

# THE CHEQUE DAY STUDY COMMUNITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Perspectives on changing the  
timing and frequency of income  
assistance payments

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# Executive summary

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In British Columbia, people who receive provincial income assistance are paid once a month, all on the same day. However, every month there are sharp spikes in individual and community-wide harms around payment day (“cheque day”), including higher-intensity and riskier drug use, fatal and non-fatal overdose, hospital admissions, and violence, among others. While the scope and severity of harm has been well documented, alternatives to the once-monthly payment schedule have not been studied.

**The Cheque Day Study** examined the impact of different payment schedules for people who use drugs on the spikes in drug use and associated harm that coincide with income assistance payments. The study measured the effects of varying the timing and frequency of payments for recipients’ health and wellbeing over the course of the month.

In communities with many income assistance recipients, cheque day plays a large part in the monthly routine for residents; social, health, and emergency service providers; businesses; and the community as a whole. Considering the number of people that could be affected by a change to the way income assistance is scheduled, we emphasize the value of experiential knowledge in planning good policy, program, or service changes.

**To highlight this experiential knowledge,** we undertook a series of consultations with people and organizations that are affected by synchronized income assistance payments in British Columbia. We spoke with income assistance recipients, people who use drugs, health and social service providers, first responders, and policy makers. We compiled and analyzed their input into this community impact statement, which is intended to accompany the scientific results from the Cheque Day Study to inform solutions that could address challenges around the timing of income assistance payments, not only for people who use drugs, but for all people receiving income assistance and their communities at large.

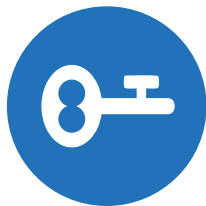
# Key considerations



Values that recipients would like to be enshrined in the income assistance system include **dignity, autonomy, and equality**.



**Low rates** of income assistance may exacerbate the problem. Many people shared how poverty and desperation contribute to the amount of substance use around cheque day.



Changes must ensure consistent and **equal access** to income assistance regardless of individual drug use patterns.



Budgeting might become easier or more difficult depending on individual financial management practices. This highlights an opportunity for tailored support, **individualization of services** and the role that **choice** might play in optimizing income assistance.



**Support services will need to be adapted** to meet client needs across the month, which may mean changes to operating hours, staffing, service provision and/or resources.



Concerns exist amongst community members and service providers alike regarding the **logistics of administration, adapting to new payment schedules, and the payment of rent and bills**.



The potential for **increased vulnerability** if payments are desynchronized requires careful consideration and potential supports.

## Proposed next steps

The information presented in this community impact statement reflects the complex nature of the individual and community impacts of income assistance payment systems. Alongside scientific results from the Cheque Day Study, this community impact statement is intended to inform the development and implementation of nuanced policy or programmatic changes that may reduce monthly harm around cheque day. Policy change has the potential to positively impact income assistance recipients, health and social service providers, and the community, if careful consideration is given to potential impacts and unintended consequences, such as those described here.

# Introduction

Monthly income assistance payments consistently coincide with increased drug use and related harms. This relationship between income assistance payment day (referred to as “cheque day”), drug use and drug-related harm is magnified in areas with many assistance recipients.<sup>1-3</sup>

In addition to increased drug use,<sup>4</sup> past research has identified several harms that increase significantly on and around cheque day. Among others these include:

- Fatal and non-fatal overdose<sup>1,5-8</sup>
- Hospitalizations<sup>8-14</sup>
- Ambulance and police service calls<sup>2,10</sup>
- Hospital discharge against medical advice<sup>4,15,16</sup>
- Treatment interruption<sup>15-17</sup>

In the context of the current opioid and overdose crises, with highly synthetic opioids adulterating the street-drug supply, the harms identified in the literature have become more extreme. Notably, research from British Columbia<sup>6</sup> as well as BC Coroner Service’s data<sup>18</sup> consistently reports a 35-40% increase in fatal overdoses in the five days following income assistance payments. Existing research also suggests that the disbursement schedule affects the **timing and concentration** of drug use, but that providing income assistance to people who use drugs **does not affect overall levels of drug use**.<sup>5,19-22</sup>

While the drug-related harms linked to coordinated income assistance payments are well-documented and acknowledged by the community, to date we are unaware of any research that has explored the potential impacts of different payment schedules on people who use drugs and the communities they live in.



The Cheque Day Study was initiated to test the ability of alternate payment schedules to reduce the severe harms we see around income assistance payments. The study also seeks to understand whether changing payment schedules could have unintended consequences.

Alongside the Cheque Day Study, we undertook a broad consultation process with stakeholders across the province seeking to better understand the potential community impacts of changing income assistance payment schedules, and the key themes emerging from this consultation are reflected in this community impact statement.

This document first outlines the study and consultation process. It then describes experiences of cheque day as reported by different key affected populations, including those of recipients, service providers, and first responders, followed by the perspectives of these different stakeholders on the potential impacts—both positive and negative—of altering the payment schedule. Finally, the document provides suggested next steps for drawing on the perspectives shared with us, along with the scientific findings of the Cheque Day Study, to inform policy and program changes.



Photo by Colin Askey



# The Cheque Day Study

The Cheque Day Study looked at whether changing the timing and frequency of income assistance might reduce drug use and related harms. The study team randomly assigned 194 volunteer participants living in Vancouver who use drugs and receive income assistance to one of three groups:

## 1. Synchronized monthly (control):

Participants received their payment as normal on government payment day.

