



2024 CMHO Report on Substances

A conversation

Led by: Dr. Réka Gustafson
Vice-President and Chief Medical Health Officer

April 2025
AVICC Convention

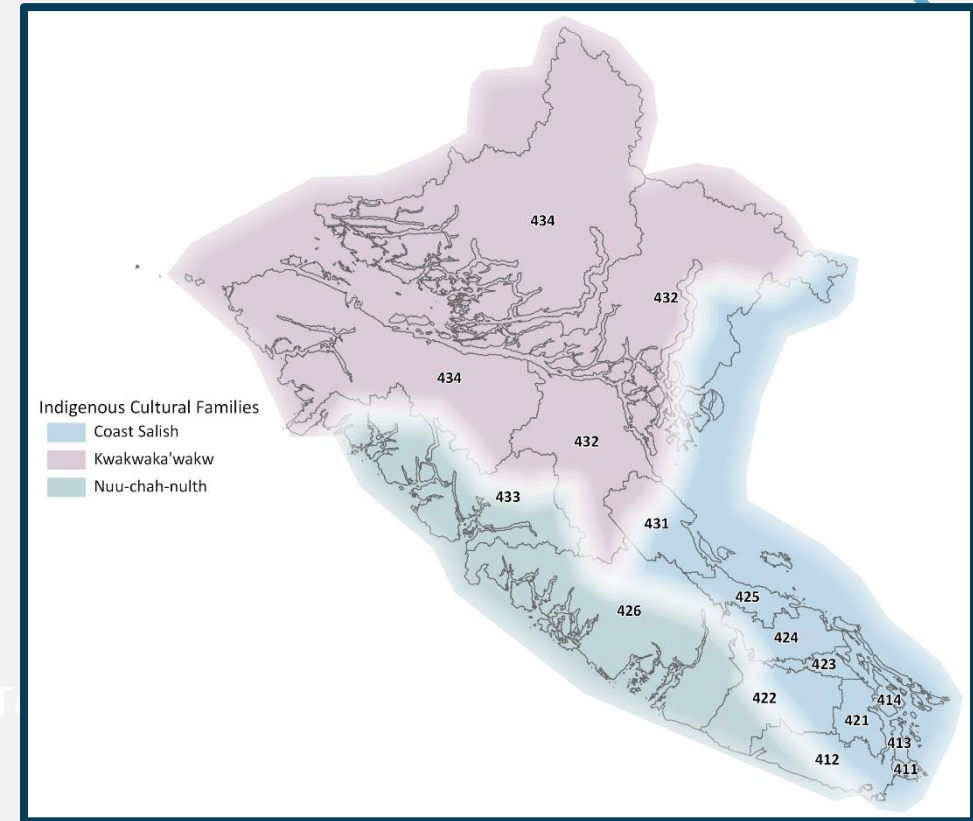
Territorial Acknowledgement



Photo by [Ronin](#) on [Unsplash](#)

With respect we acknowledge the Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuu-Chah-Nulth and Coast Salish cultural families, upon whose homelands we occupy.

With humility, we commit to walk softly on this land, and to work together to uphold the self-determination and health of the Indigenous peoples and communities we serve.



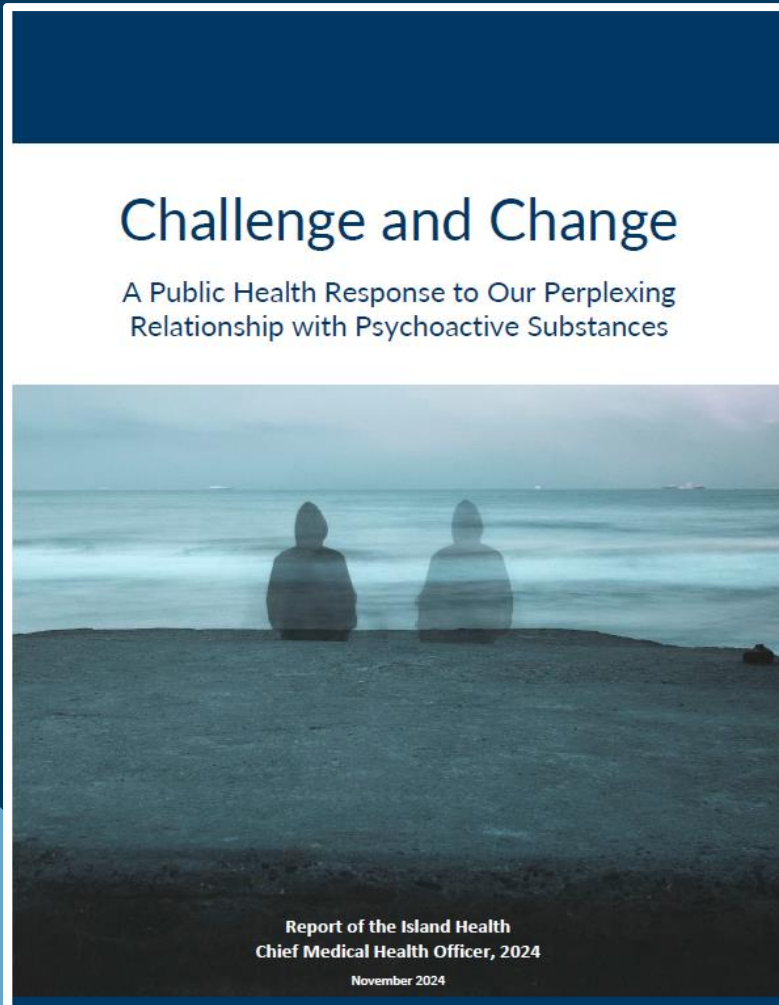
Slido!

Which psychoactive substance causes the most harm?

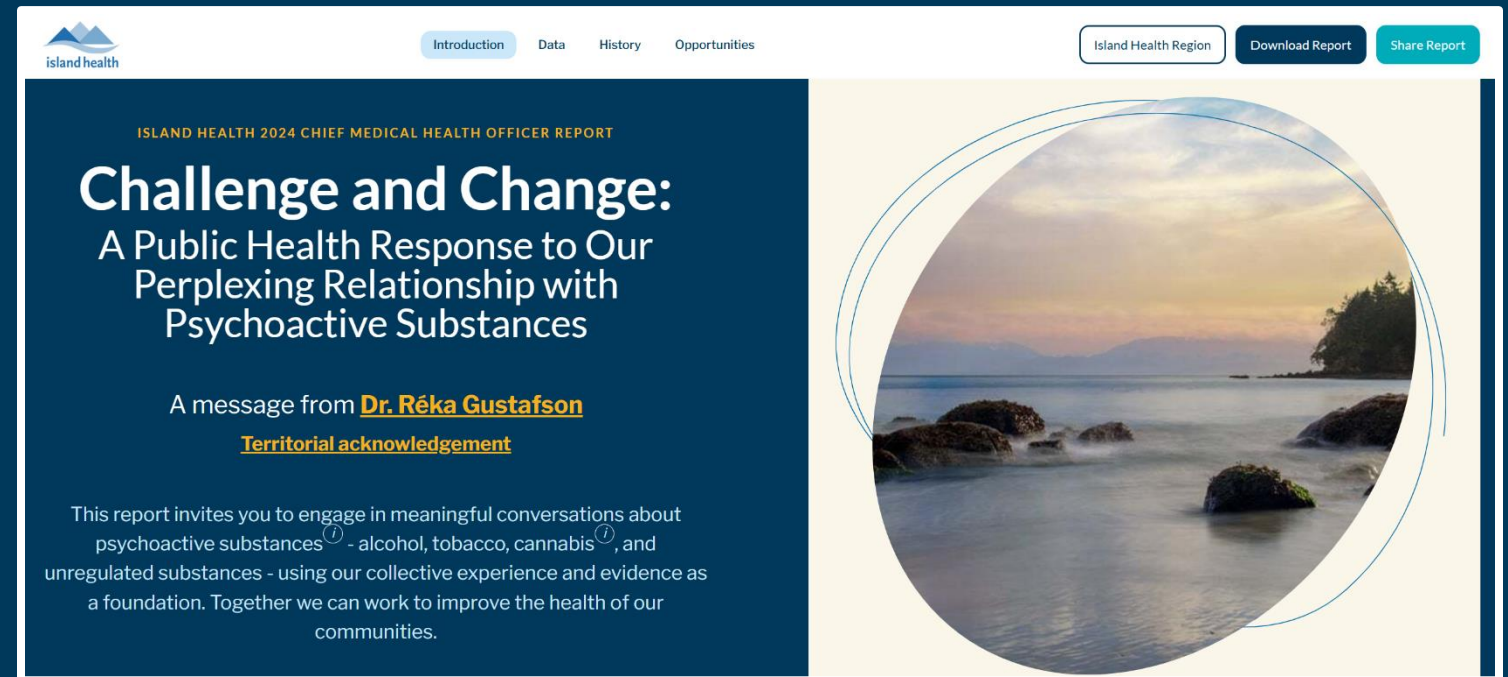
What influences substance use?

