

BRITISH COLUMBIA
CENTRE ON
SUBSTANCE USE

Networking researchers, educators & care providers

*“They talk about it like it’s an overdose crisis when
in fact it’s genocide”*

Perceptions and experiences of the drug poisoning crisis among
Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs in Vancouver’s Downtown
Eastside neighbourhood

Jennifer Lavalley, Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction
Society, BC Center on Substance Use, Ryan McNeil •

11.25.2022

Land Acknowledgement

This research took place on the unceded, ancestral, and occupied territories of the x^wməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and sel̓ilwítulh (Tsleil-waututh) Nations.

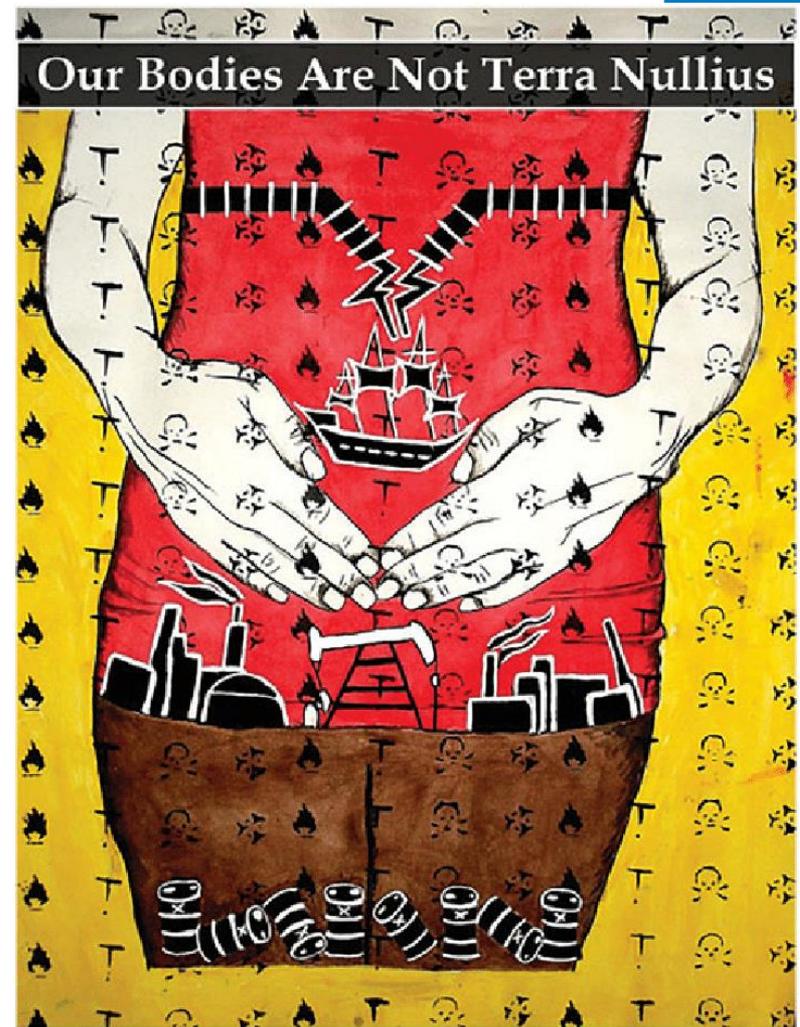


Photo Courtesy of Erin Konsmo

Self-in relation: Who am I?

Overview

- Background/Purpose
- Current Project
- Background
- Conceptual Framework
- Methodology and Methods
- Preliminary Analysis /Findings
- Key takeaways

Current Project



- Indigenous-led and community-based
- Research team included academic researchers from the BCCSU, Indigenous research coordinator, and board members from the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS)
- Incorporates Indigenous-led qualitative style interviews with IPWUID
- Objective: To explore the perceptions and experiences of the drug poisoning crisis and response among IPWUD

Background

- **Indigenous Peoples who use drugs (IPWUD)** continue to be disproportionately affected by this crisis
- In British Columbia (BC), there were **2224** overdose deaths in 2021 (BC Coroner's Report, 2021)
- In BC, **Indigenous Peoples account for 16% of all overdose-related deaths** despite representing only **3.3%** of the province's population (FNHA, 2020)
- Overdose death rates have increased by **93% increase due to the COVID-19 pandemic** (FNHA 2020)
- IPWUD experiences are deeply bound up with **histories of colonization, racism, and intergenerational trauma** (FNHA Interior Health, 2021; Lavalley, 2018; Mowbray, 2007; Reading & Wein, 2009).

