Analyzing the Relationship Between Drug Decriminalization and Crime Trends in Vancouver

Capstone Project: SDA 490

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1 Introduction

In January 2023, British Columbia introduced a pilot policy partially decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of certain illicit substances. Under this framework, individuals found with up to 2.5 grams of drugs, such as opioids, cocaine, or methamphetamine, would no longer face criminal charges. The policy was framed as a harm reduction strategy, aiming to reduce overdose deaths, encourage treatment over incarceration, and decrease the stigma associated with drug use. However, the policy caused significant public controversy. Hence, concerns over public disorder, visible drug use, and rising crime, particularly in Downtown Vancouver, dominated media coverage and

political discussion. In response to increasing pressure, the province reinstated restrictions on public drug use in 2024.

This paper adopts a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the public response to decriminalization and its effects on crime trends in Vancouver. The first component of the analysis involves sentiment analysis using social media data. This technique is used to capture how the public perceived the policy during and after its implementation. Accordingly, by analyzing patterns in the tone and content of online discussions, the study identifies shifts in public sentiment in response to the policy.

The second component involves a spatial analysis of crime trends through the use of neighborhood-level crime maps. These visualizations compare reported crime rates across Vancouver from 2022 to 2024, standardized by population. This allows for an examination of where crime was most concentrated before and after decriminalization, with a particular focus on Downtown and surrounding neighborhoods. The spatial patterns provide insight into whether crime has historically been localized or dispersed across the city.

Finally, the study applies a difference-in-differences statistical model to estimate the impact of decriminalization on reported crime. This method isolates the policy's effect while accounting for citywide trends by comparing changes before and after 2023 in the number of crimes in Downtown and other areas. A similar model was incorporated to assess whether adjacent areas experienced any spillover effects following the policy's implementation. Together, these three methods aim to offer a comprehensive understanding of both the social reaction to decriminalization and its measurable effects on crime.

2 Literature Review

Over the past two decades, academic literature has challenged the traditional assumption that drug use is inherently linked to higher crime rates. Myer and Belisle (2018) are among those who have evaluated this relationship through the use of crime data in neighborhoods surrounding safe injection facilities in Vancouver. Their study found that crime rates actually declined in areas where these facilities were present. These findings reinforce the idea that public health-oriented interventions can coexist with community safety, particularly when implemented alongside social support.

Similarly, research by Wood et al. (2006) examined the potential impact of safe injection sites on crime. Their analysis showed no significant increase in criminal offenses following the opening of Vancouver's Insite facility. In fact, they observed a reduction in vehicle break-ins and thefts near the site. Another study by Milloy et al. (2009) investigated whether using supervised injection sites influenced the likelihood of incarceration among drug users. Their research found no association, suggesting that harm reduction services may not contribute to criminal justice involvement.

On the other hand, from a qualitative point of view, Fast et al. (2017) conducted interviews with young men in Vancouver who were involved in drug trade. The study showed that their motivations to engage in drug-related crimes were more often rooted in social identity, economic aspirations, and peer dynamics than in drug dependency itself. This challenges the economic compulsion narrative, which assumes that addiction leads individuals to commit crimes to support their habits. Instead, the authors emphasize that individual choice and structural inequalities both play a significant role in shaping criminal behavior.

Finally, in relation to how the outcomes of drug policies are perceived and recorded, Boyd et al. (2022) examine how enforcement patterns, media portrayals, and the spatial placement of harm reduction services can influence public narratives about crime. They argue that clustering services in one area can lead to concentrated visibility of disorder, regardless of whether overall crime rates are rising. This spatial concentration may give the false impression of a crime surge when, in fact, it may reflect a relocation of vulnerable populations or shifts in law enforcement activity.

3 Sentiment Analysis

To complement the statistical evaluation of crime trends, the study also conducted a sentiment analysis on a corpus of news headlines and Reddit discussions concerning drug decriminalization in Vancouver. This analysis aimed to capture how public attitudes evolved around the policy's implementation and explore whether public perceptions aligned with actual crime data.

The results revealed a dominant negative tone in public discourse, particularly toward individuals struggling with addiction. Overall, media narratives often portrayed these individuals as threats to public safety rather than as people in need of care and support. Similarly, headlines commonly employed alarmist language, suggesting that the policy had failed or that it was responsible for the rising disorder. Such framing likely contributed to a heightened sense of public fear or misunderstanding regarding the intent and impact of the policy.

Reddit discussions, while more diverse in tone, reflected a polarized environment. Some users expressed support for harm reduction and viewed the policy as a compassionate approach to a complex issue. Others, however, attributed visible drug use and perceived disorder in Downtown Vancouver

directly to decriminalization, reinforcing stigmatizing views about drug users and public space (see word frequency chart). This divergence in opinion underscores the influence of sentiment, shaped by media framing and anecdotal experience, in shaping public understanding, often in ways that deviate from empirical evidence.

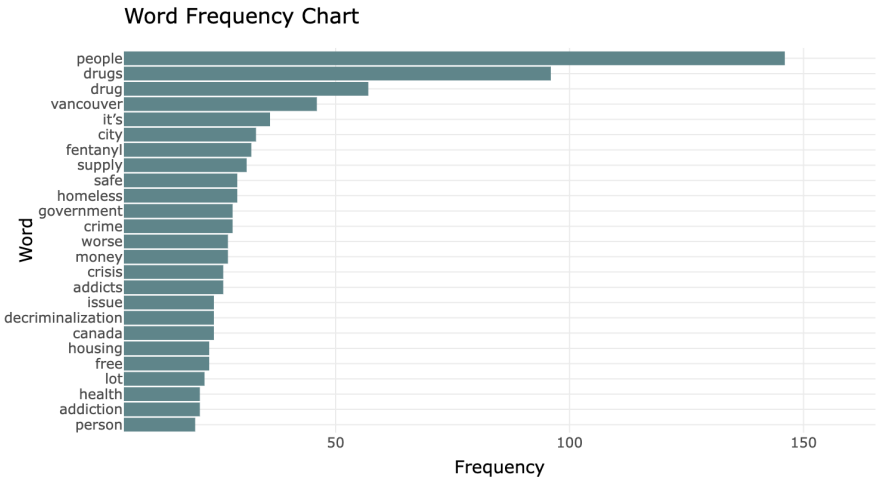

Figure 1: Word Frequency Chart

The following sections delve into a quantitative investigation of crime trends using neighborhood-level reports to assess whether these public concerns were supported by objective data.