Challenge and Change

Full Report



Interactive website

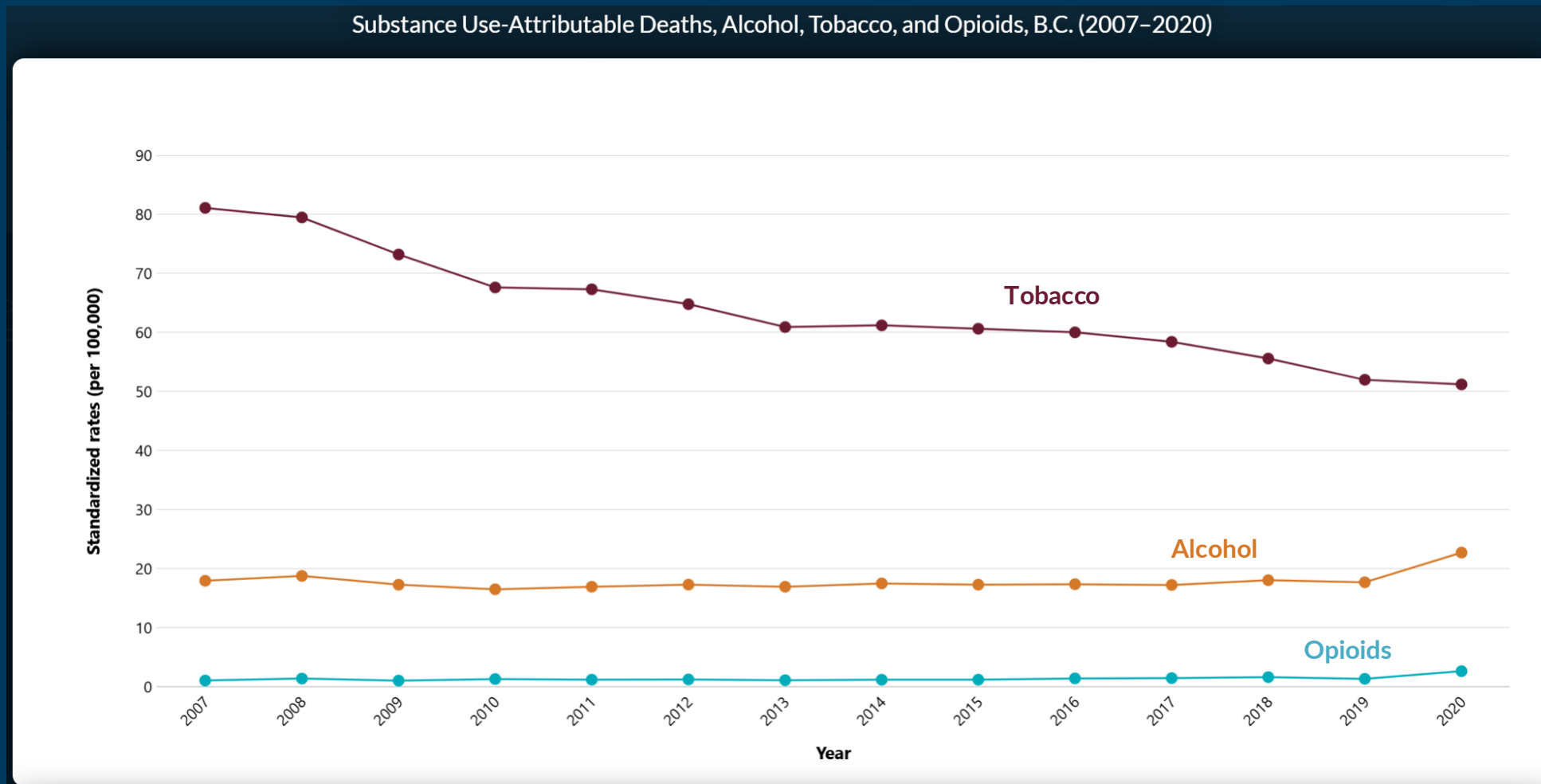


cmho-report-2024.islandhealth.ca



How Are We Doing?

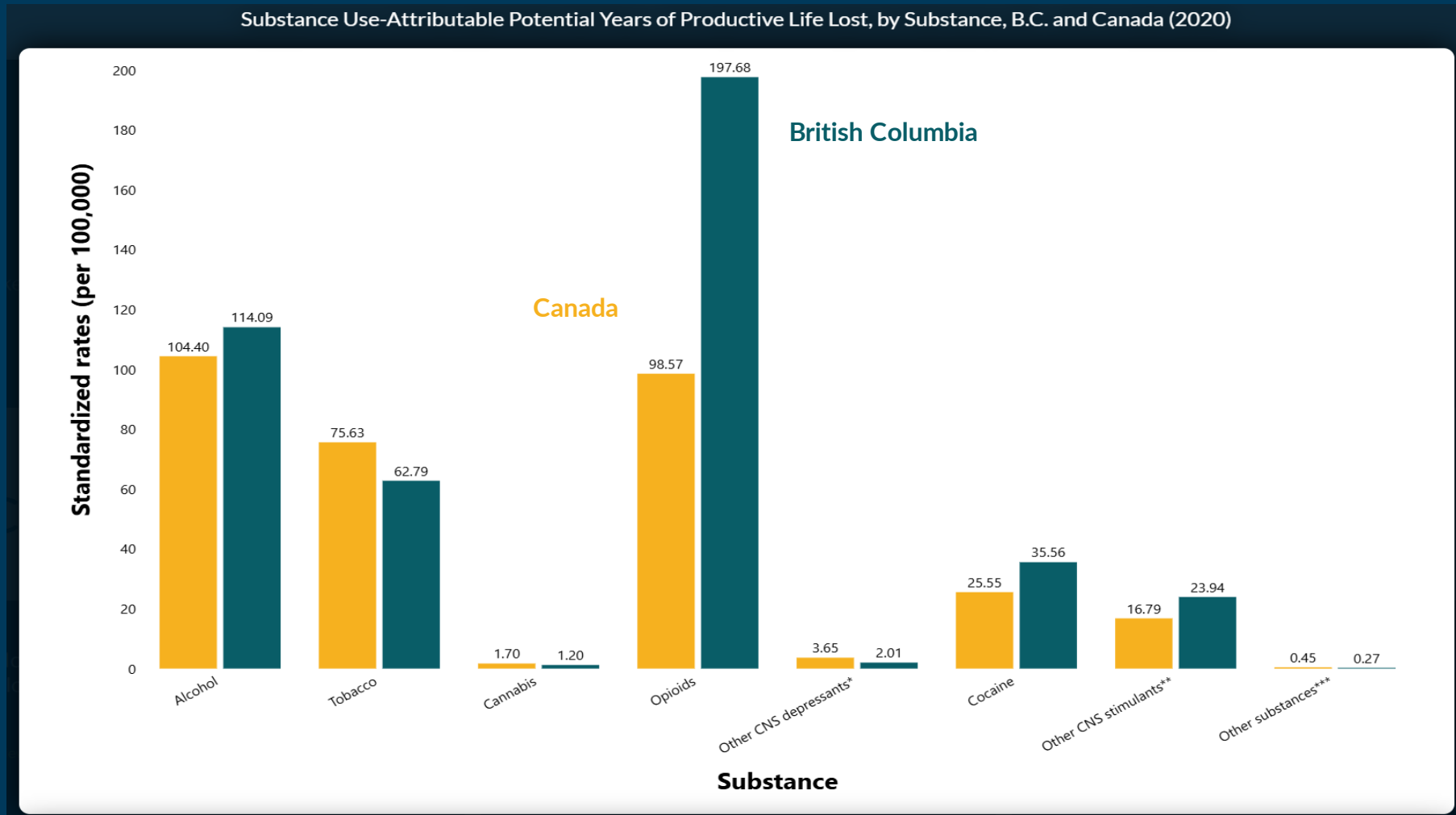
Deaths attributed to substance use



Source: Canadian Substance Use Costs and Harms Scientific Working Group. (2023). Canadian substance use costs and harms visualization tool, version 3.0.2 [Online tool]. Data retrieved from <https://csuch.ca/explore-the-data>

How Are We Doing?

