

Toronto's Drug Checking Service

What supervised consumption site closures mean for drug checking service delivery in Ontario and unregulated drug market monitoring in Canada

On August 20, 2024, the [Government of Ontario announced plans to ban supervised consumption sites \(SCS\) within 200 metres of schools and child care centres](#). If implemented, these zoning requirements could result in the closure of nearly half (10) of the province's SCS/consumption and treatment services (CTS), in addition to several urgent public health need sites (UPHNS).

The purpose of this memo is to share how such closures could impact drug checking service delivery in Ontario and unregulated drug market monitoring in Canada.

Drug checking is a community-based public health service that allows people to submit a sample of their drug to be tested and receive results about what's in it, along with tailored strategies to reduce harm. Beyond educating individual service users, comprehensive drug checking services combine data from all samples checked to monitor the unregulated drug supply. Timely and public unregulated drug market trends and drug education are disseminated to inform care for people who use drugs, advocacy, policy, and research.

Since October 2019, [Toronto's Drug Checking Service](#) has been operating as one of three comprehensive drug checking programs in Canada. Having checked over 14,000 samples from the unregulated drug supply, the program has become an essential public health service for people who use drugs in Toronto and a primary source of [timely and public information on the composition of the unregulated drug supply for Canada](#). Furthermore, the program has created evidence that [drug checking services have a positive and quantifiable impact on preventing harms from Canada's toxic drug supply crisis](#).

1. **Closing SCS/CTS/UPHNS would impact access to drug checking services.** Community-based drug checking services enable people who use drugs to make more informed decisions related to their substance use. Ten of Toronto's 13 SCS/CTS/UPHNS offer drug checking and are collection site members of Toronto's Drug Checking Service. Six of those 10 sites face closure by the Ontario government's proposed zoning requirements. Seventy-eight percent (11,311 of 14,420) of the samples checked by Toronto's Drug Checking Service between October 10, 2019, and August 23, 2024, were collected at the six SCS/CTS/UPHNS that are at risk of closure (see table 1 for more detail).

The five SCS/CTS outside of Toronto that face closure by the Ontario government's proposed zoning requirements – in Guelph, Hamilton, Kitchener, Ottawa, and Thunder Bay – are each actively offering drug

checking in their community. They account for over 40% of the sites offering drug checking outside of Toronto.

2. **Closing SCS/CTS/UPHNS would impact access to a continuum of care.** Data from our program shows [drug checking services act as a gateway to harm reduction services](#) and, in turn, a gateway to referrals to drug-related, health, and social services, including treatment. For example, during its pilot period, 18% of service users surveyed by our program had not previously accessed harm reduction services and 21% of service users surveyed reported intending to use at a supervised consumption site after receiving their drug checking results. For these reasons, drug checking services are best offered within integrated community health centres that provide harm reduction services, like safer injection and smoking equipment distribution, overdose response training, supervised consumption, and safer supply programs, as well as pathways to treatment and health and social supports.
3. **Closing SCS/CTS/UPHNS would impact our ability to monitor and share real-time information on the composition of the unregulated drug supply.** Comprehensive drug checking services combine data from all samples checked to perform unregulated drug market monitoring, translating and publicly disseminating unregulated drug market trends to equip:
 - People who use drugs and community health workers who cannot directly access the program to reduce harm
 - Public health units and researchers to educate their communities about their local unregulated drug supply
 - Clinicians to engage their patients who use drugs in meaningful and informed care and treatment
 - First responders to best attend to overdose and drug-related incidents
 - Policy makers and administrators to support investment in evidence-based policies and programming

Toronto's Drug Checking Service is a primary source of timely and public unregulated drug market monitoring for Canada. Every other week since October 2019, the program has provided critical information on the worsening contamination and unpredictability of the unregulated fentanyl supply. Seventy-eight percent of the samples contributing to our unregulated drug market monitoring efforts were collected at the six SCS/CTS/UPHNS in Toronto that are at risk of closure. Our program's discovery of several novel psychoactive substances – such as veterinary tranquilizers [xylazine](#) and [medetomidine](#), and various high-potency [nitazene opioids](#) – would have been delayed or missed completely had the six Toronto-based SCS/CTS/UPHNS at risk of closure not been part of our program.

It is the unpredictability and contamination of the unregulated opioid supply that is driving the toxic drug supply crisis – [a public health emergency we are over eight years into that claims the lives of 22 Canadians each day](#). SCS/CTS/UPHNS closures would inhibit the ability of people who use drugs to make informed decisions related to their substance use, disrupt pathways to services and treatment, and hinder evidence-informed responses by people who use drugs, community health workers, clinicians, first responders, policy makers, public health units, researchers, and others.

Table 1. Summary of samples checked by collection site members of Toronto’s Drug Checking Service

Collection site member		Date drug checking services were launched	# of samples collected (Oct10/19 – Aug23/24)	% of all samples checked (Oct10/19 – Aug23/24)
At risk of closure				
1	The Works at Toronto Public Health	October 10, 2019	6,002	42%
2	Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre (Queen West site)	October 10, 2019	3,329	23%
3	South Riverdale Community Health Centre (KeepSIX site)	October 10, 2019	1,888	13%
4	Regent Park Community Health Centre	May 2, 2024	69	0.5%
5	The Neighbourhood Group (Kensington Market Overdose Prevention Site)	July 24, 2024	12	0.1%
6	Toronto Shelter and Support Services (Seaton House Overdose Prevention Site)	August 1, 2024	11	0.1%
Subtotal			11,311	78%
Not currently at risk of closure				
7	Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre (Parkdale site)	June 8, 2020	2,237	16%
8	South Riverdale Community Health Centre (Moss Park site)	June 8, 2020	850	6%
9	Casey House	May 6, 2024	16	0.1%
10	Street Health	August 14, 2024	6	0.1%
Subtotal			3,109	22%
TOTAL			14,420	100%

About Toronto’s Drug Checking Service: [Toronto's Drug Checking Service](#) is a free and anonymous community-based public health service that aims to reduce the harms associated with substance use and, specifically, to prevent overdose by offering people who use drugs timely and detailed information on the contents of their drugs. Beyond educating individual service users, results for all samples are combined and analyzed to perform unregulated drug market monitoring, then translated and [publicly disseminated](#)

every other week to communicate unregulated drug market trends and drug education to those who cannot directly access the service, as well as to inform care for people who use drugs, advocacy, policy, and research.

Participating collection sites: Casey House | Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre (Parkdale and Queen West sites) | Regent Park Community Health Centre | Seaton House (Overdose Prevention Site) | South Riverdale Community Health Centre (KeepSix and Moss Park sites) | Street Health | The Neighbourhood Group (Kensington Market Overdose Prevention Site) | The Works at Toronto Public Health

Participating analysis sites: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (Clinical Laboratory and Diagnostic Services) | St. Michael's Hospital (Department of Laboratory Medicine and Drug Checking Unit)

Toronto's Drug Checking Service is coordinated by a small central team that operates from within the Drug Checking Unit at St. Michael's Hospital. The central team is also responsible for conducting unregulated drug market monitoring and developing and disseminating relevant drug information.

Our work would not be possible if people who use drugs did not access our service and, as a result, advocate for themselves and help develop solutions that impact them. We thank the community of people who use drugs in Toronto, and elsewhere, who provide ongoing feedback on the design and implementation of our program, as well as our members, partners and collaborators, and funders for their ongoing commitment.

(website) www.drugchecking.community | (email) hello@drugchecking.community | (X) [@drugcheckingTO](https://twitter.com/drugcheckingTO) | (IG) [@drugchecking](https://www.instagram.com/drugchecking)