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Opioid overdoses killed 8 Canadians a day in 2016: minister

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An average of nearly eight Canadians per day died last year from opioid overdoses, mostly involving the potent drug fentanyl, and the crisis has since deepened, the government said Thursday.

More than half of the total 2,800 deaths in 2016 occurred in westernmost British Columbia and Alberta provinces.

"We are facing a very serious crisis," Health Minister Ginette Petitpas Taylor told a press conference.

"All levels of government must be ready to act" to deal with this "tragic situation," she added.

In the first three months of 2017, more than 600 people were reported to have died from overdoses, and authorities estimate the number will rise to at least 3,000 by year's end.

Street drugs have been found laced with pharmaceutical opioids such as Oxycodone, which are widely prescribed painkillers in North America, as well as fentanyl—which is used to treat severe pain, and is up to 100 times more potent than morphine.

Fentanyl-related overdose deaths doubled over the past year, and the government said in eight out of 10 cases the deaths were linked to opioids mixed with other drugs.

"This shows the complexity of the problem we are facing," Petitpas Taylor said.

A few blocks from the homeless shelter where she spoke, a temporary supervised drug injection site was set up this week by volunteers operating outside the government-run health system.

Inside a tent, volunteers doling out syringes and naloxone (used to treat overdoses) cited an urgent need for more to be done.

Ottawa earmarked Can$7.5 million ($6.2 million) to deal with what officials earlier this year labeled a national public health crisis.

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