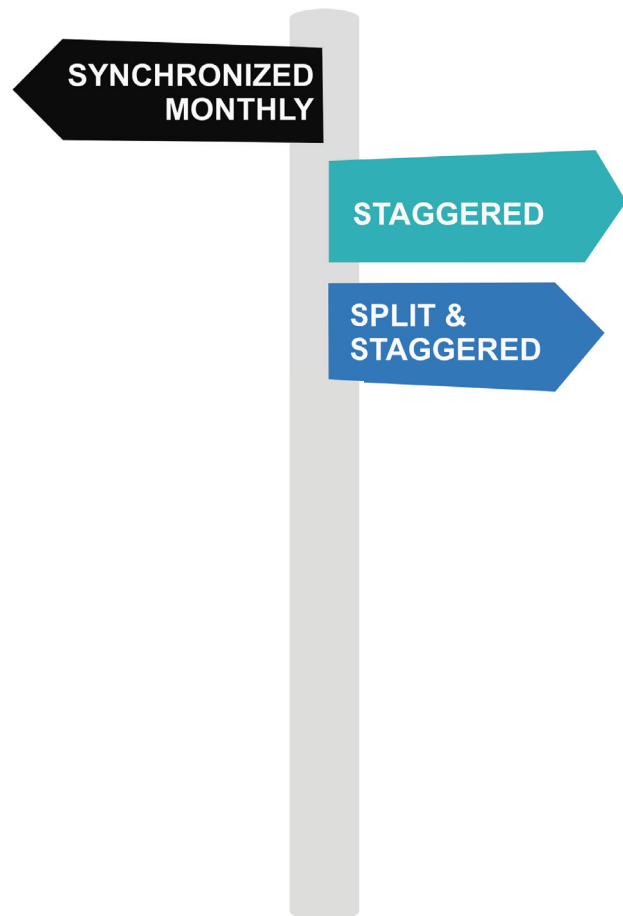
## 2. Staggered: Participants received their payment in one payment staggered on a day outside cheque week.

## 3. Split and staggered: Participants received their payment split in two, paid two weeks apart, staggered outside

Participants remained in the study for six months, with the option of staying on a different schedule of their choosing after completing the study. Pigeon Park Savings, a community branch of Vancouver City Savings Credit Union, managed the alternative schedules.

Participants in the study attended follow up interviews every two weeks for six months and provided information on their daily drug use, health and safety, income generation, service usage, and illegal activity. In addition, the study team conducted 120 qualitative interviews to help understand participants' experiences while on different schedules, including when they worked best for people and what challenges they faced.

To learn more about the Cheque Day Study please visit [bccsu.ca/Cheque-Day-Study](https://bccsu.ca/Cheque-Day-Study).



# Consultation process

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Alongside the research study, we undertook an extensive consultation process that informed this community impact statement. Our consultation sessions included:

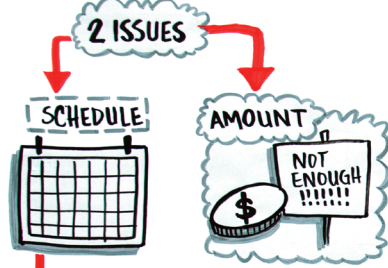


- 42 small group meetings with stakeholders.
- Two half-day forums with first responders from police, ambulance and the Fire Department.
- These consultations involved over 500 individuals.
- We also distributed a community impact survey that across British Columbia.
- We asked people to think about what might happen in their communities if income assistance were to be staggered or split into two payments and staggered.
- We received 39 responses from individuals in eight communities.
- Finally, we held a half-day community forum involving 36 individuals representing 24 different organizations.
- We shared some of what we had been hearing from participants and in community consultation sessions up to that point, and forum participants discussed how changes to the way income assistance is distributed could affect people in the community.

We had a graphic recorder join us for the community forum who created the following two posters summarizing the discussion that took place.

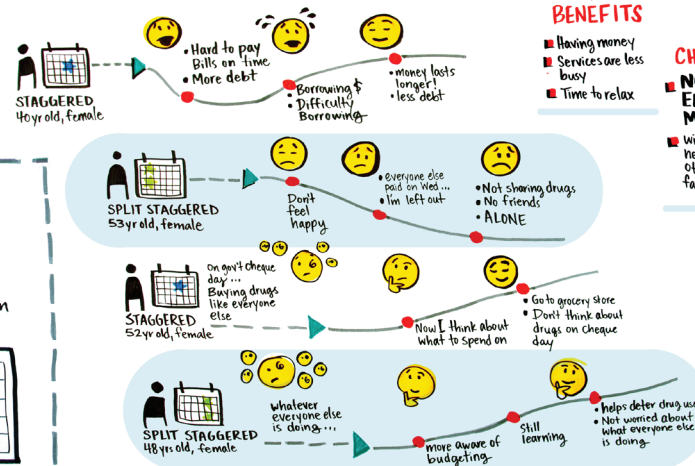
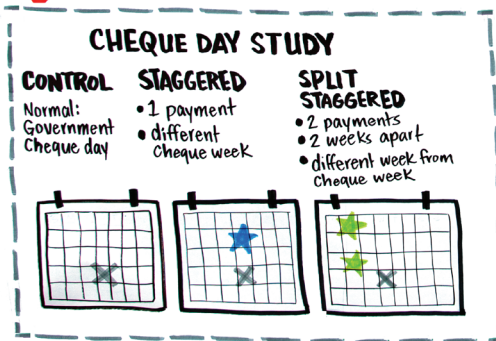
# CHEQUE DAY STUDY

Can we reduce  
**DRUG-RELATED HARM**  
by changing  
**HOW & WHEN**  
income assistance is distributed ?