4 Spatial and Statistical Analysis - Data Sources

For assessing the variable of interest that is crime rates across Vancouver, the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) open portal dataset is utilized to analyze the amount of crime that has occurred from 2020 to early 2025. Within the VPD dataset, crimes are listed across 11 categories that include types of theft and break-and-enter, homicide, mischief, vehicle collisions, and offense against a person (Vancouver Police Department, 2025). All categories except for vehicle collision crimes are included for examination purposes. To nor-

malize crime across different neighborhoods, Statistics Canada census data has been used, with allocations to neighborhoods by Vancouver local area profiles to determine the specific population by neighborhood rather than dissemination area or forward service area (Statistics Canada 2021; City of Vancouver). Additionally, data files providing geographic boundaries for data mapping were also provided to display data accurately for each neighborhood in the city. Furthermore, variables such as emergency medical calls and incidents of drug-related mortality were considered about decriminalization. BC Emergency Health Services (BCEHS) data was able to provide the number of calls made specifically for incidents involving emergencies in connection with drugs (2024). The BC Coroners Service data dashboard was able to provide deaths in connection to unregulated drug use (2025). However, for both sets of available data, the scope is limited to a city-wide perspective, and as such, specific neighborhood variations are not able to be measured. The contrast between incidents of crime compared to drug-related deaths and emergency calls is still possible across Vancouver as a whole to see any possible trends, such as noticeable increases in one another. Additionally, interactions between individuals who have used unregulated drugs and police officers was noted to provide additional context, as approximately half (49%) of all surveyed respondents by the BC Centre for Disease Control (Xavier et al., 2024) within the Vancouver Coastal Health region had interactions with the police while in possession of drugs (Xavier et al., 2024). At a provincial level, 49% of respondents reported intimidation or harassment when interacting with police (Xavier et al., 2024). While not specifically within the city of Vancouver, the frequency of interactions between those who possess unregulated drugs and police can indicate the intersections between decriminalization, crime, and drug use.

5 Spatial Analysis

When first looking at the trends in crime in Vancouver it was important to look at the relationship between crime and incidents of drug use to look for any common trends. When initially looking at emergency calls within the city from 2020 to 2024, the change in the number of calls in Vancouver increased and decreased from year to year. From 2020 to 2021, calls increased 23%, while dropping 21% the following year (BCEHS, 2024). 2023 saw a sharp increase of 34% in calls connected to overdose responses (BCEHS, 2024), the year that matched the implementation of decriminalization. However, the calls decreased again the following year by 9% in 2024 (BCEHS, 2024).

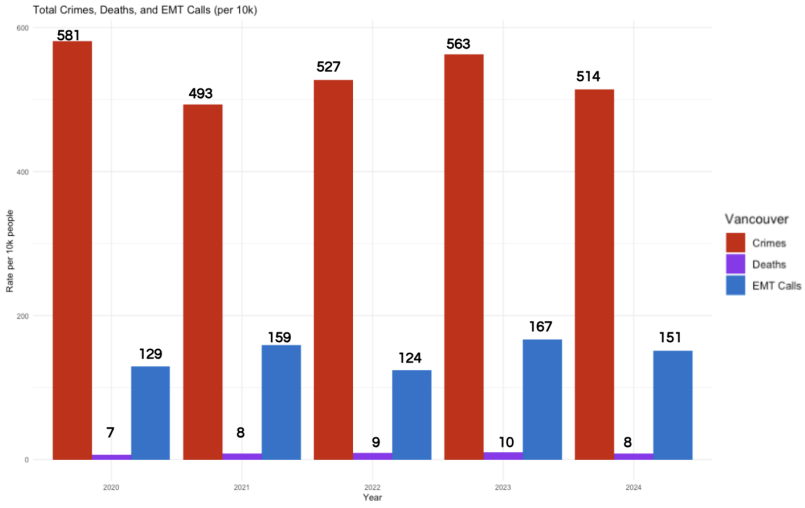

Figure 2: Bar Chart Indicating Crimes, Death, and Emergency Health Calls per 10,000 population

Drug-related deaths from 2020 to 2024 saw increases from 2020 to 2023, but a decrease from 2023 to 2024 the incidents in Vancouver dropped 20% (BC Coroners Service, 2024). In terms of total Figures within the city, that would indicate that 2023 had the highest occurrence of emergency calls and drug-related deaths. The relationship to crime is displayed in proportion to

incidences per 10,000 people in Figure 2, where crime Figures in red greatly outweigh the number of calls and deaths. More importantly, there is no discernible trend appearing to an extent that would suggest a clear reason for eliminating the decriminalization of the possession of illicit drugs in public. The effects overall to impact 2023 singularly in relation to crime, emergency calls, and deaths cannot be easily attributed to decriminalization. Furthermore, the effects of decriminalization could be seen more likely as time went on, but the cancellation of decriminalization in public mitigates any tangible effect decriminalization could have, positively or negatively.

Specifically looking at the occurrences of crime in Vancouver, with overall crime per 10,000 shifting up and down from 2020 to 2024, the need to look within the city overall arises, as crimes in specific neighborhoods may differentiate from others. The rate of crime changing within the city month to month is sporadic, as increases vary depending on various factors, such as the season. The data about the number of crimes is clear: the closer to the downtown core of the city, the greater the overall number of crimes. However, when adjusting for population, the rate of crime begins to show a clear distinction with crimes in certain neighborhoods. In July 2020, crime was distinctly high, specifically within the neighborhood of Strathcona, with a crime rate of 226 crimes, more than 100 more than any other neighborhood.

