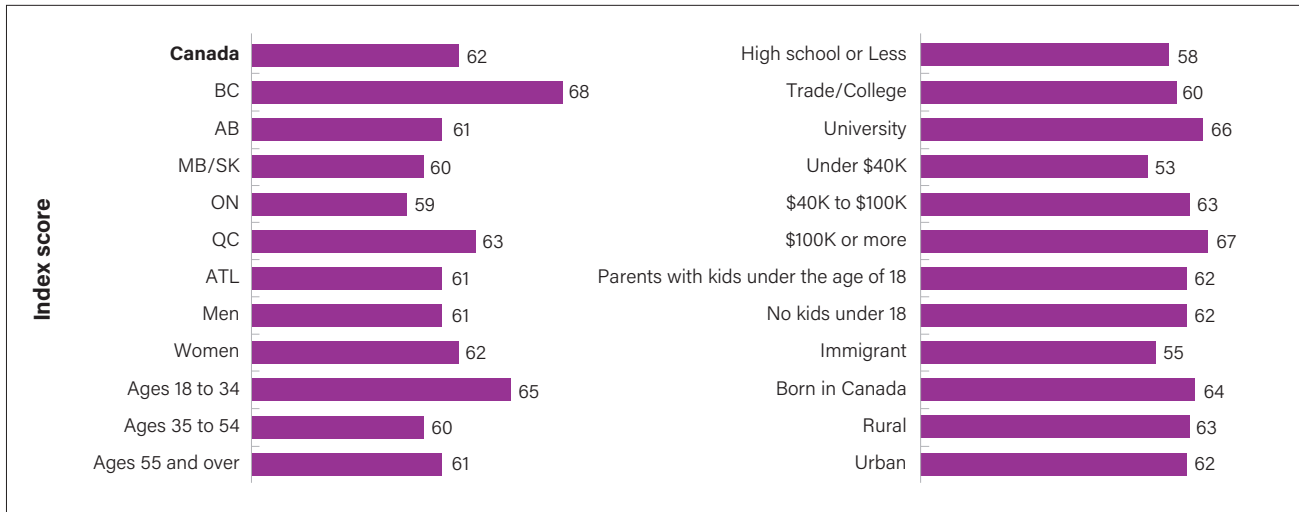
Question: Based on your understanding of the decriminalization of personal possession of drugs being implemented in British Columbia, are the following statements true or false? (Correct answers are highlighted in bold)

Source: PCO Survey on Current Issues, April 17 to 30, 2023

Base: All respondents (Canada: n = 2,000)



Figure 5. Knowledge of the details of BC's exemption for specific populations



BC's exemption understanding index: Respondents get 25 points for each correct answer. A respondent who answers all four questions correctly gets a score of 100 (range: 0–100)

Source: PCO Survey on Current Issues, April 17 to 30, 2023

Base: All respondents (Canada: n = 2,000)

Knowledge

Questions testing Canadians' knowledge of the exemption in BC focused on:

- + differences between the exemption and legalization
- + the role of police in enforcing the exemption
- + details about which activities involving drugs are covered by the exemption in BC

57% to 62% of Canadians, depending on the question, were able to correctly identify details of BC's exemption (**Figure 4**). However, 18% to 24% of respondents answered incorrectly and 15% to 19% were unsure of the answer.

Increased knowledge of the details of BC's exemption were shown by (**Figure 5**):

- + BC respondents
- + those aged 18 to 34 years
- + those with higher education and income levels
- + Canadian-born respondents



Conclusion

The results from this survey reflect the knowledge and attitudes of Canadian adults around drug decriminalization and the exemption in BC. These results will serve as a baseline to monitor key outcomes of the exemption, particularly public awareness and understanding of the details of the exemption and substance use. Health Canada's work will continue to compliment monitoring and evaluation work being led by the BC Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.