Potential years of life lost

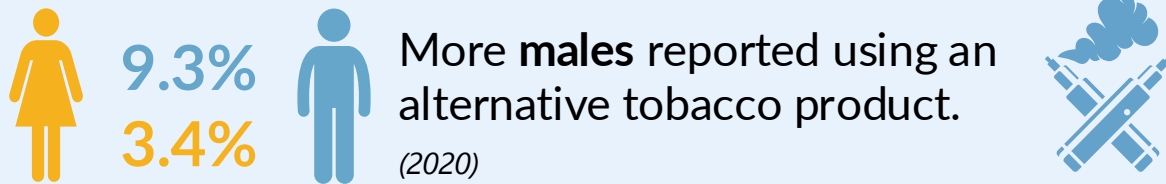


Source: Canadian Substance Use Costs and Harms Scientific Working Group. (2023). Canadian substance use costs and harms visualization tool, version 3.0.2 [Online tool]. Data retrieved from <https://csuch.ca/explore-the-data>

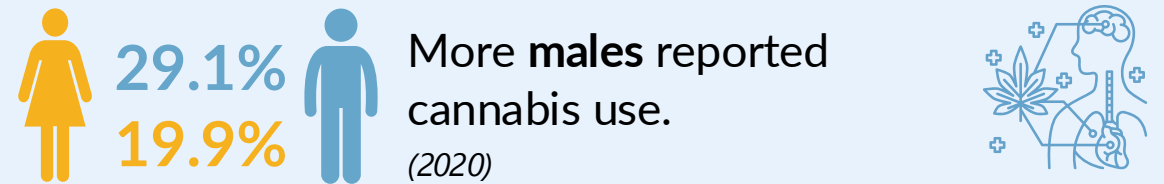
How Are We Doing?

Regulated Substances

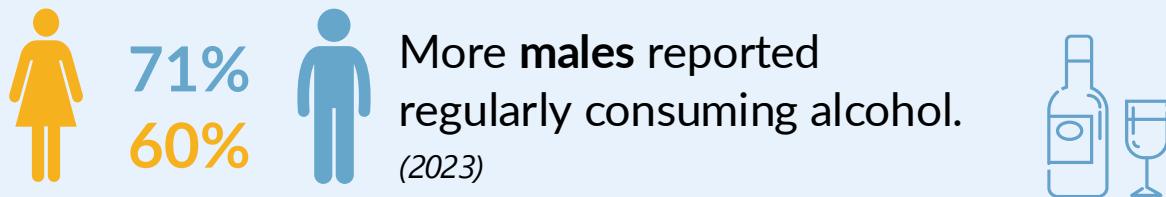
6.8% Of Island Health residents **reported using an alternative tobacco product** in the past year.
(in 2020, BC: 6.1%)



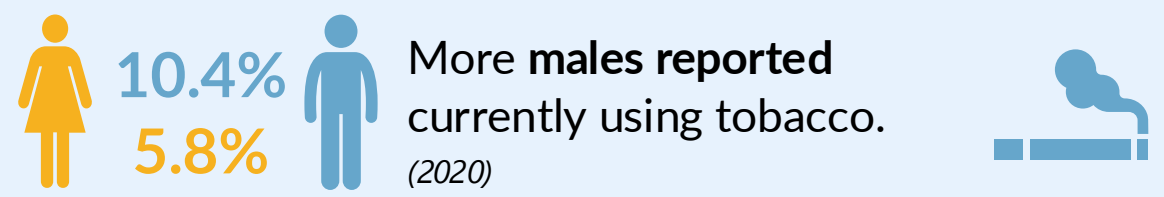
32% Of Island Health residents **reported cannabis consumption** in the past year.
(in 2020, BC: 21%)



65% Of Island Health residents **report consuming alcohol** in the last year.
(in 2023, BC: **60.7%**)



8.6% Of Island Health residents are **current tobacco users**.
(in 2020, BC: 7.8%)

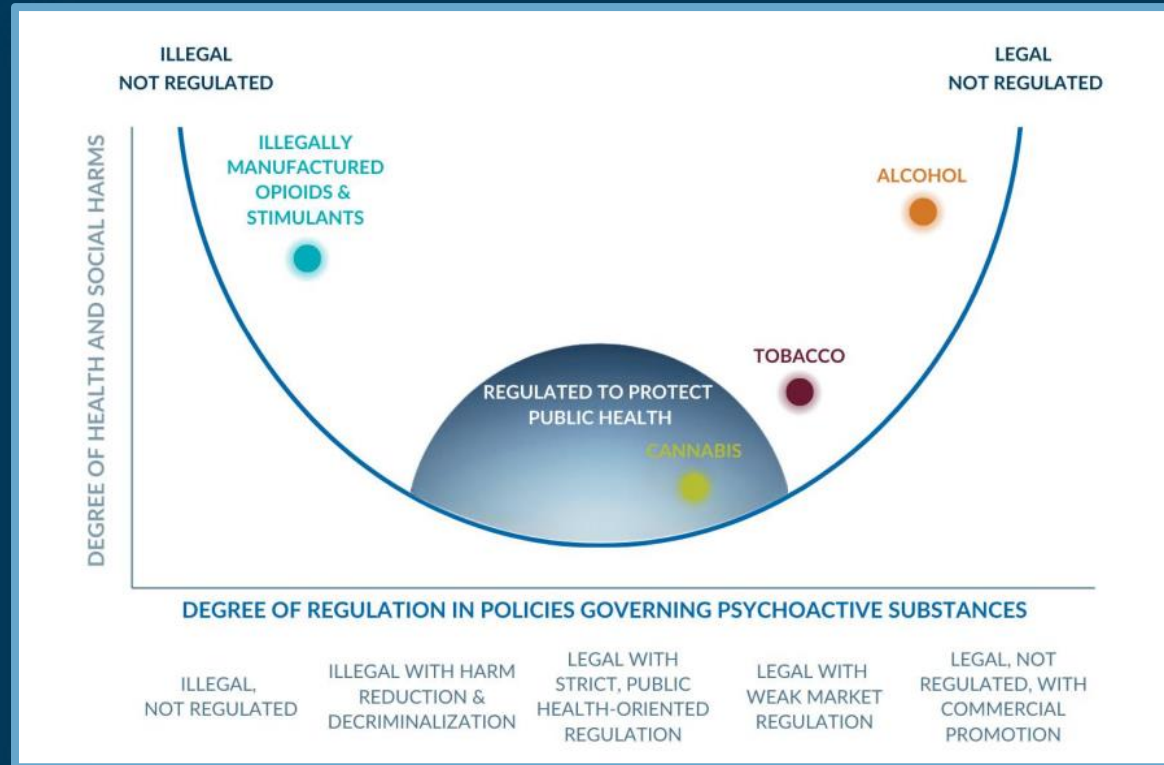


How Are We Doing?