As seen in Figure 3, the prominent bright yellow depicts the outlying nature of the Strathcona Neighbourhood, which includes the majority of Downtown Eastside. The average crime per neighborhood during this time was 42 crimes, with a median of 29 crimes. Areas in proximity to large parks all fell below the average.

By July 2022, the average and median crimes remain almost identical to 2020, at 42 and 30, respectively. Strathcona retains the highest rate of crime,

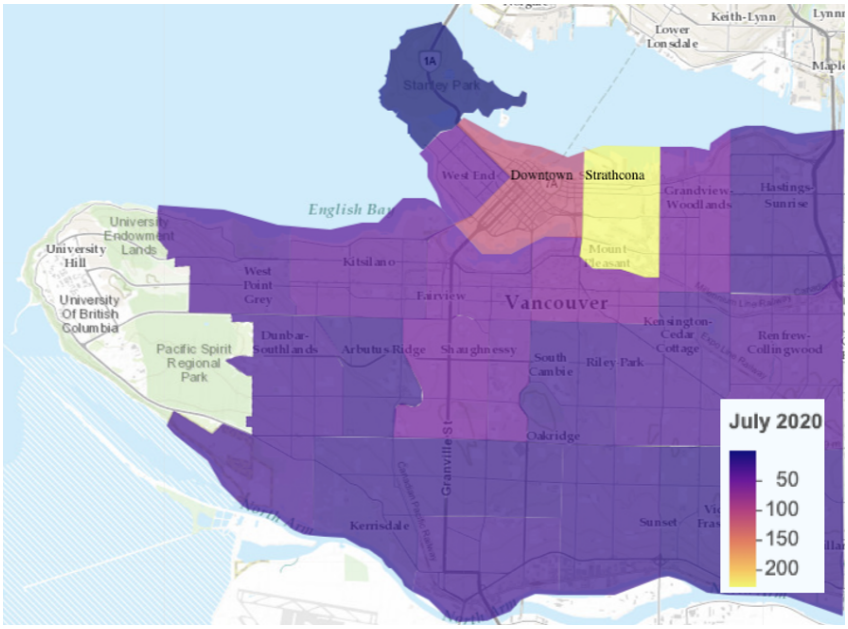

Figure 3: Rate of Crime per neighborhood in Vancouver July 2020

but the difference in crime rates from Strathona to other neighborhoods has shrunk from more than 100 to just less than 50, as Downtown saw resulted in an increase in crime to 152. Referring back to Figure 2, the overall city rate of crime has decreased, but the neighborhood disparity has remained consistent, as shown in Figure 4. The only other neighborhoods with crime rates higher than 50 are in direct proximity to Downtown and Strathcona, the West End, Mount Pleasant, and Grandview-Woodlands. The contrast between Downtown and Strathcona only further increases in July 2023 as median crime rates drop to 26 while the average remains at 43 and Strathcona's rate of crime is at 201 while Downtown's further increases to 181.

By July 2024, the rate of crime for both Downtown and Strathcona neighborhoods was the same at 177, which totals a rate of crime three times higher than the next closest neighborhoods. The average neighborhood crime was 38, with a median of 23. Neighborhoods in the south side of Vancouver held rates of crime below 20, while areas around larger parks such as Jericho or Queen

Elizabeth Park saw rates of crime significantly below average, as Stanley Park saw a rate of crime of 6, for example.

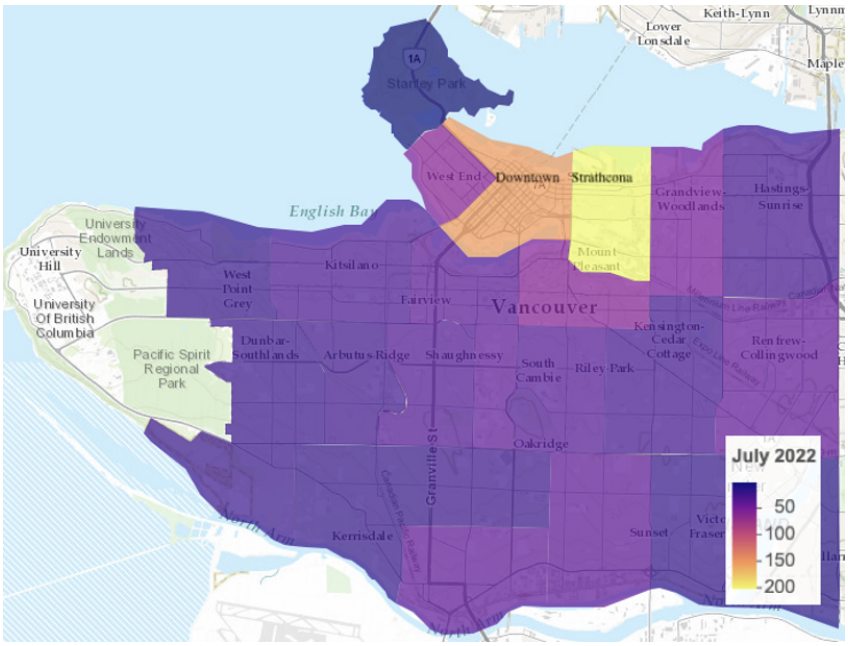

Figure 4: Rate of Crime per neighborhood in Vancouver July 2022

Figure 5 shows consistency with Figures 3 and 4, as the majority of Vancouver neighborhoods show low rates of crime compared to the two outlying neighborhoods. While overall city-wide rates of crime have remained relatively consistent, the rate of crime has shifted from just over 100 in Downtown in 2020 to 178 in 2024, an increase of over 50% over four years. This increase relative to a general consistency elsewhere indicates primarily a shift in crime within the city.