## volunteer PARTICIPANT experiences

## Community Impacts:



### BENEFITS

- Having money
- Services are less busy
- Time to relax



### CHALLENGES

- NOT ENOUGH MONEY**
- Without basic needs met... other pieces fall apart

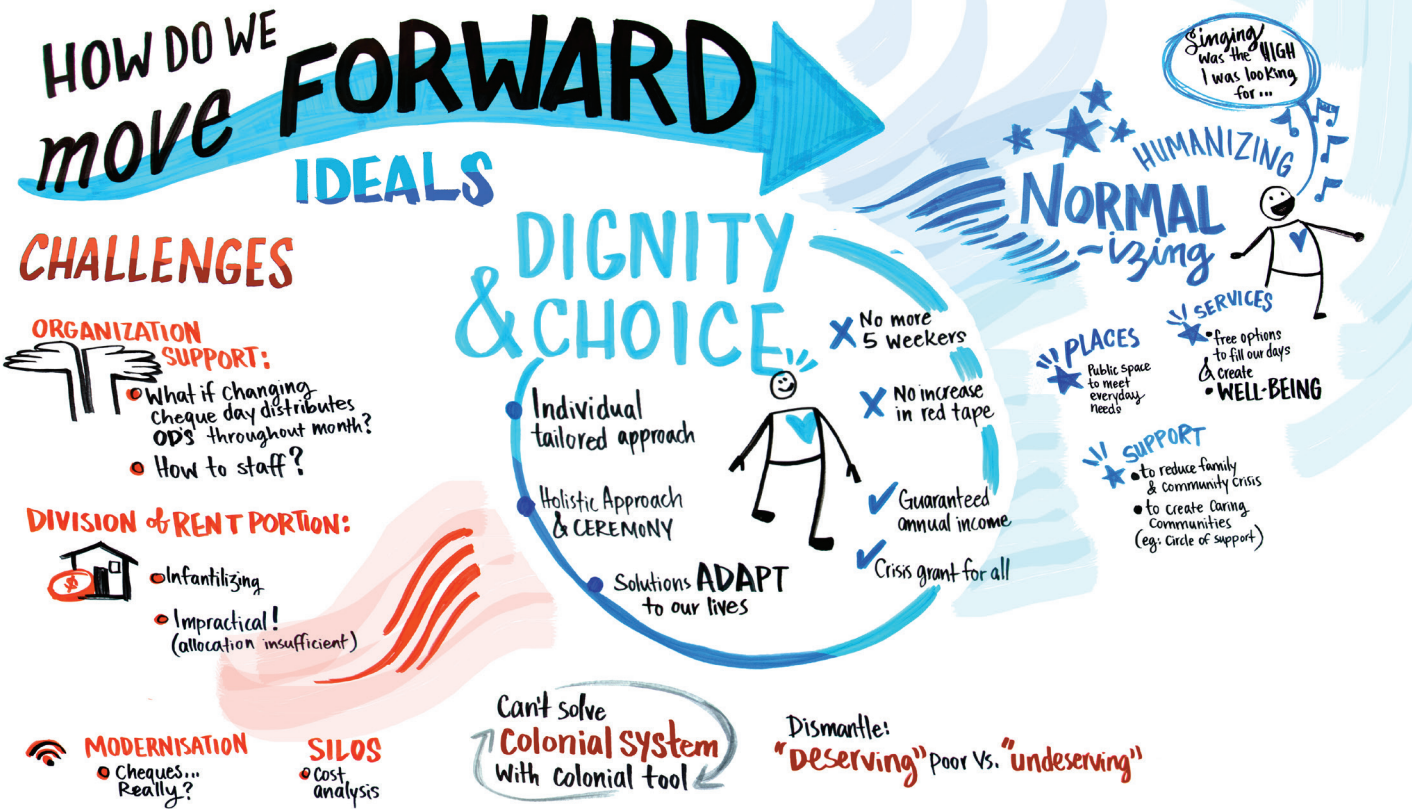


### PAYMENT SCHEDULE CONCERNS

- 5 week months
- having Choice
- Concerns about a change

Cheque Day Study, Stakeholder Forum, Sept 2017, Vancouver  
unceded traditional territories of the Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, & Squamish Peoples

LIVE GRAPHIC RECORDING | Drawing Change  
Tiaré Jung



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LIVE GRAPHIC RECORDING | Drawing Change  
Tiaré Jung

# Who was involved?

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While the study itself took place only in Vancouver, the perspectives and experiences shared in this report were gathered from consultation with over 500 residents, recipients of income assistance, and service providers, representing the following eight communities:

Dease Lake  
Quesnel  
Vancouver  
Kelowna  
New Westminster  
Surrey  
Nanaimo  
Victoria



Fifty-one organizations provided input including clinical health care providers, advocacy groups comprised of people who use drugs, faith-based organizations, employment agencies, social enterprises, third party administrators who manage income assistance on behalf of recipients, housing organizations, mental health organizations, other research groups, anti-poverty groups, and organizations representing women, men, youth, and Indigenous peoples.

Most consultations took place in Vancouver, BC and as such, much of the information presented within refers to the Downtown Eastside. However, the survey that was circulated to people in other communities across British Columbia collected many consistent reports of how communities experience cheque day. As such, unless otherwise indicated, what is reported below can be considered consistent with reports coming from the communities listed above.

## What is cheque day like in the community?

In speaking with people who are affected by cheque day, including recipients of income assistance, people who use drugs, community and health service providers, and first responders, we heard the following to describe what cheque day is like each month in the community.

### **The week before cheque day a “sort of magic happens”**

People band together to share resources and meals. Community organizations hold dinners and provide extra support ahead of cheque day since most people have run out of money and are trying to make it through the week.

### **As cheque day approaches, making ends meet becomes harder**

People often become angry and frustrated as resources become scarcer. Borrowing often picks up a few days before cheque day, particularly from people selling drugs who are willing to provide clients drugs at a premium, knowing they will be able to pay them back in a few days.

### **On cheque day, a substantial amount of money flows into communities with a high number of income assistance recipients**

There are long lines at banks, stores, and ministry offices where people are picking up cheques. There is more drug and alcohol use. There are more people selling drugs, more cars on the roads, more overdoses, and more people in poor shape on the street.

### **Cheque day disrupts what is normally a very caring and supportive community**

People report a higher number of assaults, altercations, and emergencies. We also heard how some people will take advantage of vulnerable people when they receive support payments, whether on cheque day or another day.



For example, seniors receive Canadian Pension Plan payments on a different day than when provincial income assistance is paid and are often targeted when they receive payments.

### **People often leave Insite and other supervised consumption spaces and end up using drugs in riskier settings**

Insite, a supervised consumption site in Vancouver, has moved to stay open 24 hours a day on cheque day and the two days that follow. Even with increased hours, however, lines are very long and people often leave to use drugs in potentially less safe places (e.g., outside or home alone).

