

A Critique of the Government of Alberta's Report on Supervised Consumption Services: Crime

A 2020 Government of Alberta report concluded that supervised consumption services increased crime in their surrounding communities. Is this conclusion trustworthy?

The methods used in the Government of Alberta's report to determine the impact of supervised consumption services on crime do not meet scientific standards. Therefore, their conclusions should be interpreted with caution.

Background

Supervised consumption services (SCS) are health facilities where people can consume drugs in a safer manner. Sterile drug equipment (e.g., needles, inhalation supplies) is provided and disposed of on-site. Additionally, trained staff supervise each consumption episode to respond in the event of medical emergencies such as drug poisonings (e.g., by administering naloxone or oxygen). SCS sites can also serve as a connection to additional health and social services for people who may otherwise have difficulties reaching these services (e.g., primary care providers, housing support, addiction services).

In 2019, seven SCS were open across Alberta* to offer space for people to



Want more information on SCS? See *Supervised Consumption Services: The Basics* evidence brief and infographic on whyscs.ca for more details.

* Since 2019, one Edmonton SCS and the Lethbridge SCS have closed. Currently, five SCS operate in Alberta. Find the most current information on operational sites at <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/substance-use/supervised-consumption-sites/status-application.html#a1>



consume drugs¹. 2019 also marked the year that a new government, the United Conservative Party (UCP), was elected in Alberta. The UCP's election platform included several points relating to SCS operations, including a promise to conduct a socio-economic review of the impact of SCS².

Shortly after election, the Government of Alberta paused funding for new SCS until this review was completed, stating they wanted more information on how opening an SCS impacts the surrounding communities. The Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addiction formed a Supervised Consumption Services Review Committee ('the Committee' hereafter), which held town hall meetings in cities with SCS, met with key stakeholders, hosted an online survey, accepted written submissions, and requested SCS administrative data. The Committee's findings were published in a March 2020 report³.

While the report discussed multiple impacts of SCS, this evidence brief is focused on how the report assessed the relationship between the sites and crime in their surrounding communities. The report concluded that, except for one city, crime "generally increased in the immediate vicinity in contrast to areas beyond the immediate vicinity of [SCS]" (page iii)³. However, the methods used to make this claim do not meet basic standards of scientific research or evaluation. In fact, multiple concerns regarding the Committee's methods, including a call for retraction of the report, were shared shortly after its publication^{4,5}. Regarding the report's conclusions on crime, Dr. James D. Livingston, a Professor in the Department of Criminology at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, published an article explaining why the ways the Committee assessed the impact of SCS on crime were flawed, and why their conclusions are unreliable¹. Here, we summarize Dr. Livingston's paper and provide a breakdown of his arguments.



Want more information on the impact of SCS on crime and public order? See *Crime & Public Order* evidence brief and infographic on whyscs.ca.

Why does the Committee's conclusion that SCS increase crime not meet scientific standards?

The methods used to conclude that SCS lead to increased crime in their surrounding communities were flawed in three main ways.

¹ Livingston JD. Supervised consumption sites and crime: scrutinizing the methodological weaknesses and aberrant results of a government report in Alberta, Canada. *Harm Reduct J*. 2021 Jan 6;18(4):1-5.

² United Conservatives. 2019 Platform. UCP Platform: Getting Alberta Back to Work. [Internet]. Alberta; c2019 [cited 2021 Dec 3]. Available from: <https://www.unitedconservative.ca/2019-platform/>

³ Alberta Health. Impact: A socio-economic review of supervised consumption sites in Alberta. Alberta: Government of Alberta; March 2020.

⁴ HIV Legal Network. Letter: Reject the socio-economic "review" of supervised consumption sites in Alberta. [Internet]. Toronto; 2020 [cited 2021 Dec 3]. Available from: <https://www.hivlegalnetwork.ca/site/letter-reject-the-socio-economic-review-of-supervised-consumption-sites-in-alberta/?lang=en>

⁵ Canadian Drug Policy Coalition. OPEN LETTER: Calling on the Alberta Government to retract supervised consumption site report. [Internet]. Burnaby; 2020 [cited 2021 Dec 3]. Available from: <https://www.drugpolicy.ca/open-letter-calling-on-the-alberta-government-to-retract-supervised-consumption-site-study/>

Faulty measures of crime

A key measure used to determine changes in crime levels in the report was changes in “police service calls”. However, police service calls are not limited to calls related to actual crimes and may include other calls including those related to non-criminal matters (e.g., traffic, medical distress), those that did not lead to any investigation (e.g., a noise complaint that quiets before police arrive), and those with unfounded claims (e.g., accidental calls by a child). The report did not provide a standard definition of what types of calls should be included when reporting this data, so the types of calls reported likely differ across different police services and cities. Because police service calls were not defined and are more related to police activities than actual counts of crime, an increase in police service calls does not mean there was an increase in actual crime.

The report also relied on public perceptions of crime collected through online surveys. Online surveys can be an affordable way to broaden the reach of data collection, but they should only be used if the researchers make sure that those who answer the survey represent the population they are interested in (e.g., those who actually live or work in the community of interest). The Committee did not mention any steps taken to ensure proper representation in their survey sample, so we cannot be sure that the survey participants represent the surrounding communities, or that each participant answered only once. In addition, participants were asked to compare crime rates before and after the SCS opened, which occurred up to two years prior in some communities. Evidence suggests limiting recall requests to the previous six months increases the accuracy of remembered events⁶. Due to the long time frame of questions included in the surveys, participants were more likely to misperceive the frequency of crime in their communities before SCS opened, leading to less accurate and less trustworthy comparisons.

In addition, the Committee collected further data (e.g., from stakeholder meetings, written submissions) regarding crime levels without describing how this data was recorded or analyzed. Because the report did not include evidence of the systematic recording and analysis of the data, we have no evidence that these claims are accurate.