When looking at Strathcona, the neighborhood has remained consistently high regarding the rate of crime, while other neighborhoods have been consistently low besides the increase occurring downtown. Considering the low nature of crimes in neighborhoods elsewhere in the city, the possibility of crimes occurring in certain specific areas rather than across entire neighborhoods could be the reason for removing public decriminalization. When identifying

parks and beaches, the neighborhoods of West Point Grey and Kitsilano appear as possible examples for increases in crime, with large parks and beaches such as Jericho Beach, Vanier Park, Pacific Spirit Regional Park, Spanish Banks, and Kits Beach all present in and around these two neighborhoods. However, Figure 6 shows from 2020 to 2024 that, the rate of crime has been decreasing in these neighborhoods.

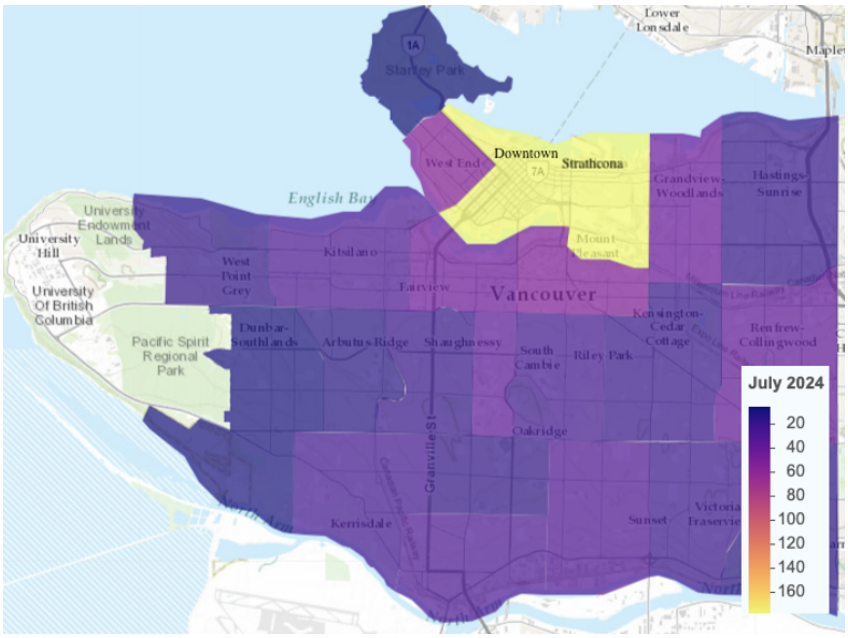

Figure 5: Rate of Crime per neighborhood in Vancouver July 2024

Visually, the trends in crime in Vancouver from 2020 to 2024 have shown a shift in crime, specifically towards downtown, as crime has remained relatively consistent elsewhere within the city (see figure 7), even showing a decrease in the case of neighborhoods such as Strathcona, Kitsilano, and West Point Grey. The impact that decriminalization had on Vancouver, specifically in neighborhoods such as Downtown, remains to be seen from just identifying the relationship of the shift in crime within the city.

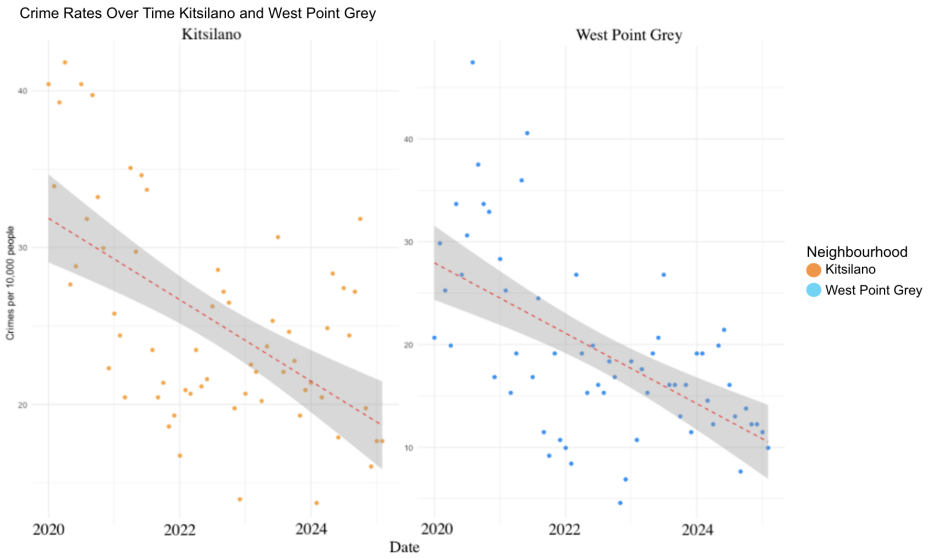

Figure 6: Scatterplot illustrating the rate of Crime in Kitsilano and West Point Grey 2020-2024