### **Cheque day is worse after five-week months**

Generally, four times a year there is a five-week gap between payments. We heard how people are extra tense and argumentative after waiting five weeks for their payment. The freedom and relief that payments bring are that much stronger after waiting for five weeks instead of four and people are much more likely to spend their cheque quickly after waiting for so long.

### **People from communities across BC identified similar patterns**

People spoke about how drug use and related harms are more visible in the Downtown Eastside, but that similar drug use patterns and related harms exist in other communities where it is often colder and drug use is less public.



Photo by Colin Askey

# What is cheque day like for service providers?

The following is what we heard from social and health service providers about their experiences around cheque day.

### **Preparing for cheque day**

Many organizations see increased need and service utilization as cheque day approaches, particularly for food distribution, drop-in services, and vouchers or crisis grants. Service providers use different strategies to prepare their clients ahead of cheque day, which might include providing harm reduction supplies or ensuring administrative information is up to date with the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (“the Ministry”) to avoid payment delays.

### **Some services see fewer clients and/or may close for cheque day**

We heard how there are often fewer people accessing some services around cheque day, beginning a few days before cheque day. Some people might disappear for several days after their payment and then check back in once they run out of money. For this reason, there is often less programming during cheque week and some services close. One benefit we heard is that service providers are often able to find shelter beds more readily for their clients around cheque day, or use time during cheque week for training. On the other hand, we heard that people can become isolated when services close.

### **Intensity increases at some services**

While most providers spoke about services being quieter on cheque day, some services see more clients. We heard about increases in the number of crisis supports they provide around cheque day in response to theft, overdose, and mental health emergencies.

We also heard that the most dangerous child welfare reports often follow cheque issue. Service providers also described being crisis mode themselves as demands and challenges increase as people's money begins to run out, often by the Friday after cheque day.



Photo by Colin Askey

## What is cheque day like for recipients?

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The following is what we heard when we asked income assistance recipients what cheque day is like for them.

### **Poverty is an important part of the issue**

A resounding theme that emerged from our consultations with the community was the role of poverty in the monthly harms around cheque day. We heard that low rates of income assistance keep people in poverty and desperation, contributing to the amount of substance use that occurs around cheque day. People emphasized that income assistance payments are not enough to last the month, and that they must spend the rest of the month finding other ways to get by (e.g., using shelters, meal services, and other income generating activities, some of which may be illegal or unsafe). After struggling to get by for days or weeks, when they receive their payment many people choose to spend it immediately to enjoy not having to find other ways to get by for a short period of time. Many people shared that they would be more likely to try to budget if it was realistic that their payment could last the month.

### **Cheque day can be a day of relief**

Some people may increase their substance use around cheque day, while others get the respite of going indoors for a night or the ability to make a larger purchase like a new phone. For this reason, people often describe cheque day as a day of relief. We heard from some that they were able to take a break from the riskier activities or time intensive service use that they undertake to make ends meet the rest of the month.

“The week before cheque day I’m fully booked up waiting for food etc. Then cheque day comes and I can afford to buy meals.”



### Services are often less busy

Another benefit we heard was that it is often easier to access some services as fewer people are doing so. Since many services close on cheque day or are in high demand, this only applies to those that remain open or are underused.

### Cheque day can be really hard

While cheque day is the best day of the month for some, for others it can end up being extremely challenging. People spoke about how hard it is to avoid using drugs when they receive a lump sum payment, especially in communities where drugs are easily available. We heard that it can be a scary day, with people losing track of their friends after payments come through, drug dealers collecting on drug debts and some people getting taken advantage of. We also heard that for some there is shame that comes up when the money is gone.





## What is cheque day like for first responders?

The following is what we heard from police officers, firefighters and paramedics about how their routines change around cheque day.

### Police

Police call volume increases substantially around income assistance payments. However, in the two days after cheque day, property crime, including theft, break-ins, and broken car windows, decreases as recipients receive payments. Then, in the few days leading up to cheque day - once debt collection begins - violent crime increases as does the number of mental health apprehensions and instances of violence towards officers. As money runs out property crime begins to ramp up again.

VPD had a property crime task force set up one month. The only night that no one was caught committing a property crime was cheque day.

Another thing we heard from the police is that they face longer wait times when requesting an ambulance transfer to the hospital and may even end up completing the transfer themselves. They explained that it used to be unheard of for police officers to drive someone to the hospital, particularly because it is not the appropriate response for someone requiring medical attention and it could be unnecessarily traumatic for individuals who have had negative experiences with the police in the past. However, policy has had to change and officers often have no choice around cheque day when ambulances are too busy.

Approximately 8-10 hours of officer time is required to investigate an overdose death and, as such, responding to overdose calls pulls resources away from investigating crimes. Police report substantial costs associated with overtime around cheque day each month.

Finally, police identified their ability to prioritize calls so they end up attending the most urgent or in progress calls first, in contrast to paramedics and firefighters who are not able to delay response to calls in the same way. Police highlighted the additional pressure paramedics and firefighters are under due to the consistently urgent nature of their calls.

### Paramedics

Paramedics discussed how cheque day affects the whole Lower Mainland when ambulances are pulled from other communities to serve inner city neighbourhoods. They reported that huge increases in call volume usually begin the Tuesday before cheque day as people start buying drugs on credit.

Additionally, they spoke about challenges with staffing around cheque day, when many people call in sick or schedule vacation to avoid having to work during the busiest time of the month. During consultation, BC Emergency Health Services reported going over budget in overtime every cheque day.

One cheque day, one ambulance responded to 26 calls in what was supposed to be a 12-hour shift. Twenty-two of the calls were for overdoses.



Another thing we heard from paramedics is that it takes much longer to transfer a patient to St. Paul's Hospital during cheque week. Paramedics are tied up in the hospital, waiting up to four and a half hours to transfer patients, which creates a cascading effect for other first responders. If paramedics are at the hospital and unable to respond quickly, then police and firefighters are tied up waiting for paramedics.

