

# Frontline Workers Opioid Crisis Perceptions & Awareness

Understanding perceptions of the opioid crisis  
from frontline workers in Canada

angus reid group EMERGENT<sup>®</sup>



## Study snapshot

Emergent commissioned the Angus Reid Group to conduct an online survey of those working on the frontlines with respect to opioid use and those vulnerable to illicit opioid use and opioid poisonings in Canada.

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### FIELD & RECRUITMENT

Fielding was conducted from July 25 to August 8, 2022, among members of the Angus Reid Forum. Angus Reid Forum members are encouraged to participate in research in order to share their views, and respondents to this survey received an honorarium equivalent to \$1 CAD as a show of thanks for their time.

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### SURVEY SAMPLE

The survey sample includes:

- **Pharmacists and physicians** who prescribe opioids (n=105)
- **First responders** (police, firefighters and paramedics) (n=104)
- **Community workers** (those who work/volunteer at organizations that deal directly with communities at higher risk of opioid use) (n=113)

## The opioid crisis is widely seen to have gotten worse in the past few years, and frontline workers point to fentanyl as a major contributor.

All frontline-working groups surveyed are consistent in their view that accidental opioid poisonings have increased over the past few years: more than four-in-five community workers, first responders, pharmacists and physicians alike are seeing an increase.

These frontline-working cohorts largely point to fentanyl as being behind the increase in poisonings – most say fentanyl is playing a large or *very* large role in the number of deaths. Similar to the increase in accidental opioid poisonings, clear majorities of frontline workers say the incidence of fentanyl has increased in the past few years.

Nearly all say that accidental opioid poisonings have increased in the past few years

% saying accidental opioid poisonings have increased

87%

of community  
workers

86%

of first  
responders

82%

of pharmacist/  
physicians

And nearly all frontline workers say fentanyl is playing a large role in the number of deaths from accidental opioid poisonings

