

# British Columbia's opioid crisis hits construction workers hard

By Penny Smith  
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The western Canadian province of British Columbia (BC) continues to be mired in an acute opioid epidemic of crisis proportions. A public health emergency was declared two years ago after the number of overdose deaths doubled in a five-year period. Last March, there were 162 fatal overdoses across the province—the deadliest month on record.

The primary reason for the spike in fatal overdoses is the presence of the extremely potent synthetic opioid Fentanyl, a drug one hundred times stronger than heroin. Significant quantities of the drug are manufactured in China and shipped to BC ports from where it is distributed throughout the country.

However, the availability of this extremely potent drug has proven particularly deadly due to the unprecedented levels of social inequality, the virtual disappearance of permanent, full-time employment and the growth of widespread poverty in the province.

Recent data published by the British Columbia Coroner's Service (BCCS) reveals that among those workers who fatally overdosed in the five-year period ending in 2016, three quarters were males between the ages of 25 to 54, 20 percent of whom worked in construction, the province's second largest industry. An additional 13 percent worked in industries connected to construction, including building maintenance and waste management.

The construction sector is notoriously unsafe, with workers suffering high rates of on-the-job injuries and long-term medical conditions. The figures indicate that rather than relying on prescription drugs, many construction workers are risking their lives by turning to cheaper and deadly alternatives like fentanyl and other opioids laced with fentanyl, in order to cope with pain and other ailments.

The disproportionate number of overdoses in the

building sector is also a significant indication of the many socio-economic hardships confronting workers in an industry notorious for temporary jobs, variable working hours, and often paltry wages. Garth Mullins, member of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users, noted, "there's a lot of day labor type things and so it can be quite uncertain...you can really be just hanging on there, not making very much and you don't know when your next job is going to come."

Precarious work has led many construction workers to struggle under conditions of abject poverty. Temporary labourers make on average \$18 an hour, but the living wage in Vancouver is almost \$21. The BCCS report found that those who were employed in the year prior to their fatal overdose earned on average a meagre \$28,437 a year, much lower than the provincial average of \$42,000. A fifth of those victims had worked in the construction industry.

The dismantling of business regulations by successive New Democratic Party (NDP) and Liberal provincial governments has allowed dangerous conditions to become a regular feature of the building trades in BC. There were 44 work-related construction deaths in the province in 2017, a 42 percent increase over 2016. Workers continue to face an occupational fatality rate that is three times the provincial average.

Injured workers face a maze of bureaucratic hurdles to obtain compensation for injuries suffered through the workers compensation system. In addition, budget cuts and a failure to strictly enforce employer contributions to workers compensation have ensured that when workers do receive awards, they are grossly inadequate. Similarly, cutbacks to Canada's public health care system mean that injured workers often wait months for urgent treatments, or struggle to access specialist services like physiotherapy.

The treacherous workplace conditions in construction, and the gutting of healthcare and workers compensation provisions are the direct product of the transformation of the trade unions into nationalist appendages of corporate management and the capitalist state. No longer interested in even partially defending workers' interests, including workplace safety and wages, as they partially did in a previous period, they now function as cheap labour contractors and an industrial police force to suppress worker anger with their miserable employment conditions. The vast majority of construction workers in BC have no connection with the unions, which only represent 20 percent of all construction workers.

In response to the Fentanyl crisis, NDP government officials have deliberately ignored the dysfunctional economic and social conditions, focusing instead on tougher law and order measures. BC Premier John Horgan said in a public statement that his initial plan was to "prosecute the criminal." In the midst of this profound crisis, he has been reluctant to call a public inquiry. Although the NDP touted its appointment of the province's first mental health minister when it took power with support from the Greens in 2017, nothing has changed for the province's most impoverished and disadvantaged.

Health officials and advocacy groups alike are responding to the epidemic with calls for tepid reforms such as the introduction of more de-stigmatization programs, better access to treatment and recovery, and legal access to life-saving and clean drugs. Although these measures would likely be helpful to some in the short-term, they are grossly inadequate in addressing the bedrock issue of systemic social and economic dislocation arising out of the crisis of capitalism that has produced the acute overdose epidemic.

It is no accident that BC has become the hotbed of the opioid crisis. The province also has the highest rates of child and senior poverty in the country and is home to Vancouver, one of the most expensive cities in the world to live in, where workers may spend upwards of 50 percent of their gross income on rent and utilities. A quarter of British Columbians say they cannot pay their bills or make their debt payments right now.

By contrast, the construction industry—where residential housing speculation accounts for half of all construction projects—has enjoyed healthy returns over

the past half-decade with a cumulative value of \$75.1 billion in 2017. This has led to enormous profits for a tiny minority of financiers and speculators, including Canada's major banks. The resulting social disparity can be summed up in the recent statistic that the ten richest BC families' wealth is, on average, 5,845 times higher than a typical household in the province.

The accumulation of such vast wealth is directly responsible for throwing thousands of people into desperate poverty. The housing boom in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland has forced unprecedented numbers of people, including many low-wage workers, to live in homeless shelters and on the streets. Last May, Vancouver's homeless population reached a new record, surpassing 2,100.

The widening gap in income and wealth is not a phenomenon exclusive to British Columbia. Throughout Canada and the globe, it is becoming more and more apparent that the richest 1 percent is amassing great wealth as the vast majority languish in debt and decline.

There are now signs that the bull market conditions are changing. Market analysis indicate a recent slowdown in construction activity and this year new housing investment is expected to fall 25 percent from its 2016 peak. Within the context of a contracting economy, it is to be expected that social conditions will only worsen for BC construction workers, and the working class as a whole.

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