Conceptual Framework

❖ Indigenous methodologies

→ Body of Indigenous and theoretical approaches and methods, with the experiences and knowledges of Indigenous Peoples located at the center of the project (Kovach, 2010; Simpson, 2014; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008).

→ Informed by Indigenous worldviews and perspectives

❖ **Structural approach** helps to contextualize the ways the historical structure of colonialism influences health inequities among IPWUID

Methods

- March 2019-February 2020
- Sixteen (16) interviews were conducted
- Participants ages ranged from 29 to 59. Participants all self-identified as Indigenous (n = 16), with all also identifying as cisgender; men (n = 5), women (n = 11).
- **Indigenous storytelling** as a culturally appropriate method that utilizes an Indigenous research framework
- **Relationality is key**
- IPWUD were recruited directly by WAHRS board members
- Data analyzed thematically using Nvivo

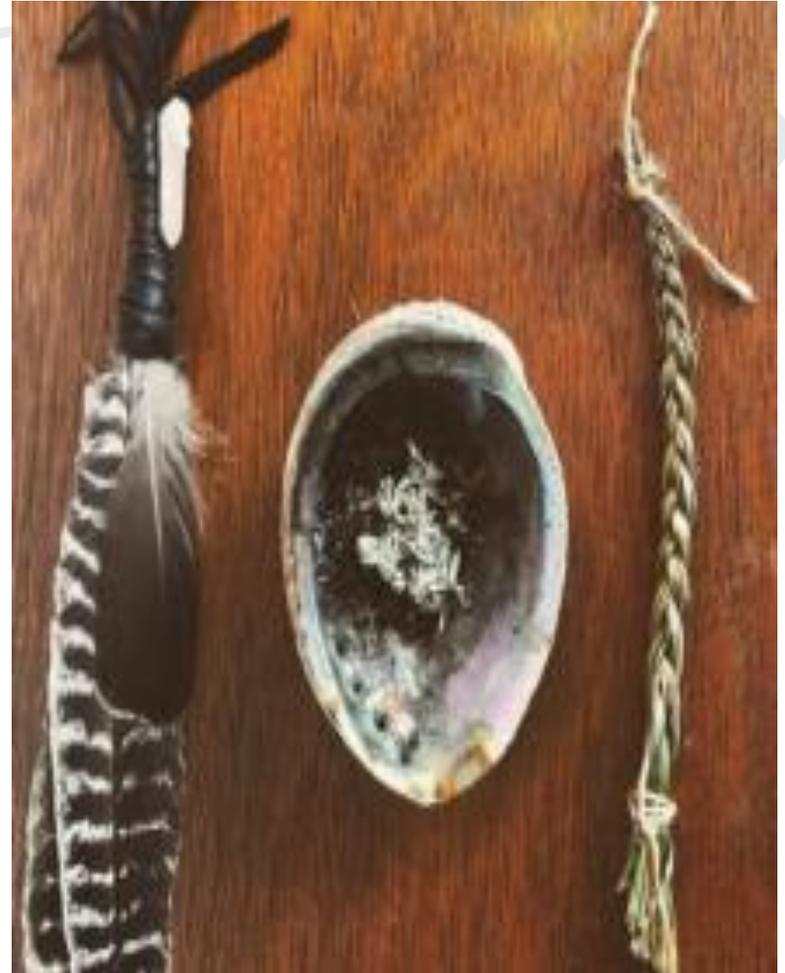


Photo courtesy of Jenn Hoben

Preliminary Analysis

- ❖ Drug poisoning crisis as genocide
- ❖ Distrust and adversarial relationships with police / law enforcement practices
- ❖ Risk Reduction and safer consumption knowledge and practices among IPWUD
- ❖ Limited ability to engage in harm reduction in Indigenous communities – abstinence vs. harm reduction