% saying fentanyl is playing a large/very large role in number of deaths

95%

of community  
workers

86%

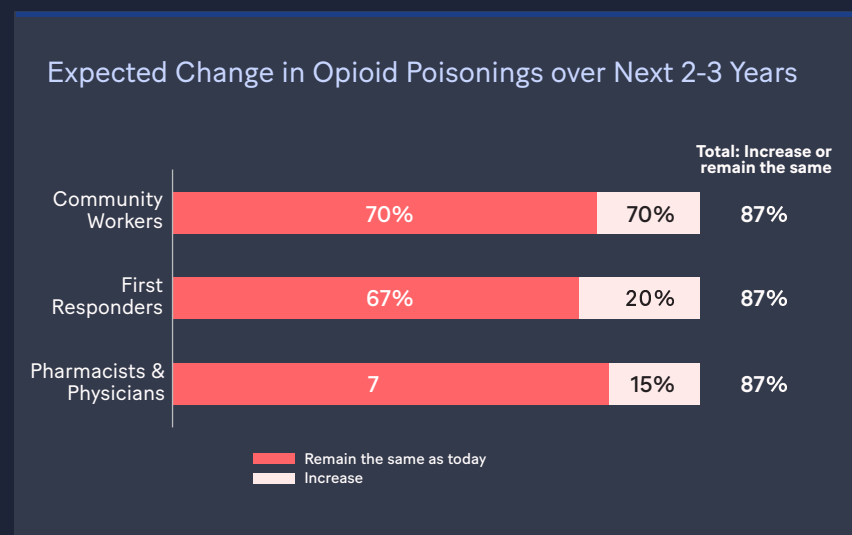
of first  
responders

87%

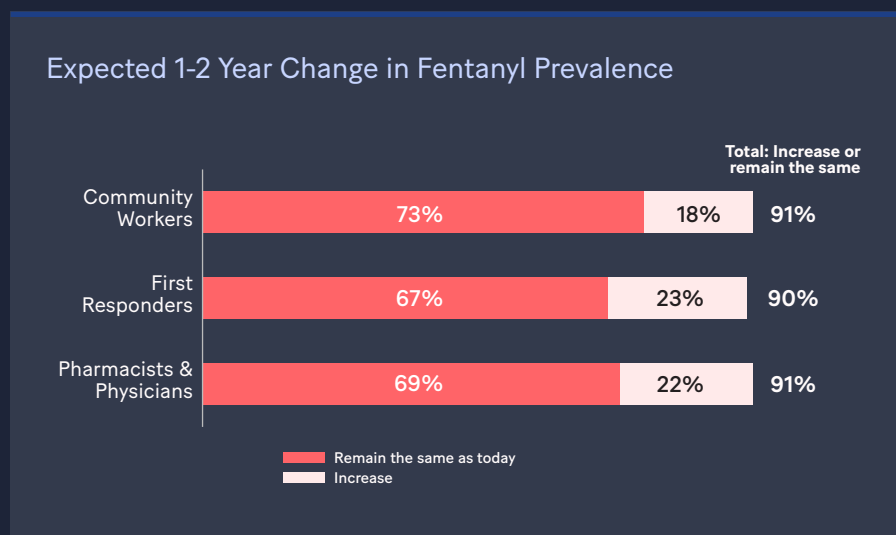
of pharmacist/  
physicians

## Frontline Workers Expect the Opioid Crisis to Get Worse

Frontline workers are not expecting the opioid crisis to improve anytime soon – clear majorities of all three frontline-working cohorts are of the mind that deaths will increase or stay at current levels.



Frontline workers do not see the higher prevalence of opioid poisonings as a transient pandemic issue that will revert as people settle back into their pre-pandemic routines. By and large the three frontline-working cohorts surveyed do not expect the crisis to alleviate in the next 2-3 years; in fact, most expect it will continue to get worse.



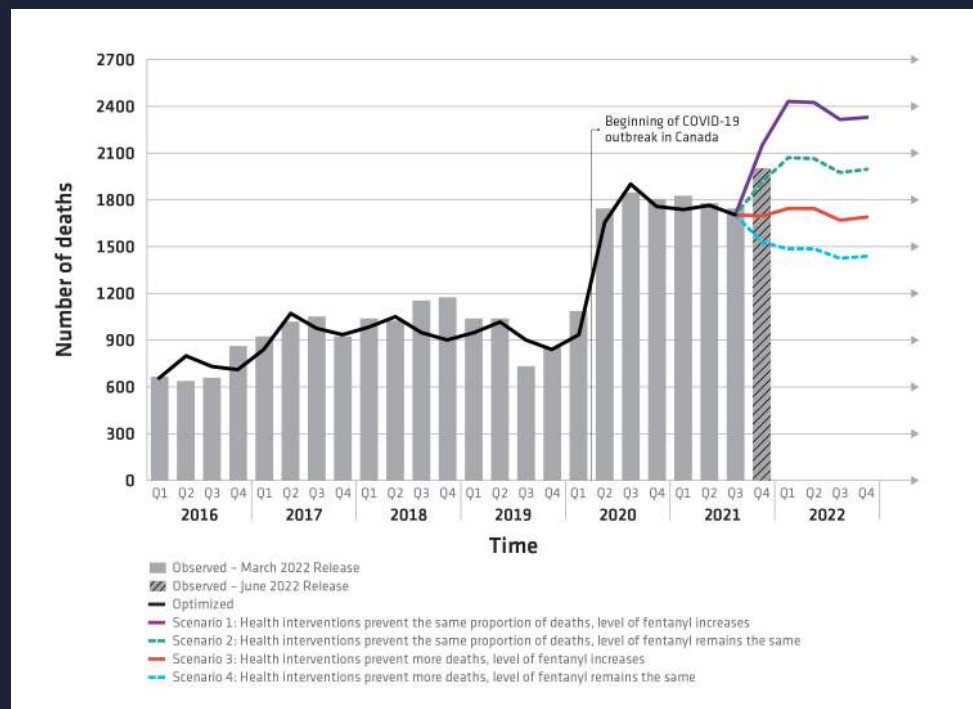
In concert with the expected continuation or increase of accidental opioid poisonings, all three frontline-working groups are aligned in their expectation that fentanyl isn't going away anytime soon. Rather, roughly seven-in-ten expect the prevalence of fentanyl in the illicit drug supply will continue increasing in the years to come, and nine-in-ten expect it will remain at current levels if not increase.

## Reactions to PHAC Research

# Observed Deaths Over Time

Research from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) indicates increases in deaths from accidental opioid poisonings since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022. We showed this analysis to frontline workers and found strong alignment with their experiences in the community.

Most say the observed incidence of deaths from opioid poisonings in 2020 is consistent with what they personally have seen in the community. Those not saying it is consistent typically indicated they weren't sure. Very few indicated the 2020 observed increase is not consistent with their experiences.



“Focusing on the increase in observed deaths (gray bars) related to opioid poisonings in 2020, *is this consistent with what you have seen* working with individuals who are at a higher risk of opioid poisonings?”