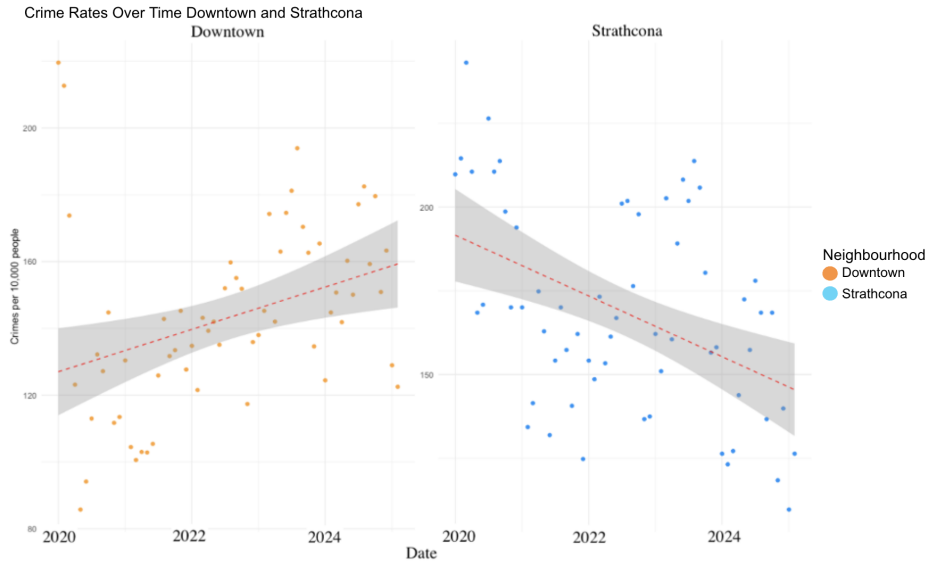

Figure 7: Scatterplot illustrating the rate of Crime in Downtown and Strathcona 2020-2024

6 Statistical Analysis - Methodology

Following what was prompted in the previous section, the intent of the statistical analysis explained below is to estimate the effect of British Columbia's 2023 drug decriminalization policy on crime in Vancouver using a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) approach. This method is appropriate for evaluating policy interventions that affect one group (in this case, Downtown Vancouver) while leaving others largely unaffected. The model compares changes in reported crime in Downtown before and after the policy's implementation to changes in reported crime over the same period in a control group consisting of less-affected areas.

The model is formally specified as follows:

$$\text{Crimes} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{PostDecrim} + \beta_2 \text{Downtown} + \beta_3 (\text{PostDecrim} \times \text{Downtown}) + \epsilon \tag{1}$$

In this equation, *Crimes* represents the number of reported crimes per day. The binary variable *PostDecrim* equals one for observations in the post-policy period (2023 and after) and zero otherwise. The binary variable *Downtown* equals one for areas classified as part of Downtown Vancouver and zero for areas outside Downtown. The interaction term *PostDecrim* $\times$ *Downtown* equals one only for observations from Downtown in the post-policy period and zero otherwise. The coefficient on this interaction term (β_3) represents the Difference-in-Differences estimate, which captures the effect of the policy on crime in Downtown relative to the control group. Note that the error term ϵ encompasses factors that are not included in the model.

Neighborhoods were grouped into five larger regions: Downtown, Westside, Eastside, Midtown, and South Vancouver. The Downtown region, consisting

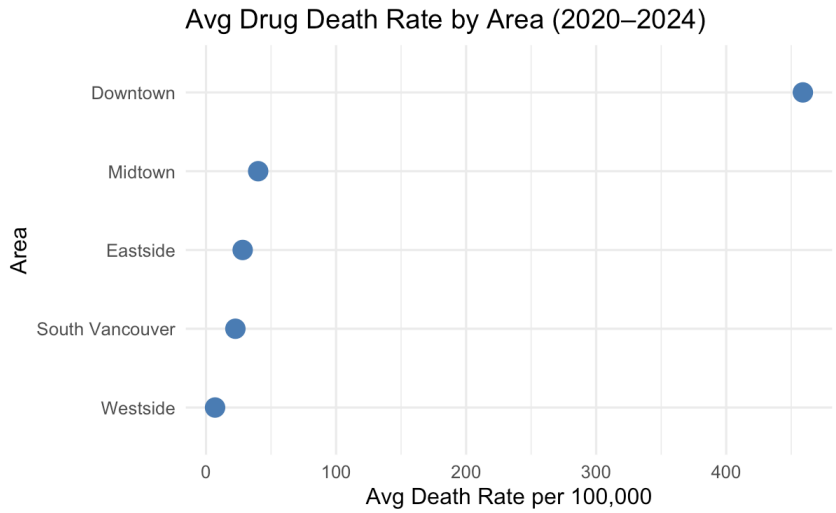

Figure 8: Average Drug Death Rate by Area (2020–2024)

of the Central Business District, West End, and Stanley Park, was selected as the treated area due to its disproportionate exposure to the drug crisis. This classification is supported by two key pieces of evidence.

First, Figure 8 shows that Downtown has an average overdose death rate that far exceeds that of any other region, clearly identifying it as the epicenter of the public health crisis. Second, Figure 9 reveals that safe injection sites are overwhelmingly concentrated in Downtown, with few to none located in other areas. This clustering of harm reduction infrastructure reinforces the area's central role in Vancouver's drug crisis and response strategy. Together, the elevated mortality rate and the spatial concentration of services provide strong justification for treating Downtown as the area most directly impacted by the decriminalization policy.

To examine whether the policy caused crime to shift into Downtown from adjacent neighborhoods, a second model was estimated. This proximity-based model classifies neighborhoods that share borders with Downtown as "near" neighborhoods. These areas include Strathcona, Mount Pleasant, Fairview, Grandview-Woodland, Hastings-Sunrise, Kensington-Cedar Cottage, and Ri-

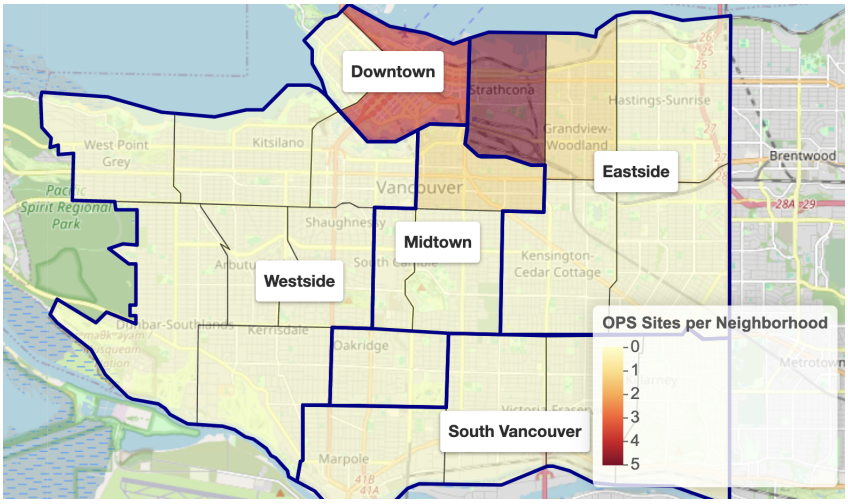

Figure 9: Map with Safe injection sites

ley Park. The model specification remains consistent with the original DiD framework, but the treatment group is redefined as neighborhoods near Downtown. The second model is expressed as:

$$\text{Crimes} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{PostDecrim} + \beta_2 \text{NearDT} + \beta_3 (\text{PostDecrim} \times \text{NearDT}) + \epsilon \quad (2)$$