Inadequate assessment of changes in crime patterns

Statistical analysis is required to accurately measure changes over time, test a question (e.g., did crime levels increase?), and examine whether one variable (e.g., SCS opening) impacts another (e.g., crime levels). The Committee did not perform standard statistical analyses, and thus their conclusion that SCS increase crime in their surrounding communities has a high chance of error.

The Committee’s assessment was additionally weakened by the lack of data



Want more information on Dr. Livingston’s critique of the Government of Alberta’s assessment of SCS and crime? See *Supervised consumption sites and crime: scrutinizing the methodological weaknesses and aberrant results of a government report in Alberta, Canada* by James D. Livingston¹.

⁶ Cantor D, Lynch JP. Self-Report Surveys as Measures of Crime and Criminal Victimization. *Criminal Justice*. 2000 Jan; 4: 85-138.

standardization. Standardization is the process of converting data to the same format or scale so that you can accurately compare data from different sources. For example, to compare the number of deaths between two cities with different population sizes, counts are typically standardized by converting each number to a rate of deaths per 100,000 people. The Committee collected police service call data from various sized areas (e.g., within 500 m surrounding SCS as well as whole cities) but failed to standardize these numbers. We cannot be certain whether the differences in crime levels identified in this report are true differences in rates of crime or due to the lack of data standardization.

The time frames used in the report further decreased its ability to assess changes in crime patterns. First, police service calls were grouped into yearly counts. Grouping data into such large categories hides details that may only be seen when the data is broken up by week or months (e.g., seasonal patterns). Secondly, the Committee assessed changes in crime over a two-year period (i.e., spanning one year before and one year after SCS opening). Restricting data collection to two years hides any long-term trends. For example, crime levels were increasing in the Beltline neighbourhood of Calgary, Alberta prior to the SCS opening and continued to increase after the SCS opened (**Figure 1**). The short study period assessed in the Committee's report would not capture this existing trend of increasing crime rate in this neighborhood.

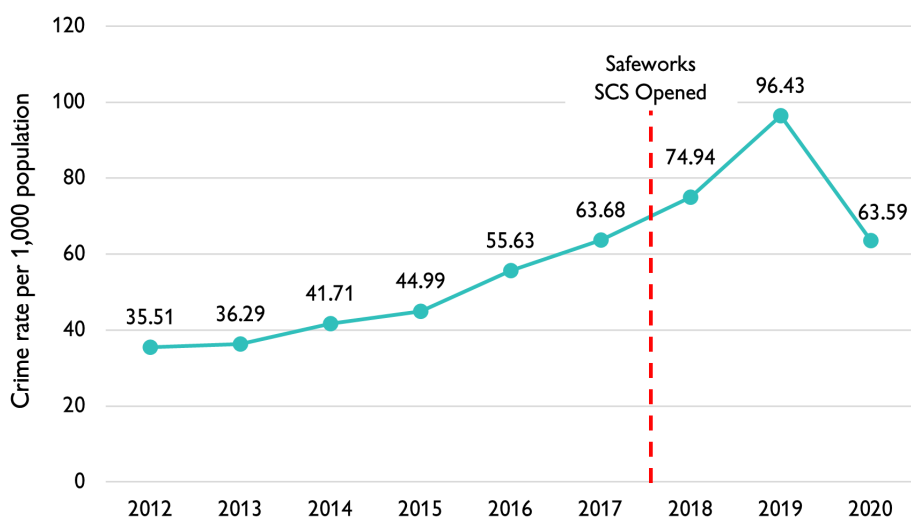


FIGURE 1: Beltline Crime Data. Analysis of crime rate per 1,000 population in the Beltline neighbourhood in Calgary, Alberta by year. Dashed red line indicates when the SCS in the neighbourhood opened. Analysis was performed by Dr. James D. Livingston using publicly available crime data from Beltline, Calgary.

Additionally, because data from only one year after SCS opening was included, the Committee's conclusions are based on only short-term effects. As pre-existing and long-term trends were not considered, we cannot be certain that the findings accurately reflect an increase in crime due to the opening of SCS.

Inappropriately attributing the cause of increased crime to SCS

To gather their findings, the Committee used an uncontrolled, observational design where researchers simply observe things as they happen, ask people questions, or look at previously captured data, without controlling for any other variables. Controlling for variables is a way researchers can ensure that the relationship they are trying to measure (e.g., impact of gender on rates of lung cancer) is not influenced by a third factor (e.g., smoking). As controlling is not possible in observational studies, researchers cannot make conclusions on direct cause and effect (i.e., that opening SCS led to increased crime). Several variables exist in the relationship between SCS and crime levels (e.g., police resources, weather) that were not controlled for in the Committee's analysis, and we thus cannot trust their conclusion that the increase in crime was caused by SCS.

Why does it matter?

Despite its inadequate data collection, analysis, and reporting methods, the claims made by the Committee have been disseminated to numerous decision-makers in Canada and internationally. It is concerning that the report may be used to decide whether to implement, fund, or even cease to operate SCS. Inappropriately reducing or closing these services is likely to increase unsafe drug use practices (e.g., re-using drug use equipment, using alone) and ultimately cause harm to people who use drugs. People who use drugs deserve to have accurate and high-quality evidence used in the decisions that greatly impact their health, quality of life, and well-being.

Authorship and Citation

Lexis R. Galarneau, Kelsey Speed, Elaine Hyshka, James D. Livingston; Last updated February 2022

Galarneau LR, Speed K, Hyshka E, Livingston JD. Evidence brief: A Critique of the Government of Alberta's Report on Supervised Consumption Services: Crime. Edmonton: Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Misuse; 2022. 5p. Available from whyscs.ca.