“I was at St Paul's Hospital and there were 10 ambulances in the emergency department dock, five crews waiting to transfer patients, and five police cars waiting to offload.”

Another thing we heard from paramedics is that drug quality varies throughout the month. Higher quality drugs will often be sold ahead of cheque day, when dealers are trying to get people to buy from them. Then, as cheque day approaches, drugs that are more poorly mixed or of lower potency will start to be seen on the street. This variation in drug quality and potency affects people's tolerance, can make choosing the correct dose difficult and can contribute to the risk of accidental overdose.



# Strategies people use around cheque day

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Community service providers, first responders, and income assistance recipients all identified strategies they use to reduce harms around cheque day.

## **COMMUNITY SERVICE PROVIDERS**

A key task that service providers identified was ensuring that people had a safety plan, harm reduction training, and safe supplies (e.g., sterile needles, naloxone) in place before cheque day. Service providers reported trying to help clients budget leading up to their payments and offering to keep clients' debit cards at the office. Some clients find this helpful as they can withdraw money when with their service provider, but don't feel tempted to spend their entire cheque when out in the community. Providers also spoke about buying gift cards for grocery stores with their clients or making plans to meet for coffee or other activities that encourage active engagement during cheque week.

Other providers spoke about making more frequent neighbourhood checks, increasing their on-call availability, and extending hours for drop-in spaces during cheque week in order to ensure access to a safe space with naloxone kits and food.

## **FIRST RESPONDERS**

Police officers described increasing their street visibility in key areas as a strategy to prevent violent crime, often in the Downtown Eastside and mostly concentrated on the four blocks of Hastings Street around Main Street. This increased activity requires an increase in staffing and significantly increased staffing costs each month, as well as pulling resources from other areas of the city.



BC Emergency Health Services described a new staffing model they have started using around cheque day, where staff are able to sign up voluntarily for overtime shifts and choose their own partners as an incentive to work on cheque day. This model has reportedly helped morale and reduced staffing challenges around cheque day.

### **INCOME ASSISTANCE RECIPIENTS**

We heard about creative strategies that recipients use to help themselves avoid the chaos and the temptation to use drugs. Examples include using the time to do laundry, go shopping, or go to church, as well as staying in their home, or avoiding going to the Downtown Eastside. Others asked to have their payment split into two. These were strategies that involved engaging in other activities, being in places where it is easier to avoid drug use, or ensuring that they had less money to spend all at once.





# Community perspectives on alternative schedules

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ADDRESS POVERTY & MENTAL HEALTH

RAISE INCOME ASSISTANCE RATES

MAKE A LIVING WAGE POSSIBLE

PROVIDE STABLE HOUSING

NO MORE 5-WEEK MONTHS

SPLIT UP PAYMENTS

GIVE PEOPLE A CHOICE

LEGALIZE DRUGS

PROVIDE BETTER TREATMENT OPTIONS

When asked how to address the monthly harms around income assistance payments, many pointed to addressing poverty and meeting people's basic needs. Many suggested that this would decrease the amount of time people spend in survival mode and in turn decrease the tendency to blow off steam after payments. We also heard how because people need to find ways to get by the rest of the month, whether it be relying on services or finding other ways to make money, on cheque day they felt they might as well spend their money and enjoy the day. Others noted that increases in payments, without considering the design of the system or other contributing factors could easily be absorbed back into the monthly routine around cheque day and/or increases in rent.

Suggestions about changing the income assistance system included making payments more frequent and abolishing five-week gaps between payments. We heard repeatedly that working with people and giving them some choice about how they receive payments could help create a system that works better for people.

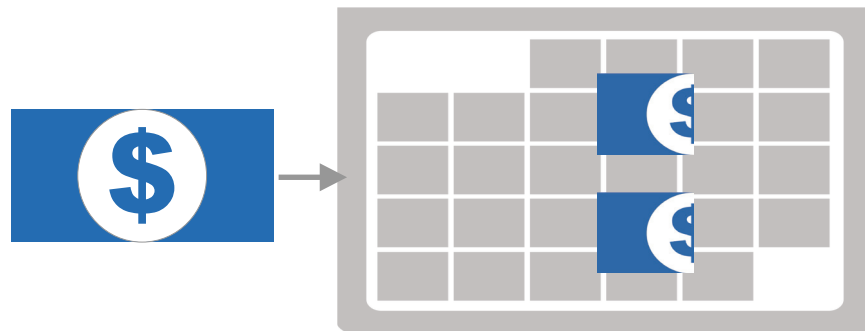
Finally, we heard from some who believe that real change lies in legalizing drugs, providing better treatment options, and addressing poverty, and who don't believe that changing the timing or frequency of payments would make much of a difference in reducing the harms they face. First responders, when presented with the idea of a system with staggered or split and staggered payments, felt that this might relieve some of the pressure and stress surrounding income assistance payments by redistributing demands for their services.

# Potential impacts of alternative schedules

Ahead of moving forward with any system-wide changes, we heard that it would be vital to consider the potential impacts for recipients and service providers of changing the way income assistance is paid. To help gather this information, we asked people to think through all the ways that a change in payment timing and/or frequency might affect them. The following responses reflect the complexity of the issue and provide initial considerations for program, policy, and service planning moving forward.

## Splitting payments

The split payment model would entail recipients receiving two or more payments per month. In discussing the split payments model, recipients, service providers, and first responders identified potential benefits, concerns and challenges of this model.



### How service provision may be affected

Service providers expressed mixed feelings about how more frequent payments might affect their service delivery. Some worried that it could produce two 'cheque days' and double the number of challenging days in the month. Others thought it might disperse the demand throughout the month, allowing service provision and demand to be more consistent. Most agreed that planning their services would change dramatically and that they would need to change the way they respond to variation in service demand across the month.

### **How budgeting and stability may be affected**

As with the other considerations, there was a range of responses regarding budgeting. With split payments, budgeting may be easier or harder, depending on the person, their financial management strategies, and their capacity for budgeting.