Here, $NearDT$ is a binary variable equal to one for neighborhoods adjacent to Downtown and zero otherwise. This model allows for the detection of potential spillover effects resulting from decriminalization.

To assess the validity of the Difference-in-Differences model, the parallel trends assumption was examined using both visual and statistical tools. Accordingly, average daily crime trends from 2020 to 2024 were plotted by region (Figure 10). This visualization revealed that prior to 2023, crime patterns in Downtown and the control areas moved similarly over time, supporting the plausibility of the parallel trends assumption. To further verify this, an event study regression was conducted (Figure 11). The results show that the estimated difference in crimes between treated and control areas remained stable

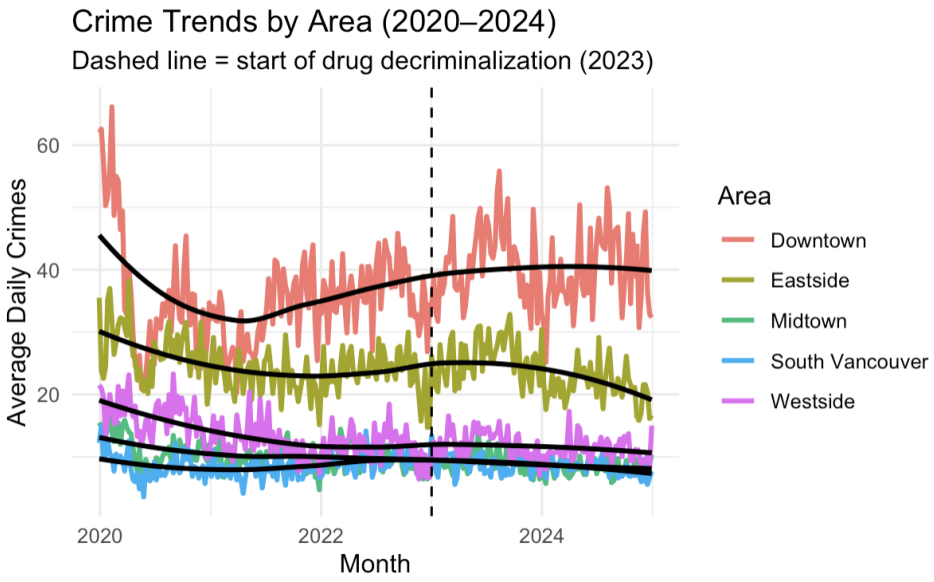

Figure 10: Crime Trends by Area (2020–2024)

during the pre-treatment period, with no significant divergence prior to policy implementation. These results strengthen the credibility of the Difference-in-Differences framework in isolating the impact of decriminalization.

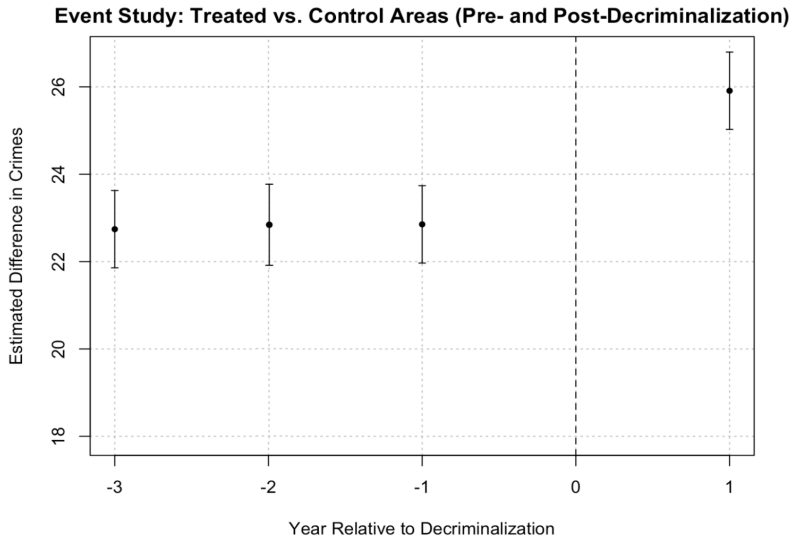

Figure 11: Event Study

In addition, a placebo test was performed by assigning a hypothetical policy implementation date in 2021. The interaction term in this model was

	Placebo
(Intercept)	17.159***
	(1.795)
PostPlacebo	-3.724***
	(0.248)
TreatedArea	28.870***
	(0.392)
PostPlacebo × TreatedArea	-7.500
	(0.554)
Num.Obs.	7304
R2	0.548
R2 Adj.	0.547
RMSE	9.47
Std.Errors	IID

Table 1: Regression Results for Placebo

found to be statistically insignificant (see results in Table 1), which reinforces the confidence that the Difference in Difference estimate is reliable.

To get a better insight into the relationship between the policy and crime, both statistical models were estimated for total reported crimes and for separate categories, including theft, mischief, break-and-entry, and offenses against persons. In further sections, the results and limitations of these models will be analyzed.