Role of policy

Unregulated Opioids

Illegal, unregulated—
policies → increased toxicity



Alcohol

Legal and loosely regulated—
policies encourage
consumption

Cannabis

Legal, regulated since 2018

Tobacco

Legal, strictly regulated →
reduced consumption and
health harms

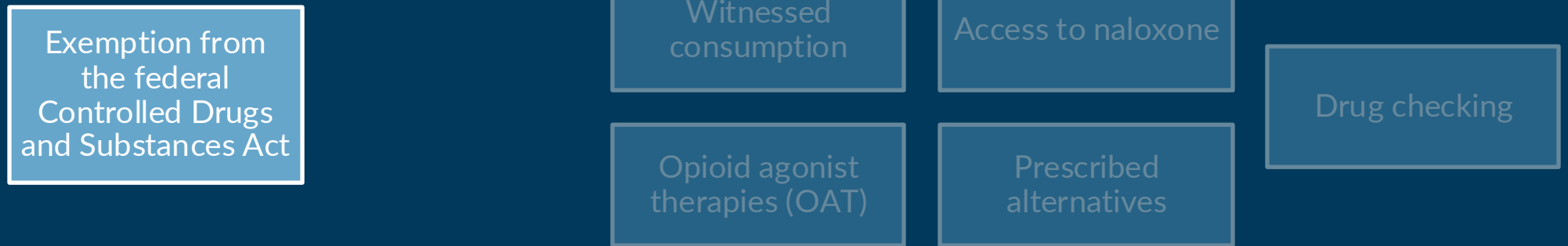
Effective Policy Tools

Legal Substances



Effective Policy Tools

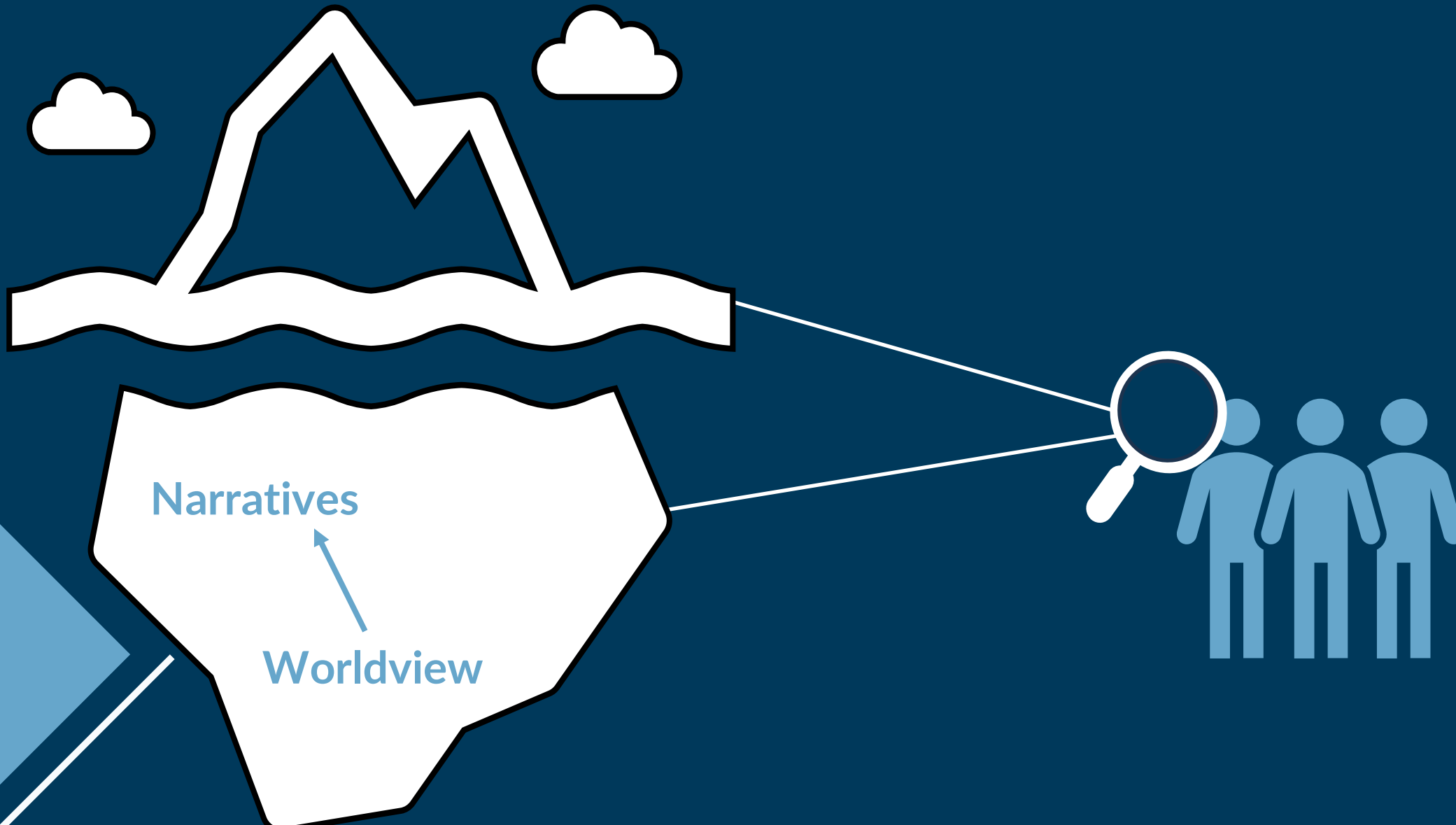
Illegal Substances



Legalization with strict regulation opens the door to a range of policy tools that are highly effective in reducing harm. When a substance is illegal, we lose opportunities to use these effective policy tools.

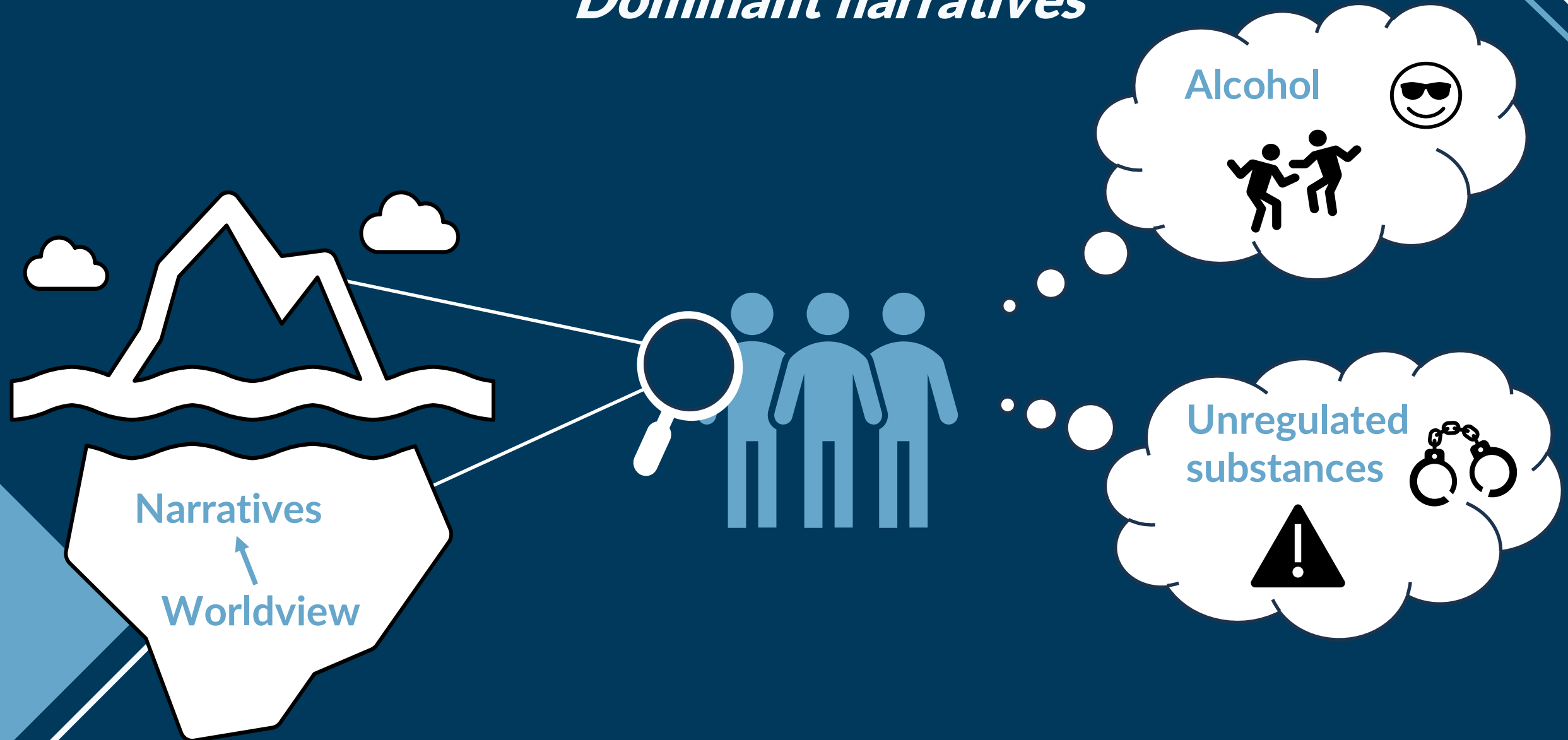
How Did We Get Here?

Dominant narratives



How Did We Get Here?

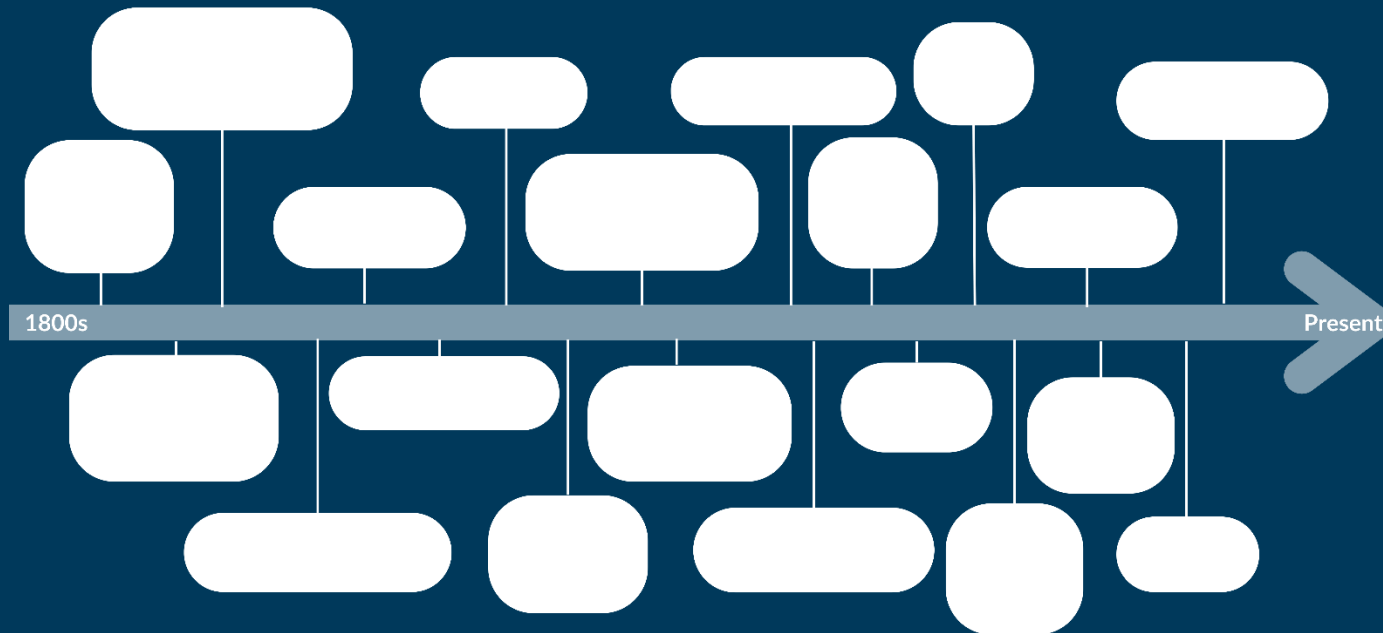
Dominant narratives



How Did We Get Here?

