

UNPREDICTABLE DRUG SUPPLY TRENDS

Insights from 2023 Mid-Year Review Analysis Using Drug Checking and Harm Reduction Data

July 2023





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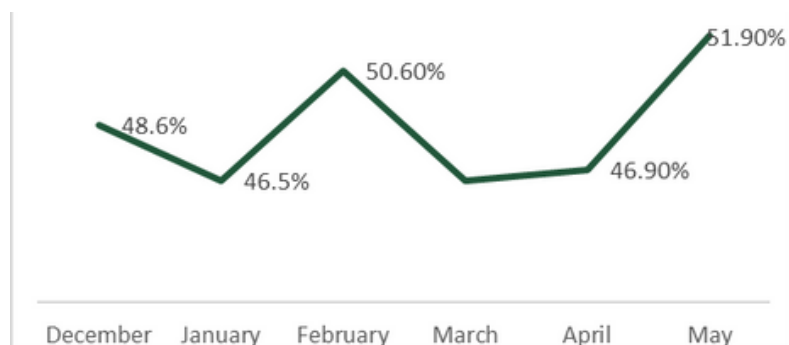
INTRODUCTION

This report presents an in-depth analysis of unpredictable and unregulated drug supply trends across multiple regions of the country during the first half of 2023. The analysis primarily relies on drug checking data and anecdotal evidence provided by our national drug alert system partners. It is crucial to note that this report serves an educational purpose and should not be considered a substitute for access to drug checking services. Rather, it emphasizes the significance of drug checking and the urgent need for accessible drug checking services due to the unpredictable nature of the drug supply. While the data obtained from drug checking and anecdotal reports from partners provide valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge their limitations in determining overall trends in the drug supply.

UNREGULATED DRUG SUPPLY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Benzodiazepine and Opioid Testing

The data obtained for British Columbia was collected and analyzed by the BCCSU Drug Checking Project. They gathered the data from drug checking sites in British Columbia (BC) that utilized Fourier Transform Infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy.



Benzodiazepine positive tests in opioids over time.



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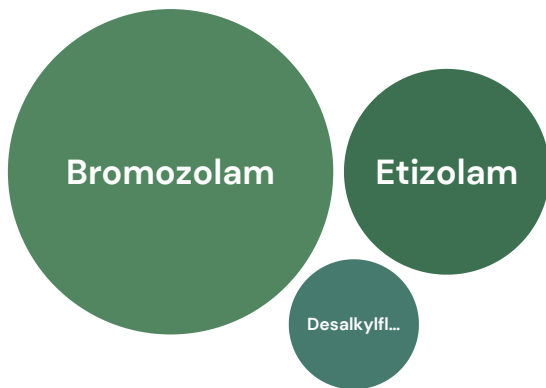
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The findings revealed a range of opioid samples testing positive for benzodiazepines, with a low of 46.5% in January and March (379 of 815 and 522 of 1,123 samples, respectively) and a high of 51.9% in May (536 of 1,032 samples).

Throughout this period, Bromazolam consistently emerged as the most frequently detected benzodiazepine, while other substances like Etizolam and desalkylflurazepam appeared at varying frequencies.



Fentanyl and its Analogues in the Opioid Supply

The uncertainty of drug potency in an unregulated opioid supply can lead to a significant rise in fatality. Drug-checking services are crucial in providing people with useful information about the composition of their substances. Over the study period, the median fentanyl concentration in BC's opioid supply was around **15.1%**, indicating a considerable presence of fentanyl and emphasizing the need for surveillance.

Fentanyl analogues, like as Carfentanil, are extremely potent and increase the danger of accidental poisoning. In particular, the prevalence of **Para-fluorofentanyl** in the unregulated opioid supply has steadily increased, accounting for **25%** of fentanyl-containing samples predicted in May (259 out of 986 samples). Furthermore, the sporadic presence of Xylazine, a veterinary sedative, in opioid samples raises concerns about potential adulteration and highlights the significance of drug checking.

UNREGULATED DRUG SUPPLY IN TORONTO

The data on drug checking trends in Toronto was obtained from [Toronto's Drug Checking Service \(TDCS\)](#) coordinated by The Centre for Drug Policy Evaluation (CDPE). It is important to note that the TDCS has faced funding difficulties which have affected their capacity to deliver crucial services and data. This challenge has impacts on service users, organizations, doctors, toxicologists, coroners, and academics who heavily rely on the extensive data provided by the CDPE.