For some, there may be less inclination to spend their whole payment at once if they know another payment is coming in a couple weeks and they have a smaller length of time to budget for. For those folks, smaller more frequent payments would add stability and feelings of security, knowing they would have money for groceries in the middle of the month. We also heard that smaller more frequent payments would mean people had less money to spend at once or to have stolen after each payment, with their funds replenished more regularly. Another advantage of the split payment model is that the schedule would be more like the regular paycheck received by most employed individuals, reducing segregation and stigma between paid work and income assistance. On the other hand, smaller, more frequent payments would reduce recipients' ability to buy in bulk or make larger purchases.

Overall, we heard from people who would find budgeting easier with the split payment model and people who would find budgeting more challenging under this model.

### **How crime may be affected**

Some people thought that we might see less property crime throughout the month, while others discussed the potential for more crime, as people would be trying to stretch smaller payments. The mixed responses to this question reflect the complexity of people's lives, different experiences of the relationship between payments and crime and the variety of income-generating strategies people engage in, as well as significant variety in how people spend money over the course of the month.

### **How administration and logistics may be affected**

People raised concerns about the logistics of two payments a month, especially for the minority of income assistance recipients who do not receive their payments via direct deposit from the province. Concerns included recipients having to pick up cheques twice as often, something that would be particularly burdensome for people with mobility challenges and/or for those with child

or elder care responsibilities; organizations needing to provide double the bus tickets to assist people in picking up cheques; and individuals potentially having to make more calls to the Ministry, as well as the inevitable challenges of a new system being implemented.

For individuals who rely on payday lenders to cash their cheques, twice as many cheques could mean losing more money to fees or interest. However, we also heard that it might reduce the need for loans and could ultimately save people money if more frequent payments helped people budget their payments for longer, thus reducing their need to access predatory lenders. The variability of responses again points to the different ways individuals manage their money and identifies ways they could be supported in doing so.

Another logistical concern identified was how people would deal with rent payments. Currently, for most people receiving income assistance, the Ministry pays their rent directly to the landlord, with the remainder going to the recipient. Under the split payment schedule, it would need to be decided if the Ministry would pay rent directly to the landlord and split the remaining support part of the payment into two installments or if people would be responsible for covering their rent out of one payment. People also raised concerns regarding the potential for more administrative errors in issuing cheques, as well as potential difficulty in keeping track of payment dates for both clients and service providers.

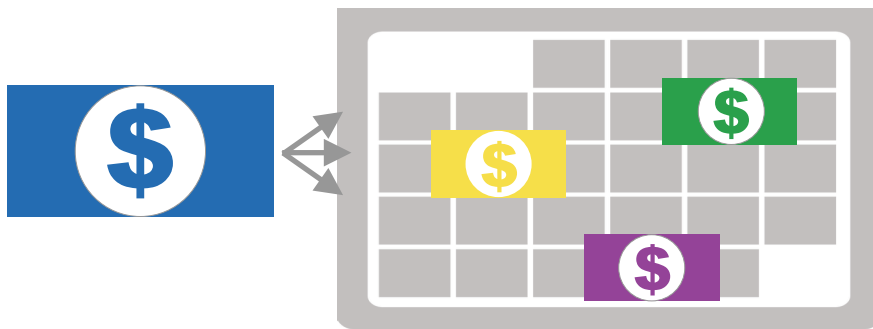
### **How the severity of harm around payments may be affected**

Some believed that payments would remain a focal point of the community, but that more frequent and smaller payments could mean less desperation, fewer and less extreme spikes in drug use and drug-related harm, and potentially fewer emergencies. However, we also heard that the culture of cheque day would continue with a shorter cycle between payments and that this type of schedule would do little to disrupt the monthly spikes in harm. Similarly, we heard people talk about the anxiety that cheque day brings with it and how this would potentially happen twice as often. On the whole, such a change would likely affect different people differently, some in positive ways and some in more challenging ways.

# Potential impacts of alternative schedules

## Staggering payments

The staggered payment model would entail cheque days being staggered over the month, rather than all recipients receiving payment on the same day. In discussing the staggered model, recipients, service providers, and first responders identified potential benefits, concerns and challenges of this model.



### How service provision might be affected

Service providers identified many potential impacts of staggered income assistance payments, which included both the potential for service provision to become easier and for new challenges to be introduced.

Some thought that a steadier influx of clients accessing services would alleviate some pressure on service providers—especially ministry workers and case managers—and decrease wait times for clients around payment days. We heard that staggered payments might spread out the busy times at Insite, decreasing the number of people who leave to inject elsewhere around cheque day. We also heard that service providers may be better able to support people in the week leading up to payment if payments were staggered.

Others felt it might be more challenging to check on people in the community if their normal routines around payments were changed and that this might cause service providers to lose track of clients they normally support around payment days. It may make monitoring for potential overdoses more difficult as providers would need to be more vigilant through the entire month instead of increasing vigilance around cheque day. For people who receive injectable psychiatric



medication, staggering payments might disrupt adherence if appointments are not coordinated with payment dates.

Some service providers worried that it might be difficult for their organizations to respond to staggered payments. Concerns were raised around staffing, changing hours, keeping track of when clients are paid and are therefore at higher risk, and/or when clients are waiting for payments and might need more support. Other organizations stated that they may need more resources to provide the same breadth of services across the whole month. For example, some organizations that provide food support suspend services during cheque week.

Individuals who work within organizations that provide **third party administration\***, identified concerns focused on the challenges of coordinating and picking up cheques if people were paid on different days. Third party administrators often distribute payments to clients on a 'midmonth' schedule, where people receive half their payment on cheque day, and half midway through the month. Currently, the Ministry releases cheques for these individuals twice a month, at which point third party administrators pick up cheques from Ministry offices to distribute to clients. Organization representatives worried that if payments were staggered, and the Ministry released cheques on different days for different clients, staff would be tied up making many more trips to Ministry offices. One solution that was suggested was updating the system of third party administration to be more digital and less reliant on physical cheques.