Policy decisions

Incremental decisions made over many decades.

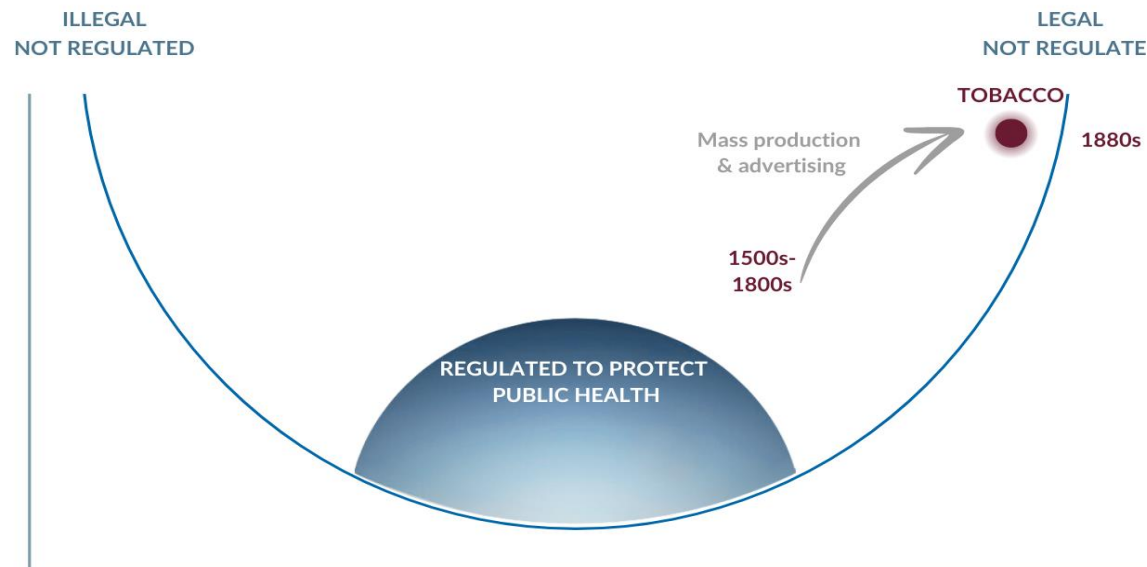


Many of these policy decisions were considered separately for each substance, creating a patchwork of inconsistent policies. Many of these policy decisions not only fail to minimize harm, but in fact increase harm.

How Did We Get Here?

Historical context of policy decisions

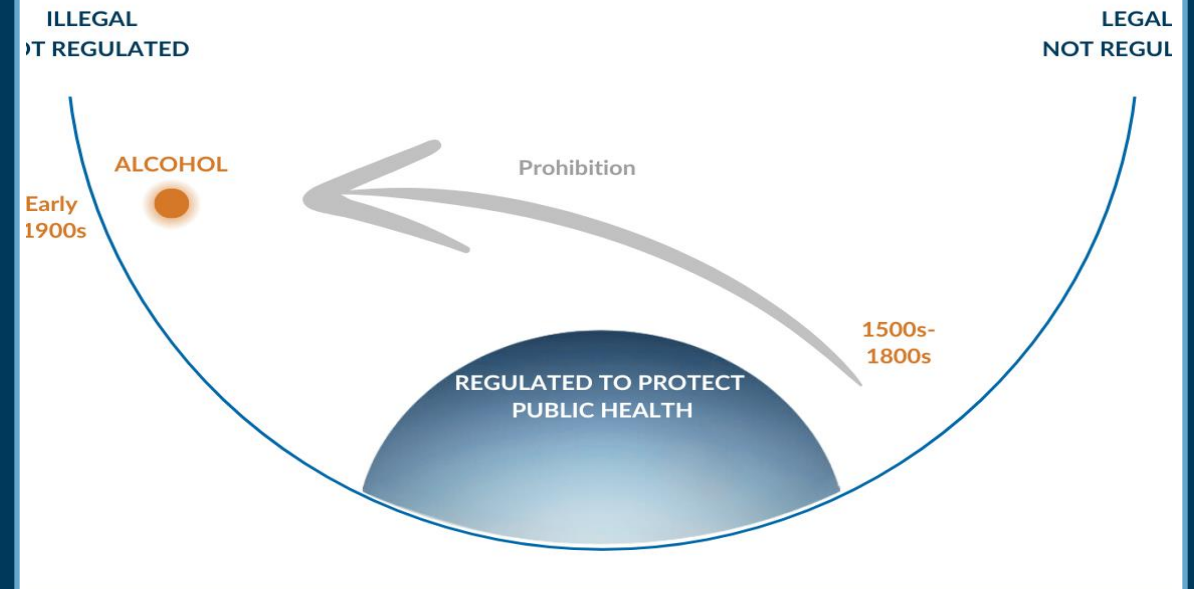
Tobacco



DEGREE OF REGULATION IN POLICIES GOVERNING PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES

ILLEGAL, NOT REGULATED	ILLEGAL WITH HARM REDUCTION & DECriminalIZATION	LEGAL WITH STRICT, PUBLIC HEALTH-ORIENTED REGULATION	LEGAL WITH WEAK MARKET REGULATION	LEGAL, NOT REGULATED, WITH COMMERCIAL PROMOTION
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Alcohol



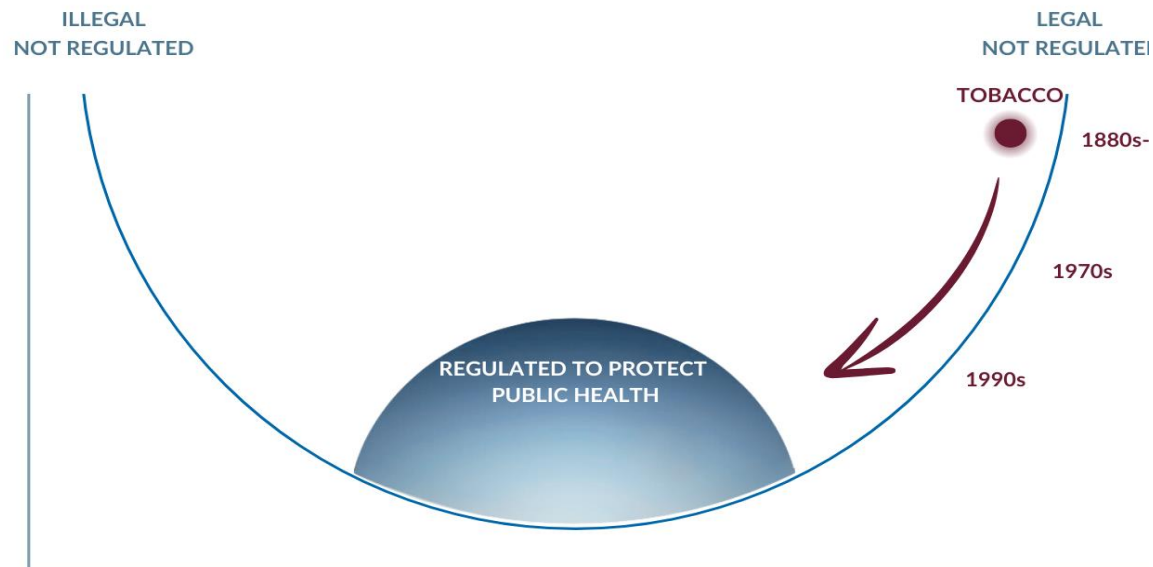
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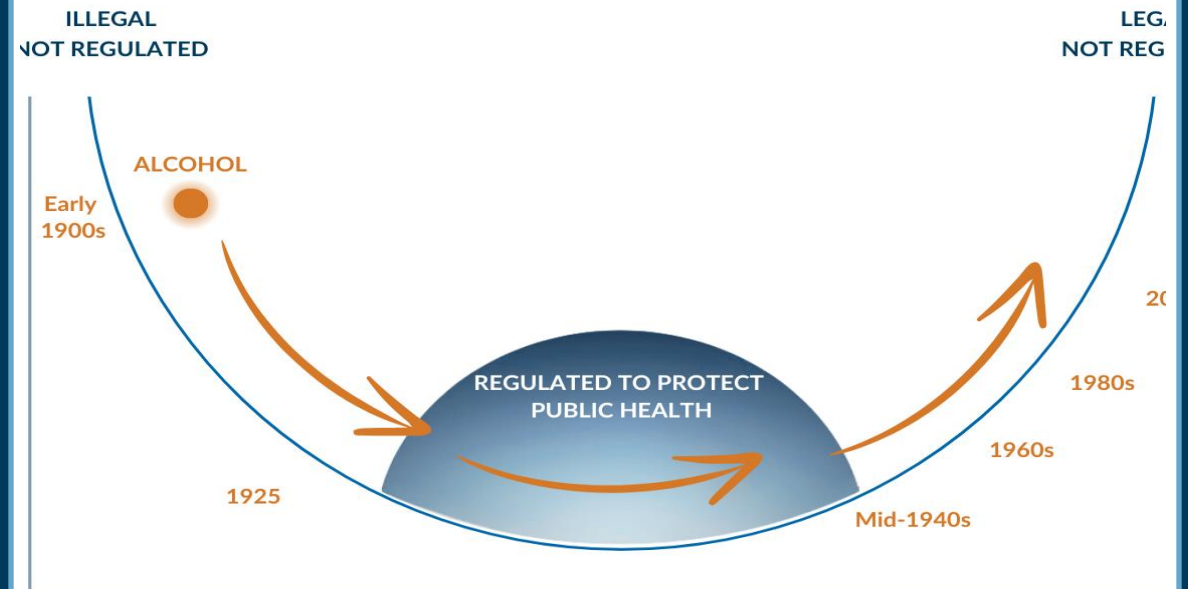
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Alcohol