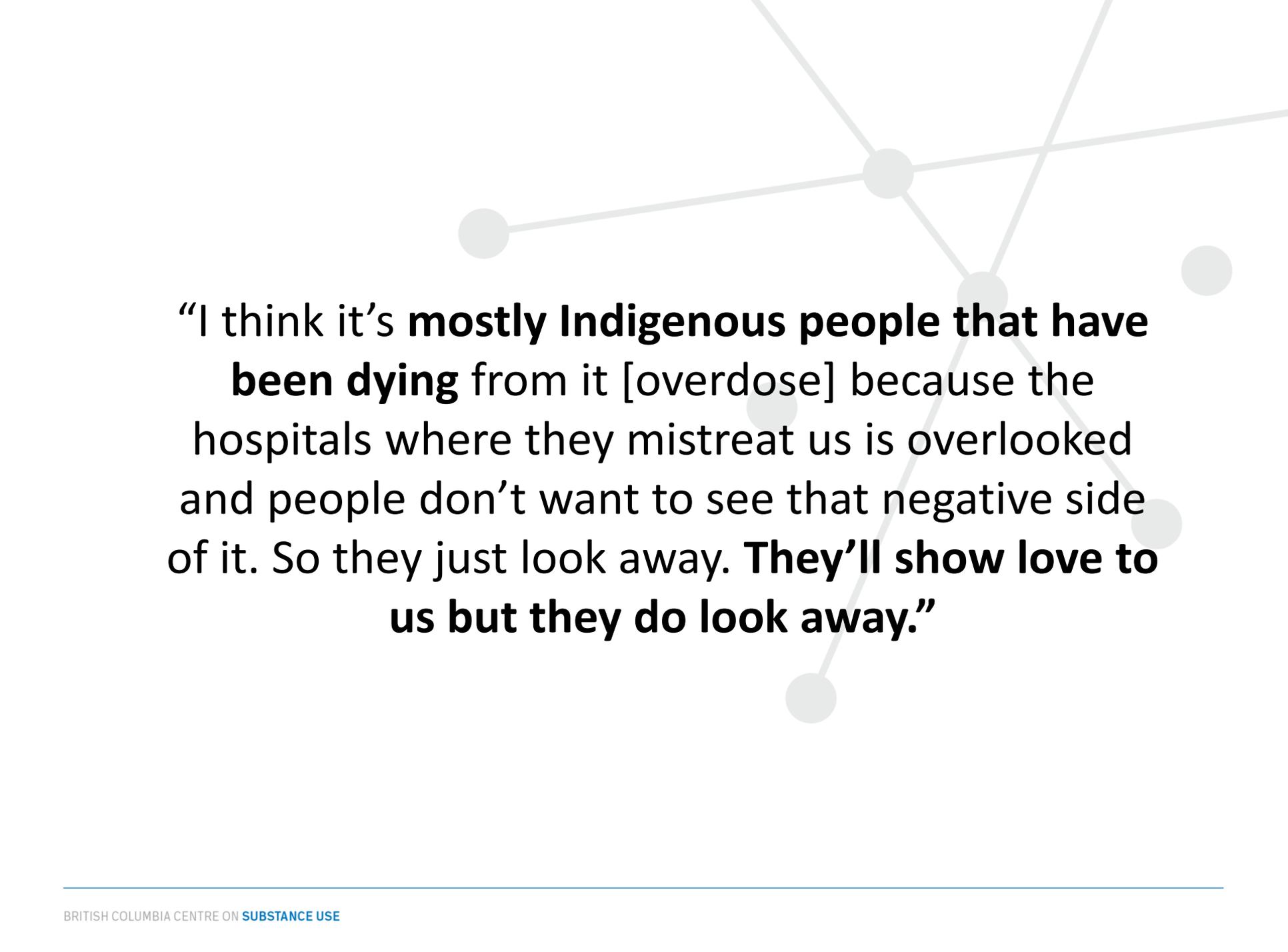
An abstract graphic consisting of several grey lines and dots. The lines are thin and grey, connecting various grey circular dots of different sizes. The dots are scattered across the upper and right portions of the slide, with some lines forming a network-like structure.