Fentanyl and High-Potency Opioids

Across reporting periods, considerable variation was noted in fentanyl content. It ranged from **5%** in early January, dropped to **3%** in late January, spiked to **11%** in early February, and continued to vary in the subsequent months.



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In numerous instances, samples expected to contain fentanyl did not and instead contained other high-potency opioids like **fluorofentanyl, nitazene opioids, bromofentanyl, or a new carfentanil-related drug**. These substitutions varied from **28% in early January to a high of 71% in early February**, indicating a significant risk of severe sedation, respiratory system suppression, and accidental poisoning due to the frequent coexistence of multiple potent opioids. **Carfentanil** was last found in 6% of samples in **early January**. Its absence from late January onwards indicates fluctuations in its prevalence in the unregulated supply.

Benzodiazepine-Related Drugs and Xylazine

Benzodiazepine-related drugs and/or Xylazine were consistently found in a significant percentage of samples, ranging from **49% in early January** to a high of **62% in early February**. This underscores the complexity of the unpredictable drug supply.

UNREGULATED DRUG SUPPLY IN MANITOBA

Data for Manitoba was obtained from drug alerts circulated by [Sunshine House](#) and [Manitoba Harm Reduction](#), creators of [SafeSites.ca](#) and partners of the National Drug Alert System Between December 2022 to June 2023. Notably, substances such as **methamphetamines and pills marketed as T3, Dillys, and Molly**, were found to contain powerful and undisclosed opioids like **Fentanyl, Carfentanil, and the potent analogue Isobutyrfentanyl**. Such unexpected combinations led to numerous cases of accidental poisoning.

A considerable number of opioid samples also tested positive for benzodiazepines and xylazine. This combination with opioids increases the likelihood of complex accidental poisonings, which are more challenging to reverse with naloxone alone. A significant incident involved methamphetamine cut with gasoline byproducts, signaling supply challenges within the unregulated drug market and the need for accessible drug checking in Manitoba.





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ATLANTIC PROVINCES DRUG SUPPLY

Data for the Atlantic provinces, primarily Nova Scotia, was provided by the partners of the National Drug Alert System, [Nova Scotia Health Authority](#). Over the past six months, several alerts have been reported regarding substances of concern within their jurisdiction.

One alarming incident involved **Xanax**, which was suspected to contain **Fentanyl instead of Alprazolam**, resulting in severe reactions and indicating a high risk of fatality. Similar situations occurred with substances reported as **Crystal Meth, where Fentanyl** was detected through testing strips.

There were also reports on drugs like a hallucinogenic substance and cocaine, which caused unexpected symptoms.

An incident involving **"Pink Cocaine"** led to users experiencing an out-of-body experience and disorientation, indicating its impurity. Similarly, users of a substance marketed as "Crack " experienced intense sweating and panic due to alterations in color and taste when heated. These alerts highlight supply challenges within the unregulated drug market and underscore the importance of accessible drug checking in Nova Scotia. Additionally, [SUNAR](#) and [PEERS](#) Alliance, also partners of the [National Drug Alert System](#), reported five significant drug alerts involving substances such as Methamphetamine and Fentanyl sold as other drugs, posing significant risks in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island.

UNPREDICTABLE DRUG SUPPLY IN YUKON

Our partner [Blood Ties](#) provided the information for Yukon. The results of drug tests conducted in this area over the previous six months showed some concerning tendencies. The prevalence of "bunk" drugs, which are substances that were determined to contain no active components upon testing, is one of the observed trends. This emphasizes the significant risks and uncertainties connected to unregulated drug supply.





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While conventional contamination, such as the presence of fentanyl in non-opioid drugs like MDMA, was not seen, buyers who reused baggies for various substances reported cross-contamination. Only fentanyl test strips were able to identify these very small quantities of cross-contamination.

In addition, inactive fillers or "cuts/buffs" were frequently found in the drugs, particularly in "down samples" expected to contain fentanyl and/or benzodiazepines. These samples often contained additives like caffeine and erythritol, a sweetener. **Phenacetin, an older pain reliever with potential long-term, heavy use risks, was occasionally detected in crack cocaine samples.** These findings underscore the complexities and potential dangers associated with unregulated drug supply in Yukon all of which further confirms that implementing a regulated safe supply can address these issues effectively.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this report emphasizes the urgent need for accessible drug checking services, enhanced surveillance measures, and evidence-based interventions to mitigate the risks and harm associated with the unpredictable drug supply. By implementing comprehensive strategies, and most importantly regulated safe supply initiatives, we can strive towards creating a safer environment for individuals who use substances.

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- Blood Ties: [Link](<https://bloodties.ca/>)