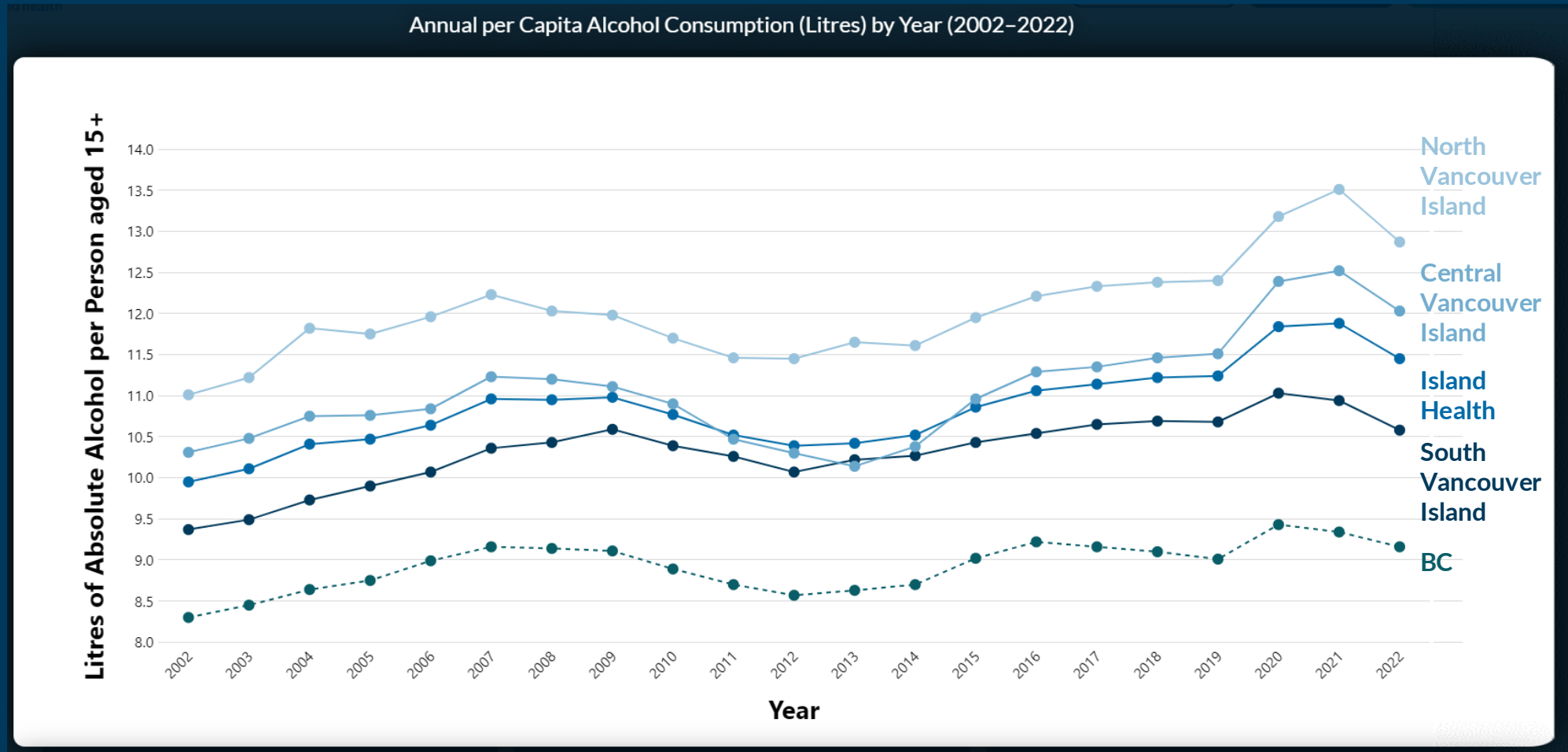


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Consumption Trends

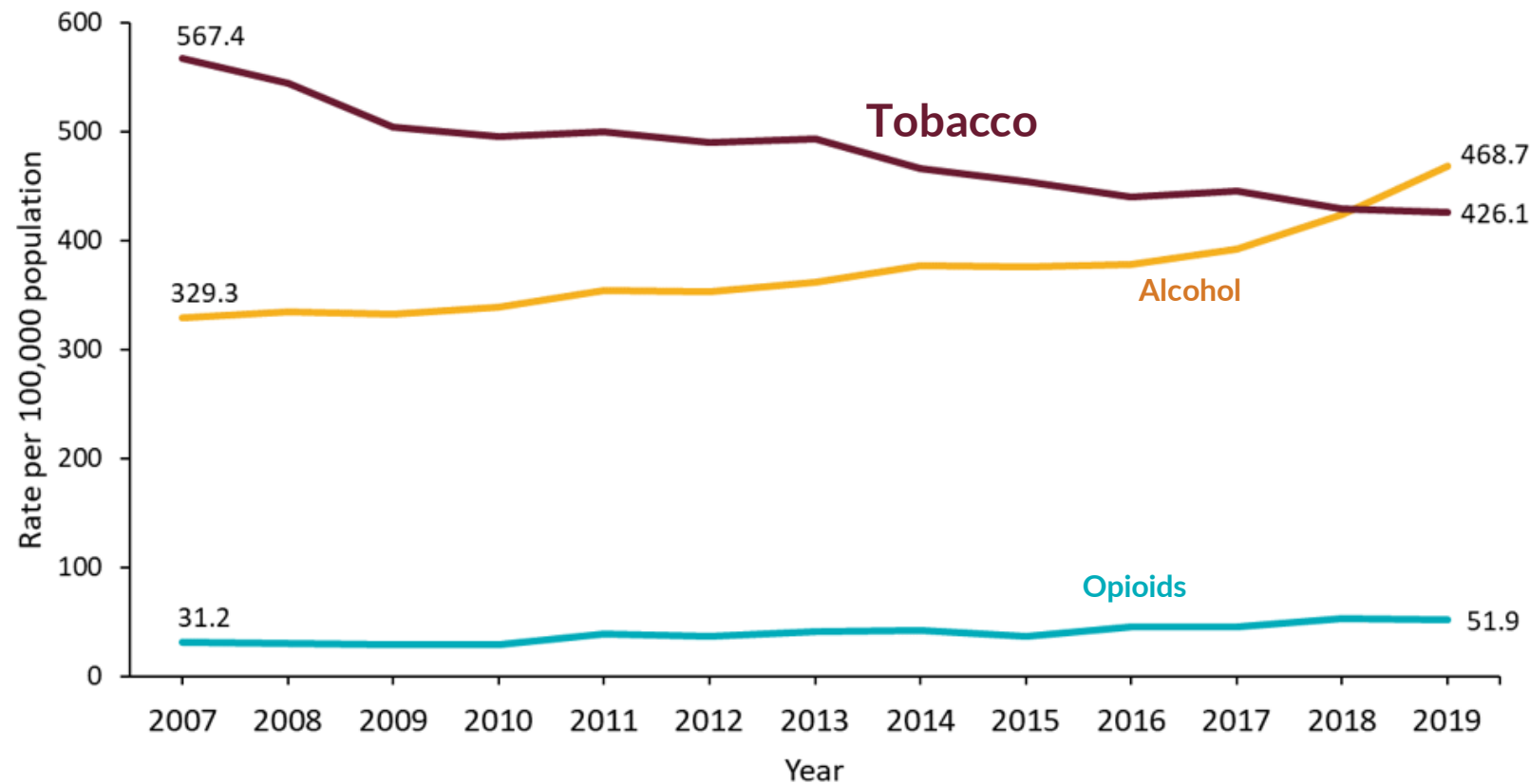
Increasing alcohol consumption



Burden of Illness

Decreasing hospital admissions due to tobacco

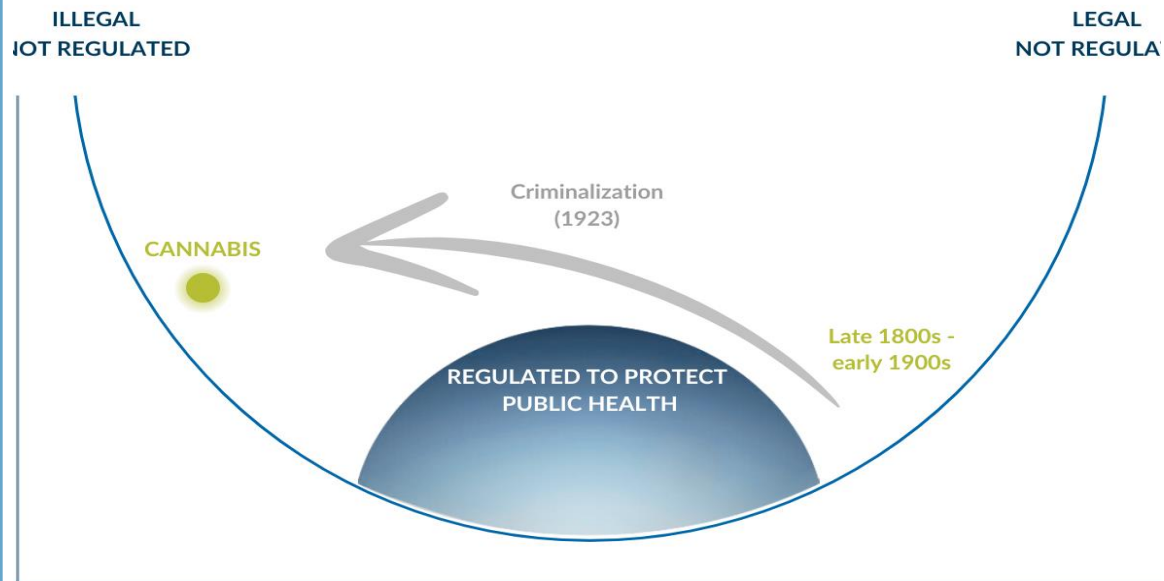
Hospital Admission Rate for Tobacco, Alcohol, and Opioids, Island Health (2007-2019)