Drug poisoning crisis as genocide

Genocide and gentrification

*“It’s a **death sentence**. It’s not just some overdose crisis.”*

*“I don’t think we’re represented at all. I don’t think anybody is. They don’t seem to represent anybody. **They talk about it like it’s an OD crisis when in fact it’s basically genocide. It’s hiding the gentrification. It’s not fucking an OD crisis. I don’t give a fuck what anybody says about it. I tell people what it is. It’s genocide hiding the gentrification.** They want to fucking... SROs, so they can put all these little yuppie places in here. Always we got to be little puppies. They can come down here and walk by us like we’re all fucking bedbug-ridden and, you know, walk past us like scalded cats. It’s very odd. The whole thing is wrong.”*



“I think it’s **mostly Indigenous people that have been dying** from it [overdose] because the hospitals where they mistreat us is overlooked and people don’t want to see that negative side of it. So they just look away. **They’ll show love to us but they do look away.**”



Distrust and adversarial relationships with police/law enforcement practices

“Street sweeps”



Photo courtesy of Meenakshi Mannoe

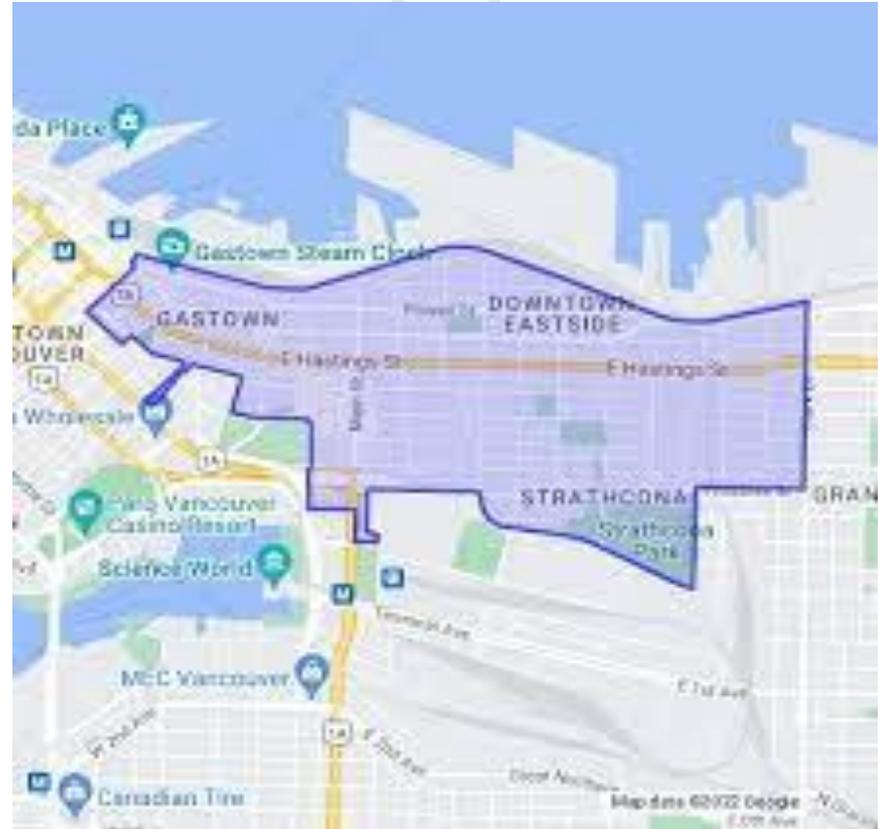
*They [VPD] don't say anything. **They say give us your stuff or we will arrest you.** They don't have any kind of response. And if we do they'll arrest us like all the time.*

