

# Public Health Approach to Drug Policy

## Board of Health

July 16, 2018

- One of the key strategies recommended in the *Toronto Overdose Action Plan*.
- Worked with diverse steering committee to advise on process + develop discussion paper and fact sheets.
- Contracted Ipsos Public Affairs to facilitate the community dialogue process.



# Four components

1. Two community sessions:  
Downtown + Etobicoke  
(60 participants)
2. Twenty (20) interviews  
with people who use  
drugs
3. Open online survey: 346  
respondents
4. Representative general  
public survey: 503  
respondents



# What did we ask?

- How well is our current approach to illegal drugs working?
- Awareness of health/social harms of existing drug laws?
- Level of support for a public health approach to drugs?
- Should the federal government consult about decriminalizing personal use of all drugs?
- Should they consult about legally regulating all drugs?



## **Decriminalization**

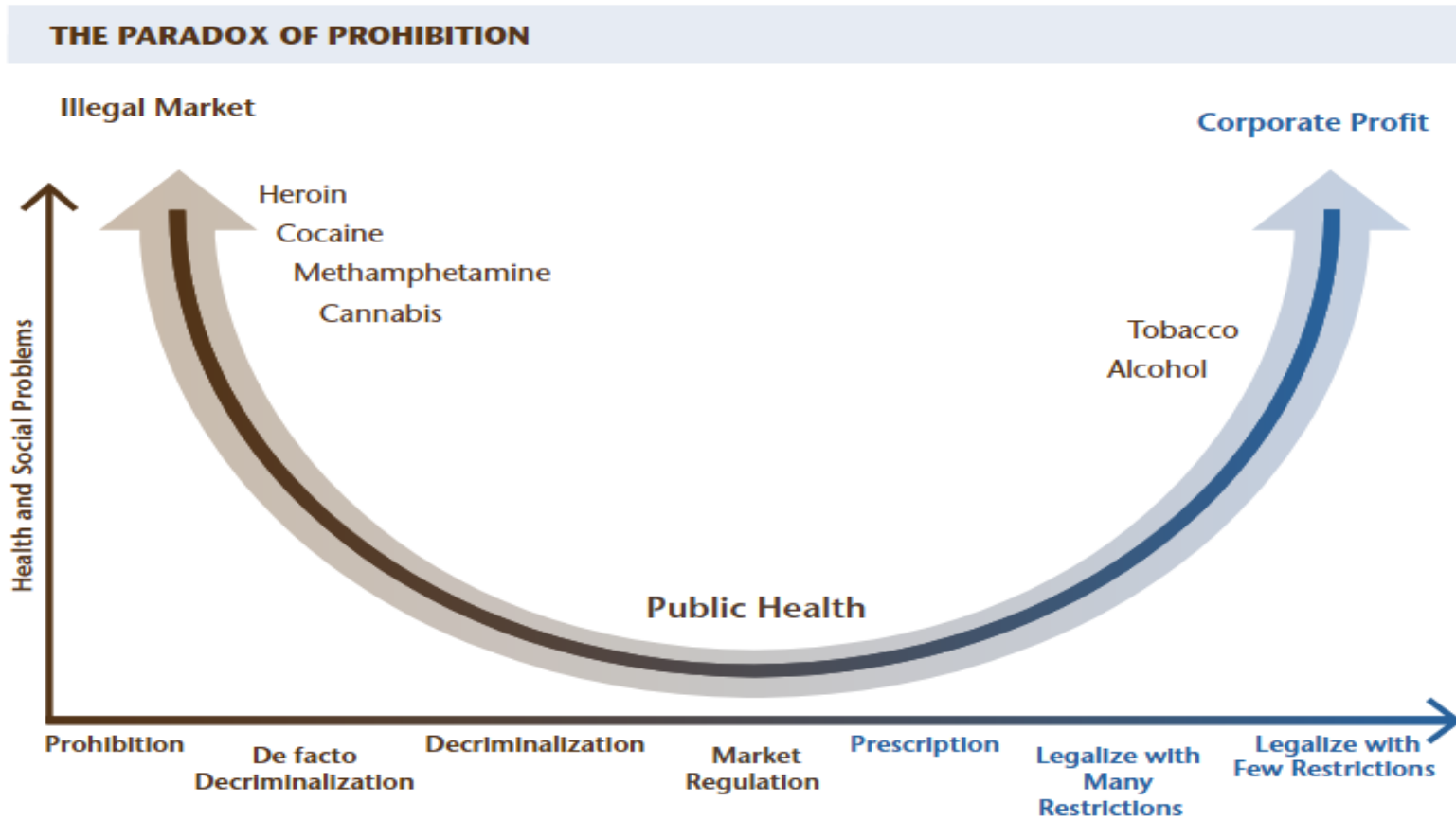
Removal of criminal penalties for the personal use + possession of drugs, but the production and sale of drugs is still illegal.

## **Legal regulation**

Drugs are legalized with controls over how they are produced, distributed, sold and consumed.

## **Public health approach**

Comprehensive, including prevention, harm reduction and treatment. Can also include decriminalization or strict legal regulation.



**Figure 3.** Adapted from Marks,<sup>(41)</sup> reproduced by permission from the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition.

# What are the harms of criminalization?

- Negative beliefs/stereotypes of people who use drugs.
- Difficulty finding work and housing.
- Difficulty accessing needed services.
- Forcing people into unsafe spaces/behaviours.
- Illegal markets with stronger drugs for higher profits.
- High enforcement costs - \$2 billion annually.
- Some groups affected more than others.

# Benefits of decriminalization

- Portugal: Decrease in drug use among vulnerable populations, increase in people seeking treatment, significant decreases in HIV (85%), and deaths.
- Czech Republic: HIV rates are less than 1% among people who inject drugs- one of lowest rates in the region.
- California: \$1 billion in criminal justice savings cannabis was decriminalized.
- Improved police/community relations.



# What did we hear from Torontonians?

- Canada's current approach to drugs is broken.
- We should address drug use as a public health and social issue, not a criminal issue.
- Decriminalization is a step in the right direction, but is not a panacea.
- Strong support for a public health approach to drugs.
- Legal regulation, and a public health approach that focuses on harm reduction, is the ideal solution.

1. Call on the federal government to decriminalize the possession of all drugs for personal use, and scale up prevention, harm reduction and treatment services.
2. Call on the federal government to convene a task force to explore options for the legal regulation of all drugs based on a public health approach. The task force should include people who use drugs, and policy, research and program experts in the areas of public health, human rights, substance use, mental health, and criminal justice.

## **Thank you to:**

- Project Steering Committee
- Ipsos Public Affairs
- Community dialogue participants