How Did We Get Here?

Historical context of policy decisions

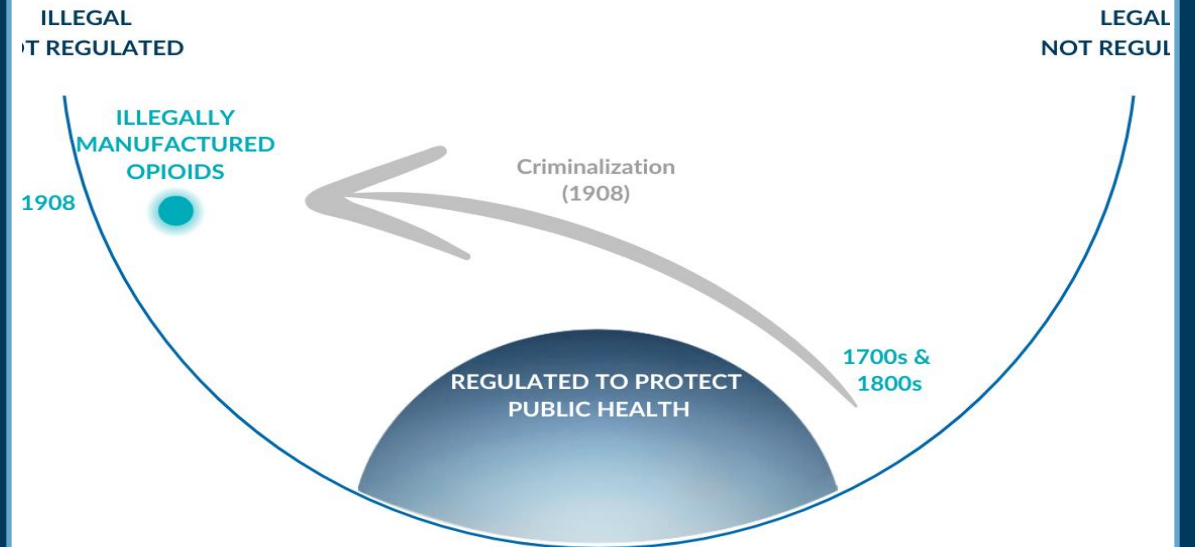
Cannabis



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Unregulated Substances



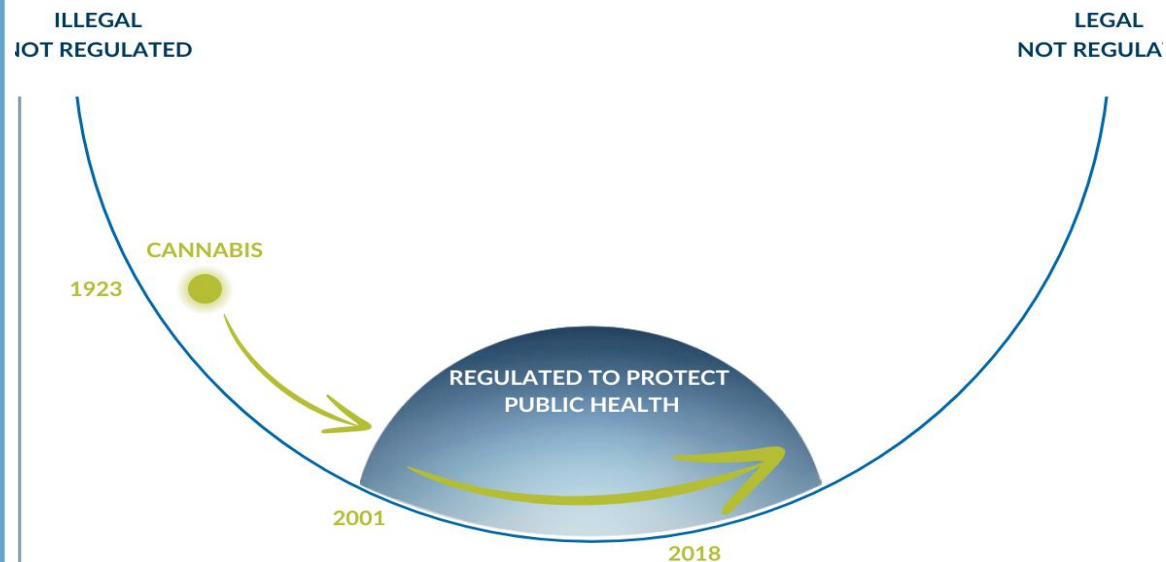
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How Did We Get Here?