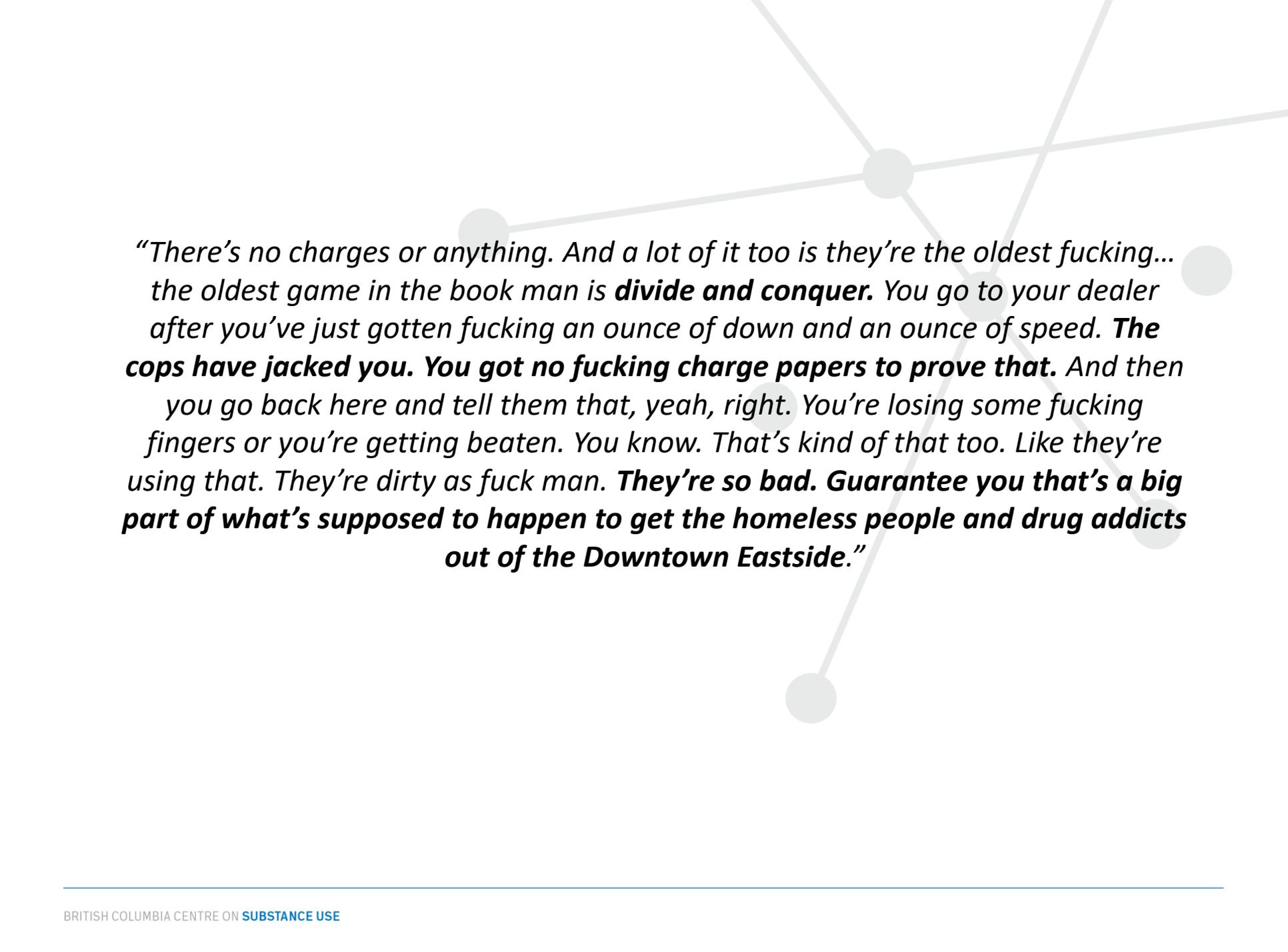
*I just called them [VPD] and told them I either see them **poor bashing and people trying to sell stuff and they're taking all their stuff away.** Poor bashing others to try to sell and make money to survive, and they neglect that. **They take their stuff anyways or take them...** to make them go somewhere else and try to, just trying to survive.*

