



# INFORMATION REPORT

<b>TO:</b>	Mayor and Members Public Health Committee
<b>COMMITTEE DATE:</b>	April 2, 2024
<b>SUBJECT/REPORT NO:</b>	Suspect Drug-Related Deaths and Opioid-Related Paramedic Calls (September-December 2023) (BOH24006) (City Wide)
<b>WARD(S) AFFECTED:</b>	City Wide
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<b>SIGNATURE:</b>	

## COUNCIL DIRECTION

This report is in follow-up to direction provided via a motion at the February 13, 2023 Board of Health Meeting:

“That City staff be directed to provide quarterly reports on overdoses tracked by [Emergency Medical Systems] and all deaths related to toxic drugs to the Board of Health beginning in Q2 2023.”

## INFORMATION

Hamilton continues to experience a significant public health burden related to the ongoing toxic and unpredictable drug supply. This report provides an overview of the opioid-related impacts in Hamilton based on data available up to December 31, 2023. Multiple data sources are used in this report which describe different forms of substance-related harm. The information from these data sources should be interpreted together to provide a more complete understanding of the evolving impacts of the volatile toxic drug supply on both fatal and non-fatal substance-related harms in Hamilton.

In Hamilton, opioid-related paramedic calls decreased substantially from October to December 2023 after rising steadily in previous quarters of 2023. Emergency department visits and hospitalizations continue to parallel trends in paramedic calls, rising through September 2023. Suspect drug-related deaths and opioid-related deaths

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have remained comparable to previous quarters in 2023, though the total number of suspect drug-related deaths in 2023 is lower than in 2022 and 2021 (see Appendix “A” to Public Health Committee Report BOH24006, Figure 1). One drug alert was issued on November 10, 2023, in response to a short-term spike in suspect drug-related deaths, some of which occurred in local residential care facilities. From October to December 2023, community reports highlighted several substances of concern circulating locally that were linked to drug poisoning incidents.

Between October 2023 and December 2023, the distribution of harms across age and sex groups has remained consistent, with most paramedic calls and suspect drug-related deaths occurring among males aged 30 to 60 years. Most incidents leading to suspect drug-related deaths occurred in private residences and toxicology data show that most opioid-related deaths in Hamilton involve at least one other substance, most commonly a stimulant. Further analysis of the local data is described below.

### **Opioid-Related Paramedic Calls**

There were 964 opioid-related paramedic calls in 2023, 167 (17%) of which occurred from October to December 2023.<sup>1</sup> While the yearly total is the highest ever recorded in Hamilton, the calls from October to December 2023 represent the lowest number of calls in a three-month period since 2020 and is a significant departure from trends observed in the first three quarters of 2023. The monthly count of calls in 2023 ranged from 74 to 105 from January to September 2023 and 50 to 62 from October to December 2023. Further data is needed to determine if this decrease represents a lasting change in the trajectory of call data. Between October and December 2023, paramedic calls were concentrated geographically, with 48% originating in Ward 2 and 22% occurring in Ward 3.

### **Emergency Department Visits and Hospitalizations**

Data describing counts of opioid-related emergency department visits and hospitalizations at Hamilton hospitals is available up to September 30, 2023. Opioid-related emergency department visits and hospitalizations are those where opioids are confirmed as either the main or contributing cause.

The number of opioid-related emergency department visits in Hamilton hospitals historically mirrors trends observed for opioid-related paramedic calls. Emergency department visits increased steadily throughout 2023.<sup>2</sup> From January to March 2023 there were 202 visits, 219 from April to June 2023, and 248 from July to September

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<sup>1</sup> Hamilton Paramedic Services. Opioid-Related Emergency Medical Services Calls. Extracted January 2, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Hamilton Health Sciences, Integrated Decision Support: National Ambulatory Care Reporting System. Opioid-related emergency department visits and hospitalizations. Received December 4, 2023.

2023. The number of visits from January to September 2023 (n=669) was higher than the number of visits over the same period in 2022 (n=564). However, it is unclear at this point whether this represents a sustained trend or if emergency department visits will continue to trend with paramedic calls and decrease from October to December 2023.

Opioid-related hospitalizations have also increased in 2023 with 25 between January to March 2023, 35 from April to June 2023, and 47 from July to September 2023. These 47 hospitalizations represent the most recorded since the second quarter in 2021 (n=51). The 107 hospitalizations recorded in the first three quarters of 2023 are comparable to the total number of hospitalizations recorded in 2022 (n=109).

### **Suspect Drug-Related Deaths and Opioid-Related Deaths**

Suspect drug-related deaths are deaths in which the preliminary Coroner investigation indicates drug involvement. These data are preliminary and subject to change. While not all suspect drug-related deaths are opioid-related, the demographic distribution of suspect drug-related deaths is similar to the distribution of opioid-related deaths.