7 Statistical Analysis - Results

Table 2 presents the results of the first Difference-in-Differences (DiD) model, where the treatment group consists of neighborhoods within Downtown Vancouver. Note that the estimate for the interaction term, *PostDecrim* × *Downtown*, is positive and statistically significant for all crime categories.

For total reported crimes, the coefficient is 6.191, indicating an average increase of approximately 6.2 crimes per day in Downtown after the policy was implemented, relative to the control group. When multiplied by 365, this

	All Crimes	**Theft**	**BE**	**Mischief**	**OAP**
PostDecrim	-1.063***	-0.316*	-0.479***	-0.060	-0.016
	(0.163)	(0.103)	(0.033)	(0.046)	(0.047)
DT	20.980***	11.862***	0.742***	3.911***	2.796***
	(0.639)	(0.569)	(0.165)	(0.235)	(0.181)
PostDecrim*DT	6.191***	4.972***	-0.300**	1.213***	0.218*
	(0.406)	(0.275)	(0.064)	(0.199)	(0.059)
Num.Obs.	9131	8096	7075	7743	6177
R2	0.558	0.486	0.061	0.415	0.320
R2 Adj.	0.558	0.486	0.059	0.414	0.319
R2 Within	0.558	0.486	0.067	0.415	0.325
R2 Within Adj.	0.558	0.485	0.059	0.414	0.322
RMSE	8.43	5.81	1.50	2.24	1.93
Std.Errors	by: day_of_week				
FE: day_of_week	X	X	X	X	X

Table 2: DiD results for Model 1

corresponds to an estimated 2,258 additional crimes per year.

In the case of theft, the interaction term is 4.972, which implies roughly 1,815 more thefts per year. Mischief increases by 1.213 crimes per day or about 443 additional incidents annually. Offenses against persons rise by 0.218 per day, which translates to approximately 80 more cases per year. On the other hand, break-and-enter incidents decline slightly, with a coefficient of –0.300, suggesting around 110 fewer such crimes annually.

Table 2 shows the results of the second DiD model, which redefines the treatment group as neighborhoods adjacent to Downtown (NearDT). The interaction term, $PostDecrim \times NearDT$, is negative and statistically significant for both total crimes and theft. Specifically, the estimate for all crimes is –0.347, implying about 127 fewer crimes per year in NearDT areas compared to the rest of the city. For theft, the effect is –0.278 per day or roughly 101 fewer incidents annually. The coefficient for break and enter is –0.074, indicating a small reduction of about 27 crimes per year. Estimates for mischief and offenses against persons are close to zero and not statistically significant.

	All Crimes	**Theft**	**BE**	**Mischief**	**OAP**
PostDecrim	0.006	0.147**	-0.071**	-0.011	0.010
	(0.025)	(0.027)	(0.018)	(0.020)	(0.017)
NearDT	2.038***	0.784***	0.178***	0.329***	0.362***
	(0.045)	(0.050)	(0.033)	(0.036)	(0.031)
PostDecrim*NearDT	-0.347**	-0.278**	0.074*	0.014	0.021
	(0.080)	(0.052)	(0.021)	(0.024)	(0.026)
Num.Obs.	28682	24345	14528	12815	7010
R2	0.125	0.035	0.026	0.043	0.052
R2 Adj.	0.125	0.035	0.025	0.042	0.051
R2 Within	0.125	0.034	0.025	0.042	0.051
R2 Within Adj.	0.125	0.034	0.024	0.041	0.050
RMSE	2.50	1.82	0.59	0.78	0.78
Std.Errors	by: day_of_week				
FE: day_of_week	X	X	X	X	X

Table 3: Regression Results for Various Crime Types

Note that all models include fixed effects for day of the week to account for routine fluctuations in crime reporting and daily activity patterns.

8 Statistical Analysis - Limitations

Although the findings presented in this paper offer meaningful insight into the relationship between drug decriminalization and crime trends in Vancouver, several limitations must be acknowledged. One critical concern lies in the potential influence of concurrent policy changes that occurred around the same time as decriminalization, particularly in Downtown Vancouver. The Difference-in-Differences model assumes that decriminalization was the only major intervention affecting crime after January 2023, yet several other initiatives could have contributed to observed crime dynamics.

First, in October 2023, the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) hired approximately 100 new officers specifically to enhance enforcement in the Downtown Eastside (City of Vancouver Council, 2023). An increase in police presence can have a direct impact on crime reporting and deterrence, making

it difficult to isolate the effects of decriminalization alone. With more officers patrolling the area, crimes may have been more frequently detected and recorded, artificially inflating the observed crime figures in Downtown relative to other regions.

Second, "Project Barcode," an initiative launched in early 2023, was specifically aimed at curbing shoplifting and organized retail theft through enhanced surveillance and coordinated law enforcement responses (VPD, 2025). Although the program was not implemented exclusively in Downtown, it likely intensified enforcement in commercial corridors where theft was already a concern. If Project Barcode increased apprehensions or reporting rates in tandem with decriminalization, the observed spike in theft-related crimes could reflect enforcement efforts rather than behavioral shifts caused by the policy.

Third, the number of abandoned calls to the VPD's non-emergency line was significantly higher before 2023, with over 88,000 such calls recorded in 2021 alone (Business in Vancouver [BIV], 2025). This trend suggests that changes in public-police interaction may have occurred independently of the decriminalization policy. If the VPD improved its call-handling infrastructure or community response mechanisms after 2023, the resulting increase in responsiveness could have led to more documented incidents—especially in areas like Downtown, where calls are more frequent.

Finally, in April 2023, the City of Vancouver collaborated with the VPD to remove large encampments from East Hastings Street (City of Vancouver Council, 2024). The displacement of unhoused individuals from encampments may have caused a spatial redistribution of vulnerable populations, potentially concentrating them in Downtown or nearby neighborhoods. This type of population shift can independently affect crime rates, particularly if individuals lacked alternative housing options or were pushed into unfamiliar areas, in-

creasing the likelihood of interactions with law enforcement or engagement in public offenses. It must be noted that this list of policy initiatives is not exhaustive, and other interventions or social dynamics could have taken place exclusively in Downtown during the study period.