Zone surveillance and displacement

*“there’s a **two-block radius** they have this on, from Main to Abbott We go on the **outskirts** and the police tell us to get back.”*

*“... if you go out of the area you’re going to... you know, you go out of the area you’re looking at, okay, the police are going to... you get fined by the police. You’re going to be more upset because you’re **out of the area** that we’re not supposed to be in.”*



The background features a network of thin grey lines connecting several semi-transparent grey circles of varying sizes, creating a geometric pattern across the page.

*“There’s no charges or anything. And a lot of it too is they’re the oldest fucking... the oldest game in the book man is **divide and conquer**. You go to your dealer after you’ve just gotten fucking an ounce of down and an ounce of speed. **The cops have jacked you. You got no fucking charge papers to prove that.** And then you go back here and tell them that, yeah, right. You’re losing some fucking fingers or you’re getting beaten. You know. That’s kind of that too. Like they’re using that. They’re dirty as fuck man. **They’re so bad. Guarantee you that’s a big part of what’s supposed to happen to get the homeless people and drug addicts out of the Downtown Eastside.**”*



Limited ability to engage in harm reduction practices in Indigenous communities

“Abstinence vs. harm reduction”

*“...it’s hard to say because they’ve had so many deaths too and, you know, and **still they want to be like so blinded that it’s not there [First Nations communities], you know, but it’s there.** You know, if they don’t talk about it then it’s not going to be there, but you know, they keep their door closed, but you know, they open the door it’s still out there. **It’s still happening, you know. People are still doing it [drugs]**”*

*“Or when they go **back home** they’re like I’ll pick up that stuff up in the city, you know. They don’t want **anything from the city brought back home.** But they don’t even know it’s **already there**”*

Drug use and harm reduction stigma

*“Because I went home last summer...and **they’re like so blinded on the drugs, the overdosing, the opiates**, you know, and how marijuana is better than, you know, doing this. Doing THC, CBD better than, you know, doing heroin and all that for the pain and stuff like that and it’s... it’s like they’re still kind of blinded. **They don’t want to bring it in but yet they still have a lot of our people from our areas dying and slowly it’s getting into the reserves**. I’ve seen that. **But the elders there, they don’t want to see it because they don’t want it happening on their reserves**. They don’t want to see it happening to their people or whatever. They want it to stay in the city. **They don’t want it to come home, although it is home. It is there. They just don’t see it.**”*

*I think that those **OPS sites should definitely be on reserve**. That’s where sometimes it begins, right, and it’s all concentrated so much right there. But we need people right there looking after, you know, it doesn’t only happen once you leave the reserve. **It doesn’t happen on the Downtown Eastside only. It happens right there in your very backyard.***

Key takeaways

- ❖ Must acknowledge the harms perpetuated by ongoing colonial policies and systems that continue to impact Indigenous peoples.
- ❖ **Narratives around what we consider “harm reduction”**- should go beyond addressing individual substance use behaviours and interrogate colonial systems that shape the everyday lives on Indigenous Peoples.
--> **Indigenous harm reduction = reducing harms of colonialism** (ICAD, 2019).
- ❖ **De-stigmatizing harm reduction** in Indigenous communities
- ❖ **Indigenous and community-based leadership** in developing harm reduction within Indigenous communities.

Disclosures

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: University of British Columbia research ethics board/H17-0138

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests

Funding: This study was supported by the US National Institutes of Health (R01DA033147)

Acknowledgments

- ❖ Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society
- ❖ National Institutes of Health
- ❖ BC Center on Substance Use

Chi-Miigwech!
Thank you!

**BRITISH COLUMBIA CENTRE ON
SUBSTANCE USE**

400-1045 Howe St
Vancouver BC
V6Z 2A9
www.bccsu.ca