Between October and December 2023 there were 44 suspect drug-related deaths, which brings the total to 199 suspect drug-related deaths in Hamilton in 2023.<sup>3</sup> There were fewer suspect drug-related deaths in Hamilton in 2023 than in 2022 (n=221) or 2021 (n=222). Of the suspect deaths in 2023, so far 111 of them have subsequently been confirmed or probable opioid-related deaths (up to September 30, 2023) (see Appendix “A” to Public Health Committee Report BOH24006, Figure 2).<sup>4</sup> The number of confirmed or probable opioid-related deaths from January 2023 to September 2023 ranged from 36 to 38 deaths per quarter, which was lower than the average in 2022 of 42 deaths per quarter.

From January to December 2023, most suspect drug-related deaths occurred among males (75%) and among those aged 30 to 59 (74%). The proportions of deaths among all age and sex groups that occurred among males 30-39, 40-49, and 50-59 were similar (21.1%, 18.1%, and 19.1%, respectively) and more than two times the proportion that occurred among any other age and sex group (see Appendix “A” to Public Health Committee Report BOH24006, Figure 3). The age and sex distribution of suspect drug-related deaths has not changed substantially in recent years and is comparable to the distribution of suspect drug-related deaths across Ontario.

From January to December 2023, 65% of suspect drug-related deaths in Hamilton occurred in a private residence. In Hamilton, other common incident locations included

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<sup>3</sup> Office of the Chief Coroner, Ontario. Office of the Chief Coroner Weekly Update: Suspect drug related deaths. Received January 11, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Office of the Chief Coroner, Ontario. Office of the Chief Coroner Monthly Update: Suspect drug opioid related deaths December 2023. Received January 12, 2024.

the outdoors (15%) and congregate living (11%). The number and percentage of incidents occurring outdoors was significantly higher in 2023 (n=29, 15%) compared to 2022 (n=17, 8%). This trend was not observed for Ontario overall.

### **Substances Involved in Opioid-Related Deaths**

Toxicology reports from confirmed accidental opioid-related deaths occurring from January 2022 to June 2023 find that, in Hamilton, 89% of all opioid-related deaths involved more than one substance (median 3 substances).<sup>5</sup> Fentanyl was identified in 87% of opioid-related deaths, stimulants (cocaine or methamphetamine) in 76% of opioid-related deaths, benzodiazepines in 39% of opioid-related deaths, and xylazine in 4% of opioid-related deaths.

In the most recent six-month period (January 2023 to June 2023), there was an increase in the detection of bromazolam (39% of deaths), fluorofentanyl (30%), and hydromorphone (18%) as compared to previous time periods. The number of deaths involving frequently identified substances is provided in Appendix “A” to Public Health Committee Report BOH24006, Figure 4. From October 2022 to June 2023, methamphetamine was identified more frequently than cocaine, and the benzodiazepine bromazolam was identified more frequently than the benzodiazepine etizolam. These trends represent a reversal of trends in the previous three-quarter period of January 2022 to September 2022, and highlight the fact that the substances involved or present in drug-toxicity deaths are evolving due to the volatility of the unregulated drug supply. Note that these data are incomplete, as only confirmed (not probable) opioid-related deaths are included in this analysis. Data are preliminary and subject to change.

### **Community Reports & Alerts**

Public Health Services shares a weekly Opioid Situation Report to healthcare providers, social service staff, and community members through the established early warning email system. The information received from members between October 2023 and December 2023 is reported below.

In this period, one alert was issued by Public Health Services on November 10, 2023. This alert informed the community of an increase in suspect drug-related deaths in Hamilton from October 30, 2023 to November 5, 2023. Notably, several of these deaths occurred in residential care facilities in the community.

Community reports in October 2023 to December 2023 highlighted several substances of concern. “Yellow-down” was linked to one drug poisoning occurring in the community in December, which is also linked to other drug poisonings occurring earlier in 2023. A green fentanyl was linked to drug poisonings occurring in Hamilton and nearby

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<sup>5</sup> Office of the Chief Coroner, Ontario. Office of the Chief Coroner Toxicology data for opioid toxicity deaths 2023 Q2. Received November 16, 2023.

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communities in October 2023. Additionally, there have been community reports of drug poisoning and memory loss associated with “tranq-dope”, which is usually a combination of xylazine and fentanyl.

Overall, this quarterly report continues to highlight the burden of the unpredictable and toxic drug supply in Hamilton, and the impact on the health of the community. Continued work to address the harms associated with the unregulated drug supply is ongoing through the Hamilton Opioid Action Plan.

**APPENDICES AND SCHEDULES ATTACHED**

Appendix “A” to Report BOH24006: Supporting figures for the quarterly update on opioid and substance-related harms