### Community Workers

**74%** yes  
22% not sure  
4% not consistent

### First Responders

**77%** yes  
16% not sure  
7% not consistent

### Pharmacists & Physicians

**74%** yes  
20% not sure  
6% not consistent

## Reactions to PHAC Research

# 2022 Projections

Based on their experiences in the community, most members of the three frontline-working cohorts say PHAC's projections of either *an increase* or the *same number* of deaths in 2022 are most accurate; very few say deaths are decreasing.

Community workers in particular are most likely to note that deaths in 2022 have continued increasing after the spike observed in Q4 2021: just over half say this is the case, whereas one quarter (26%) say deaths have remained at Q4 2021 levels.

First responders and physicians/pharmacists are split on whether deaths have continued increasing in 2022 (39%-42%) or remained at Q4 2021 levels (36%-40%).

Only small proportions of any of the frontline-working cohorts say deaths have been decreasing throughout 2022 (4%-15%).

“From your experiences working with populations who are at higher risk of opioid poisonings, **which of the projected scenarios do you think Canada is experiencing** in 2022?”

### COMMUNITY WORKERS

# 81%

Say 2022 deaths have increased or remained at the Q4 2021 high

**55%** Increased from Q4 2021

**26%** Same as Q4 2021

**4%** Decreased

**15%** Not sure

### FIRST RESPONDERS

# 75%

Say 2022 deaths have increased or remained at the Q4 2021 high

**39%** Increased from Q4 2021

**36%** Same as Q4 2021

**15%** Decreased

**10%** Not sure

### PHARMACISTS & PHYSICIANS

# 82%

Say 2022 deaths have increased or remained at the Q4 2021 high

**42%** Increased from Q4 2021

**40%** Same as Q4 2021

**10%** Decreased

**9%** Not sure

# Frontline Workers Expect They Will Need More Naloxone

From their experiences in the community and research findings from PHAC on projected continued impacts of fentanyl use, frontline workers expect a greater need for naloxone in the community, in addition to a greater number of doses needed per intervention.



More than four-in-five members of the community workers and pharmacist/physician cohorts say more naloxone will be needed in the community in the next 1-2 years, along with 70% of first responders. Similarly most members of all three frontline working groups expect a larger number of naloxone doses per intervention will be required over the coming years.

Meanwhile, few within the three cohorts have confidence that current health public interventions with regards to fentanyl use are sufficient to manage increased levels in the drug supply: seven-in-ten first responders and pharmacists/physicians disagree that current interventions are enough, along with 86% of community workers.

Most frontline workers expect more naloxone will be needed in the community

% saying more naloxone will be needed



Community Workers



First Responders



Pharmacists & Physicians

Frontline workers expect more naloxone doses will be needed per intervention

% saying more doses of naloxone will be required per intervention



Community Workers



First Responders



Pharmacists & Physicians

And most disagree that current health interventions are sufficient to manage increased levels of fentanyl

% disagreeing



Community Workers



First Responders



Pharmacists & Physicians



## Conclusions

In this research we see largely consistent perspectives on the magnitude and direction of the opioid crisis in Canada from the three frontline-working cohorts who are connected to the issue in different ways. Simply put, whether we ask those responsible for prescribing/dispensing opioids (pharmacists & physicians), responding to acute instances of opioid poisonings (first responders), or others working with those at higher risk of opioid use (community workers), the majority perspective is that the crisis has gotten worse, is continuing to get worse, and that fentanyl is a major contributor to this.

Research findings from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), in addition to the experiences of the frontline workers we surveyed in this study, identify an increase in accidental opioid poisonings and the prevalence of fentanyl coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic. Neither PHAC's research or the perspectives of frontline workers provide substantial indications that this trend will reverse as Canadian society moves past the circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Naturally, increases in the prevalence of fentanyl use and accidental opioid poisonings will need to be met with increased interventions to mitigate harm. Most of the three frontline-working groups surveyed disagree that current health interventions are enough to manage increased levels of fentanyl. Further, expected increases in fentanyl use and accidental opioid poisonings are leading most members of these frontline-working groups to note that the need for naloxone—the antidote drug given in cases of opioid poisonings—will increase both in terms of the total amount needed in the community in addition to the average number of doses that will be needed to respond to cases of accidental opioid poisonings.

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Those closest to the opioid crisis paint a startling picture of direness of the current situation and what they think the future holds. Naloxone is a key tool in overdose interventions and they're clearly stating that more supply will be needed in the future.

**Demetre Eliopoulos**

SVP and Managing Director  
Research Services, Angus Reid



hello@angusreid.com

angusreid.com

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