**\*Third party administration:** Organizations that manage income assistance for some individuals. Individuals who are not be able to access income assistance through the Ministry because of behaviour or the requirement for extra support are referred to third party administrators who distribute their cheques and provide additional supports. Third party administrators often provide two cheques a month, a practice that is generally mandated and not available to opt in or out of. When speaking with recipients, while some like the idea of getting a mid-month cheque, third party administration is often viewed as paternalistic and demeaning and something that happens as a punishment.

### **How resource sharing may be affected**

Some people thought that the amount of resource sharing and borrowing might increase among recipients if individuals who have already received their payment share with those who are waiting for their payment. Although resource sharing already occurs, and increased sharing is not necessarily a bad thing, people discussed the potential for increased violence if holding debts becomes more frequent, as well as for people to take advantage of others more frequently if money is changing hands more often. We also heard that pooling resources amongst family or friends to make larger purchases or buy in bulk may become more difficult if payments are staggered. Others said that staggered payments may help couples spread income across the month.

### **How community relationships and vulnerable people may be affected**

Some people raised concerns that staggering payments could increase tensions between recipients, potentially introducing more conflict and violence. Tensions could arise due to increased targeting and/or stealing from people who have received their payments and people who are still waiting for theirs.

Another concern that was raised was the potential for increased vulnerability amongst the most vulnerable in the community. Some highly vulnerable people are targeted for theft and other harm when they receive their cheque, something that may increase if they are paid when others are not. This could happen for a number of reasons including being paid separately making someone a visible target, and perpetrators being more likely to steal from others if they are waiting for their payment.

We also heard that trust is difficult when you are dealing with debts and scarce resources; with staggered payments, people would need to trust others when they say they are being paid. On the other hand, we heard from some people that they may have more privacy if others didn't know when they were being paid and would thus not feel the need to lend or share as much.

### **How first responders may be affected**

The first responders we spoke with indicated that they would find it helpful if payments were not all disbursed on the same day. Some believed we wouldn't see as much of a swing from property to violent crime, that it would decrease the group mentality of 'the party' and the abundance of drugs available, and that it would likely reduce the social pressures to use. Most first responders

agreed that it would reduce the pressure and demand on them and that they would be better able to respond to emergencies as calls would be more evenly distributed across the month.

### **How the drug supply and crime may be affected**

Responses identified the potential for staggered payments to affect drug production and distribution. We heard how a steadier influx of money and more stable purchasing over the course of the month might stabilize the production and quality of drugs. This could produce changes to the drug market that may result in less manipulation of the product and more consistent drug production practices.

We also heard that income assistance recipients might be less targeted by people selling drugs around payment days, as it would be more difficult to know when people were being paid and harder to find them if their patterns changed (e.g. if they weren't accessing their bank on cheque day). Additionally, police noted that staggered payments might improve their capacity to respond to activities related to selling drugs or collecting debts. Currently, the highest volume of selling drugs and collecting debts occurs around cheque day, when police are often too busy to respond or monitor such transactions. One consideration is that increased police presence could discourage the use of harm reduction services.

### **How administration and logistics may be affected**

Multiple people raised concerns that staggered payments would be confusing for both recipients and service providers to keep track of and that this type of change might cause a lot of stress for recipients. Recipients already must keep track of when and where organizations offer certain services and these schedules often change. If payments were staggered, recipients may have different and possibly unequal access to existing services, depending on when they receive their cheques compared to when services are scheduled and how services respond to a change.

Another concern that was raised was the possibility of recipients experiencing more administrative issues with staggered cheque days, such as, delayed or missed payments. On the other hand, some believed that staggered payments would decrease congestion, as fewer people would be trying to locate cheques and pay bills at the same time, which would therefore relieve pressure around payments.

One issue that was brought up was how staggered payments might affect individuals' payment of bills like rent or their phone. For example, if someone was paid at a time not close or prior to when rent is paid, it might be challenging for them to save their rent portion until it is due. As it stands now, many recipients have the rent portion of their assistance paid directly to their landlord. The capacity to plan for rent and other bills, which may have different due dates, was identified as a key consideration that should be tackled before implementing staggered cheques. As with some of the other considerations above, we heard that under this type of system, budgeting would be easier for some and harder for others.

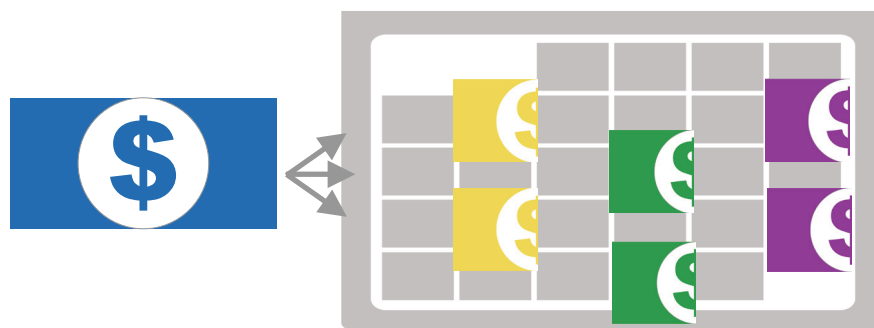
A final logistical concern that was raised was the need for payments to be staggered Monday-Friday, in case recipients needed to go to the bank or access other services that are closed on the weekend. Related to this concern was the question of whether people would be assigned a particular day of the month for payment (e.g., the third Tuesday of the month) or a date (e.g., the 15th of the month). If it was a specific day, this date would sometimes fall on a weekend, which could introduce challenges for recipients accessing funds and/or support services. If this was the case, payments could be organized to be paid on the business day before the date. However, some worried that this would introduce confusion for recipients if the date sometimes changed.