Historical context of policy decisions

Cannabis



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Unregulated Substances

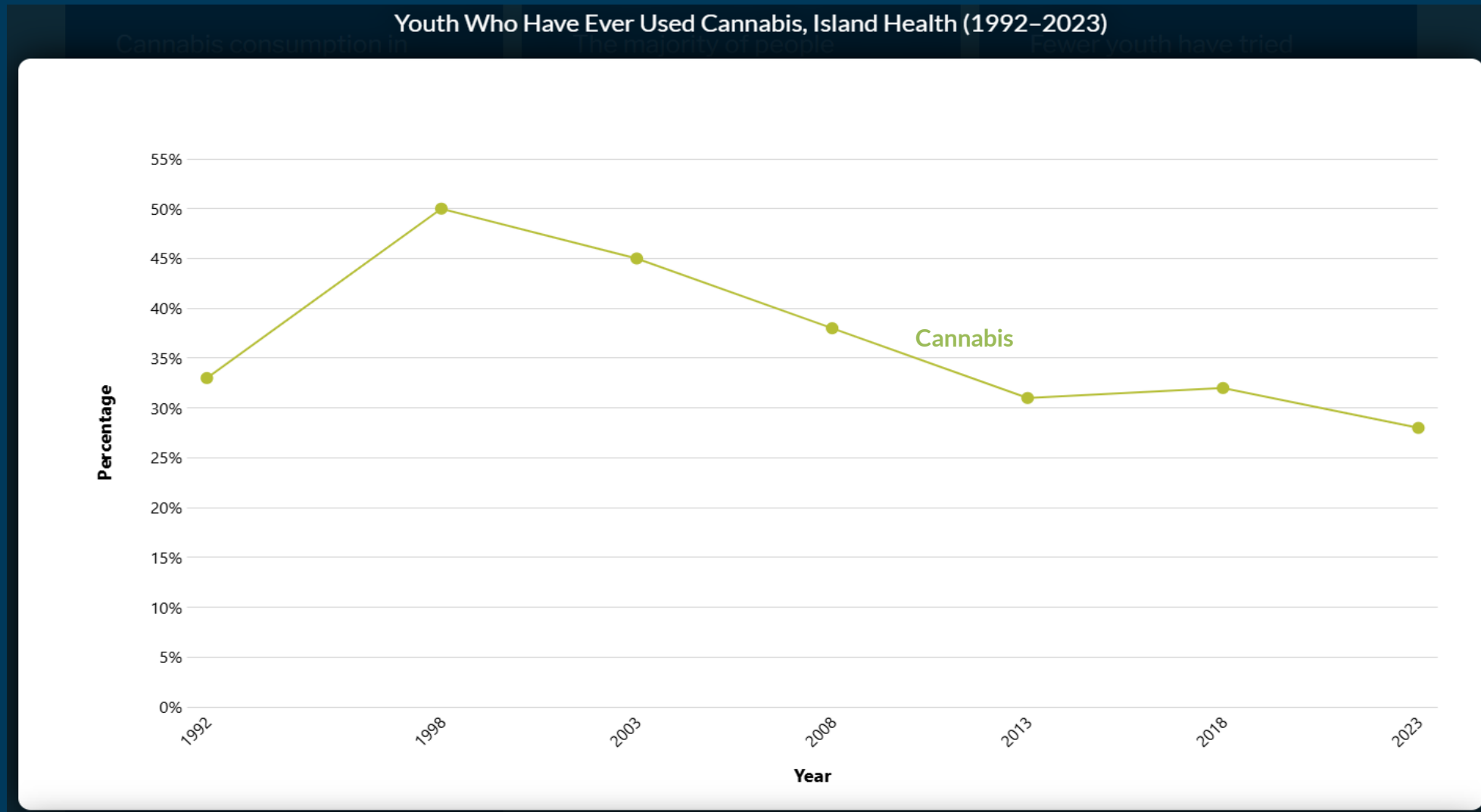


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Consumption Trends

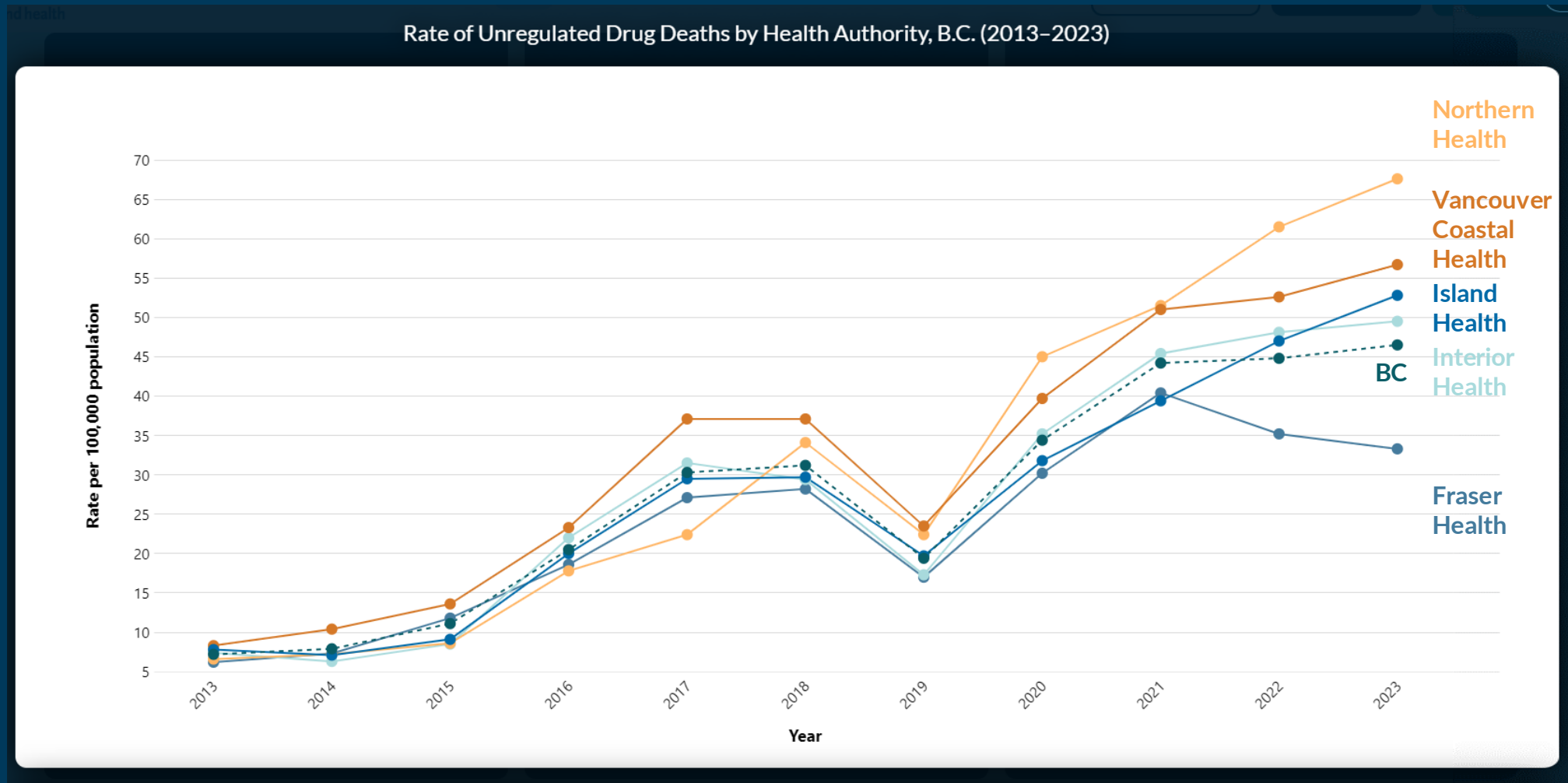
Fewer youth ever using cannabis



Source: Data provided by McCreary Centre Society, BC Adolescent Health Survey, 1992 through 2023

Burden of Illness

Increasing drug poisoning deaths



Source: BC Coroners Service, 2024, Unregulated Drug Deaths Dashboard.

Summary

- Alcohol, tobacco, and illegally manufactured opioids all cause significant health harm for the people of Island Health today
- How we are currently doing with substances is the consequence of incremental policy decisions made over many decades.
- Policy decisions often didn't have a health purpose. They have instead been based on perception, opinion, bias and stigma, disconnected from what is known.
- The environment, influenced by laws, regulations, and policies can either increase or decrease use of a substance. This impacts the amount of harm it causes to the population.

Moving Forward Together

Opportunities for Action

In the short- and medium-term

Invest in prevention

Generate high quality evidence

Meaningfully engage with Indigenous Peoples and people with lived and living experience

Create an adequate, effective and compassionate system of care

For long-term change

Start conversations

- About how we think about and address substance use in our communities
- About differences between the widely accepted ideas around the substance use and what the evidence shows us

Together we can reshape the narrative, prioritize health in our policies and drive change to improve health in our communities.

Moving Forward Together

Uplifting a new narrative



No substance is morally
good or bad



Legalization is a tool for health-
focused regulation



Regulation impacts environment,
affecting use



Play the long game



De-normalize alcohol promotion

Moving Forward Together

Community Action

- Local governments have power
 - Enacting local alcohol control policies within their jurisdictions
 - Advocating for change to other levels of government
- Community members have power
 - Demanding to have policies that support community health & wellbeing
 - Uplift alternative narratives
 - Modelling a social and community life not centered around alcohol



We can work together!

Moving Forward Together

Evidence-Informed Alcohol Control Policies

ACCESS/AVAILABILITY

- Minimum pricing and taxation
- Physical availability
- Minimal legal age
- Limiting bulk amounts (amount purchased at one time)
- Hours of entertainment in establishments
- Restrictions on delivery services
- Hours of alcohol sales at liquor stores
- Fulsome alcohol control system

■ = local governments can influence

Moving Forward Together

Evidence-Informed Alcohol Control Policies

SOCIAL NORMS

- Health and safety messaging
- Presence in and restrictions at events
- Restricting incentives
- Marketing and advertising
 - Social media, posters/signs, event and team sponsorships
 - Restricting misleading information ("health halo")
- Warning labels (Federal)

■ = local governments can influence

Moving Forward Together

Evidence-Informed Alcohol Control Policies

ENFORCEMENT

- Impaired driving countermeasures
- Business License revocation
- Bylaw enforcement of Business License conditions
- New Business License categories
- Surveillance

■ = local governments can influence

Moving Forward Together

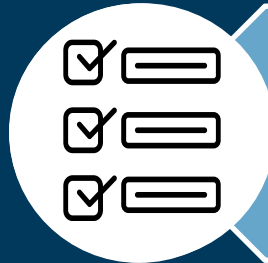
Local Government Levers of Action

1



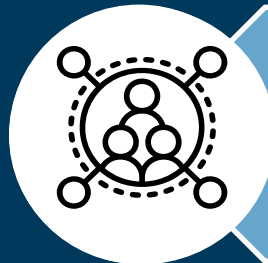
Develop a
Municipal Alcohol Policy

2



Develop Criteria for LCRB
Application Review

3



Develop a Community
Alcohol Strategy

Low
Effort/
Low
Impact

High
Effort/
High
Impact

Taking Action



Read the report



Start conversations with colleagues and friends



Consider how you can advocate for change in policies related to substance use, supported by Island Health



Thank you

Dr. Réka Gustafson

*VP, Population and Public Health and
Chief Medical Health Officer,
Island Health*