

Wake Up—We Are Dying! A Call to Action From People Who Use Drugs

On International Overdose Awareness Day, we, as people who use drugs from around the world, demand an end to the death and devastation wrought by the overdose epidemic. Awareness is nothing without concerted political action.

Our very lives, and the lives of those we love, are the human cost of this deadly war on drugs. All too often, the drugs themselves are blamed for claiming so many lives. In reality, we should lay the blame on the architects of the disastrous drug war, the lack of political will to find real solutions, and the societal apathy generated by decades of stigma and discrimination. The combined cost of all this is proving too brutal to bear. Today, as we do every other day, drug user unions and networks call for action.

Worldwide, there were [585,000 drug-related deaths](#) in 2017, and over 70,000 people lost their lives in the US. In Canada, the rate of opioid-related deaths increased from 3,000 in 2016 to nearly 4,000 in 2017. It is no overstatement to declare that we who use drugs are struggling to survive through this epidemic of death. Although preliminary figures showed a very small decline in US deaths in 2018, more Americans still died of a drug overdose that year than were killed during the entire Vietnam War. And yet governments continue to prosecute and punish people who use drugs—creating the conditions that drive these tolls—while responding to our misery with lethargy, if at all.

Stigma and discrimination lie at the heart of this inaction. This silence in the face of our deaths, and the deaths of those we love, is a manifestation of the rampant hate and prejudice against our communities.

We do not forfeit our rights because of the substances we put in our bodies. People who use drugs are *people*: mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, friends and valuable and productive members of society. And we fight on. Just like any oppressed and marginalized group in history, we refuse to be dismissed as collateral damage.

We, as drug user activists, advocates, and community organizers from around the world, know what is needed to end this overdose epidemic. We demand that governments, media, healthcare professionals, and the general public worldwide:

- 1) Declare the overdose epidemic a public health emergency and allocate the necessary resources to tackling overdose deaths

- 2) Introduce/ensure the safe supply of legal, pharmaceutical-grade drugs based on each person's substance of choice
- 3) Provide support for drug consumption rooms/spaces so that people who use drugs can use safely and securely. These spaces should be located and run in ways that are accessible and community-centered
- 4) Ensure that naloxone is widely available and easy to access.
Community-distributed naloxone programs are most likely to be successful because they are best placed to reach people who use drugs.
- 5) Advocate for the decriminalization of drugs and people who use drugs, as well as intersectional and allied criminalized populations, such as sex worker and LGBTQI communities; and further examine and rectify the ways the war on drugs has been used to disproportionately criminalize marginalized groups such as people of color, poor people, and/or queer and trans people
- 6) Meaningfully include the leadership of people who use drugs in the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of policies, research and programs

We will not stand by silently in the face of even one more preventable death.

This call is issued on behalf of drug user unions and networks around the world, including the International Network of People who use Drugs, Urban Survivor's Union, the Canadian Association for Safe Supply and the Middle East and North African Network of People who use Drugs, Canadian Association of People who use Drugs, Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users, Women and Harm Reduction International Network and Unharming Ohio