These factors that were not included in the model represent potential confounders in the estimation of the true effect of decriminalization. Therefore, while statistical tools such as placebo testing and event studies help strengthen the credibility of the findings, it is important to interpret the results as suggestive of a correlation between decriminalization and crime rather than conclusive evidence of a causal relationship.

9 Statistical Analysis - Results Interpretation

According to the results presented in the previous section, there is clear evidence of a post-policy increase in reported crime that is geographically concentrated in Downtown Vancouver. The data does not suggest a city-wide rise in crime. Instead, it points to a spatial redistribution of incidents following the implementation of the decriminalization policy. Both Difference-in-Differences models reveal that this effect is not uniform across the city, but is disproportionately observed in neighborhoods most directly exposed to the drug crisis. This suggests that crime trends in Downtown diverged from those in other neighborhoods after the policy came into effect.

This concentration of effects may not indicate a surge in criminal behaviour, but rather a shift in where such activity is occurring and being recorded. Downtown's role as the central hub for harm reduction services likely played a key role in this shift. The presence of safe injection sites, shelters, and outreach programs makes the area a natural destination for individuals seeking support. As a result, vulnerable populations become more

concentrated in Downtown, which increases both the visibility of certain behaviors and the risk of exposure to victimization or low-level offenses driven by necessity (City of Vancouver, 2023).

Changes in policing may also explain the observed pattern. Following decriminalization, law enforcement may have focused more heavily on Downtown, particularly if drug use and related behaviors became more visible in public spaces. A higher police presence in one area increases the likelihood that criminal activity will be observed and recorded, regardless of whether the actual volume of offenses changed significantly (Vancouver Police Department, 2024). This is consistent with existing research that shows enforcement priorities and deployment strategies can shape where and how crime is documented (Boyd et al., 2022).

Public reporting behavior may have also played a role. Residents and businesses in Downtown could have become more likely to report crimes after the policy change, especially if local concerns were amplified by media coverage or rising community awareness. Crime statistics are partially shaped by public willingness to report incidents, and reporting tends to increase when perceived disorder becomes more visible or concerning (Statistics Canada, 2021).

In addition, Downtown may have become more attractive to people involved in drug use or sales, who might have viewed it as a safer space in the post-decriminalization context. If the area was seen as less punitive or more accommodating due to its services and infrastructure, this could have contributed to a migration of individuals toward the neighborhood, concentrating behaviors that were previously more distributed across the city.

Overall, the increase in reported crime appears to reflect a spatial reorganization of activity rather than a rise in criminality across Vancouver. These findings highlight how changes in policy, enforcement, service infrastructure,

and community behavior can interact to shape urban crime patterns.

10 Policy Implications

Based on the findings mentioned throughout the paper, several policy implications emerge. In the first place, it must be highlighted that the spatial concentration of services should be reconsidered. When support systems such as harm reduction services, shelters, and treatment facilities are concentrated in a single neighborhood, the social and public safety impacts of related policies also tend to cluster in that area (Boyd et al., 2022). In this case, it is plausible to say that Downtown Vancouver became the focal point not just for health and outreach services but also for the visibility of challenges associated with drug use, homelessness, and poverty. As the data shows, even a citywide policy like decriminalization can have highly localized effects when infrastructure and enforcement are not spatially balanced.

This reinforces the argument for decentralized and community-based support systems. Consequently, spreading services more evenly across neighborhoods could alleviate pressure on Downtown and reduce the clustering of vulnerable populations in one place. A more balanced spatial strategy may also prevent the perception that a single neighborhood is bearing the full weight of a public health crisis, which can contribute to stigma and social tension.

That said, decentralization is not without tradeoffs. One concern is that relocating or expanding services into other neighborhoods might simply redistribute associated challenges, including crime. However, dispersing vulnerable populations does not automatically mean spreading crime. In fact, it may reduce visibility, lower social concentration of high-risk behaviors, and allow for more effective, localized support. Smaller-scale integration can lead to greater community engagement and less strain on enforcement and public services. It

can also prevent situations in which concentration leads to over-policing, which in turn leads to more recorded incidents in one area regardless of actual crime rates.

Additionally, the results call attention to the importance of educating the public about the goals and structure of harm reduction policies. As mentioned above, decriminalization is often misunderstood, especially when its goals are not clearly communicated. Public outreach and education campaigns are essential to help communities understand that these policies are designed to promote safety, health, and dignity rather than to encourage drug use. Hence, one can say that when the rationale behind a policy is made transparent, it becomes easier to build public trust and reduce opposition based on fear.

Finally, it is also rational to suggest that media outlets should be encouraged to ground their claims in evidence and avoid sensationalism, especially when discussing vulnerable populations. Promoting empirical accountability in media narratives can help ensure that public dialogue reflects reality, not fear or stigma.

11 Conclusion

According to the findings presented in the paper, one can conclude that the 2023 drug decriminalization policy did not lead to a generalized increase in crime across Vancouver but rather contributed to a spatial concentration of reported incidents in Downtown, an area already disproportionately affected by the drug crisis. The sentiment analysis revealed a disconnect between public perception and empirical data, emphasizing the influence of media narratives and stigma in shaping public opinion. The spatial and statistical analyses further demonstrated that while Downtown saw measurable changes in crime trends, surrounding neighborhoods did not experience a comparable

effect. These results support the importance of considering geographic concentration, public discourse, and enforcement patterns when evaluating the impact of harm reduction policies. Perhaps not enough time was granted by the government to evaluate the effect of the decriminalization policy, and the cancellation of the pilot program was a hasty decision that might not have considered the complexity of the crisis. Future research could expand the time frame or include other cities to explore whether these patterns persist in different contexts.

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