### **How severity of harm around payments may be affected**

Some believe that staggered payments would help lessen the intensity of harm experienced every month, and that, while individuals may still choose to use drugs, the intense pressure created by a whole community anticipating getting paid and releasing stress on the same day would not be as intense. Those who are trying to avoid drug use may not be as swept up in the payment cycle or feel as much social pressure to use drugs. Additionally, we heard how changing payment timing could break the cycles of money lending, binging, and scarcity as well as removing some of the perceived blame off income assistance for crime and overdoses. For others, we heard how it might be challenging to be removed from the social network that surrounds cheque day and that it may result in people using drugs alone more often, which could increase the risk of fatal overdose.

## Splitting & staggering payments

The split and staggered payments model would entail cheque days being split and staggered over the month. In discussing the split and staggered model, recipients, service providers, and first responders identified potential benefits, concerns and challenges of this model.



Many people believed that split and staggered cheques would be both the most complicated to administer and the most beneficial. Respondents raised similar concerns as those raised with the split and staggered models above. These included:

### How service provision may be affected

Rather than a once-monthly date that applies to all recipients, service providers would have to track multiple dates for their clients and plan for people to need increased support all month long. In addition, the added complexity and varying schedules for clients may lead to increased confusion or frustration for clients waiting for payments, and therefore service providers ending up confronted with more agitation. Community services saw the potential for this to lead to increased violence among clients.

A potential benefit of split and/or staggered payments would be an increase in face-time for service providers with clients if they were coming in at different times and/or more often.



### **How resource sharing may be affected**

As with the staggered model above, it would be challenging to pool resources with friends and family to buy in bulk, but could enable those sharing resources to have funds more consistently throughout the month.

### **How administration and logistics may be affected**

Because of the added complexity, there may be additional administrative challenges associated with this model. If administration was poor, it could cause confusion and frustration in the community and among recipients.

As cheque day often adds chaos and unpredictability to people's lives, it can often disrupt recipients' schedules and whether they attend work. Employers noted how staggered payments might make absences around payments less predictable but more manageable.

### **How severity of harm around payments may be affected**

We heard that the split and staggered model may be able to disrupt the monthly cycle that is seen in communities with many income assistance recipients; where weeks of scarcity and survival are followed by the relief of payments and the increased consumption that follows. Many noted this model may also help reduce the social pressures for drug use and decrease the severity of harm around payments.

# Concerns people had with system changes

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Beyond concerns and potential benefits regarding each model, during our conversations, we also heard concerns people had about implementing changes to the income assistance system. The following concerns were brought forward:

- Changes must ensure **consistent and equal access** to income assistance regardless of drug use patterns. We heard concerns that drawing attention to the link between overdose and income assistance payments will make some people think that people who use drugs should not receive income assistance. We also heard the concern that focusing on the drug-related harm and potential changes to the system will lead to the perception that all people receiving income assistance use drugs.
- If changes to the schedule of payments are made, people were concerned that something else will be taken away and/or this will be **prioritized over any meaningful raise** in income assistance rates.
- That changes will be put in place that don't provide any **choice or individualization** and will therefore not be optimized for everyone. This was consistent with a general criticism of one-size-fits-all approaches to payments.
- If payments are staggered and/or split, rent would need to be coordinated with landlords to **ensure people's housing security is not jeopardized**. For example, if people are paid on the 3rd of the month, they would need to save their rent for most of the month.
- A transition to staggered payments would need to happen slowly so that people are not waiting too long for their first payment in the staggered system. A system whereby the **transition to a new date was gradual** would make the transition smoother.

- Consideration would need to be made around **days chosen for disbursement**. If people are paid on a recurring date (e.g., the 12th of the month) sometimes this would fall on a weekend when certain services might not be open. Alternatively, if it was based on a day of the week (e.g., Monday) this would sometimes fall on a holiday.
- If rates are raised, **landlords will raise rents** and absorb any increase.
- With any changes moving forward, there needs to be **transparency and clear communication** to help make any transitions smooth and with dignity.



# Conclusion

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Cheque day, the day that income assistance recipients across BC receive their payments, is associated with severe and widespread harms. The Cheque Day Study tested the impact of more frequent and/or staggered payments on the severity of these harms, such as fatal and non-fatal overdose, hospital admissions, police and ambulance calls, among others. This community impact statement is intended to complement scientific results from the study and to highlight experiential knowledge from those affected by cheque day each month.

The consultation process identified both benefits and harms associated with alternative modes of payment. Potential benefits that emerged from our consultation include: The ability of alternate payment models to reduce spikes in demand at health and social services, making services more accessible; the potential for individuals to experience less social pressure to use drugs; lower demand on first responders, thus increasing their ability to respond; possible disruption of the community-wide cycle of scarcity and bingeing; and the potential to add stability to people's lives. However, concerns were also identified, which include: Logistic and administrative challenges, the need to adapt services to meet client needs across the month, and the potential for increased vulnerability if payments are staggered. As financial management and drug use patterns vary between recipients, individualization and choice in payment model was seen as a key change that could maximize the supportive properties of income assistance to help mitigate the severe impacts of poverty.

In addition to the known harms associated with synchronized income assistance payments, many participants identified the low rates of income assistance and resulting poverty as a significant contribution to the monthly harms around payments.

In the midst of the illicit opioid overdose crisis affecting all parts of British Columbia, there is an urgent need to identify strategies to reduce the increased morbidity and mortality linked to income assistance payments and the associated burden on social and emergency service providers. However, any change to the income assistance system must be done thoughtfully to ensure no one faces unintended increases in harm from these changes.



Photo by Colin Askey



# Next steps

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The information presented within highlights some of the complex ways in which income assistance payments impact recipients and those providing support for them. The community-wide harm that we see each month coinciding with income assistance payments is severe and needs to be addressed. If a change is going to be successful in mitigating the monthly harm around cheque day, scientific data alongside the wealth of experiential knowledge provided by the community need to be carefully considered.

The insight provided by community members and various stakeholders described here, alongside results from the Cheque Day Study, should be used to craft policy and/or program changes that take into consideration, and provide response for, the potential secondary impacts within the community.



*Photo by Justin Luebke on Unsplash*

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