



Substance use, work and well-being in trades and construction Research and Knowledge Mobilization Initiative – Summer 2025

Background and Rationale: The ongoing, intractable challenges linked to drug use and drug-related harm, including overdose, do not impact all groups equally. People working in the construction and trades in British Columbia bear a disproportionate burden of substance-use related harm, and there is a concerning lack of published, action-oriented research in this area. The literature that does exist identifies trades and construction as a unique occupational group. Critically, existing research and reports suffer from significant shortcomings: they are usually limited to workplace-based studies, gather data from only those actively working in the trades (and not those who have exited the industry because of substance use-related concerns), and do not focus on substance use disorder (SUD) treatment, recovery or return to work pathways. These limitations have direct impacts on the trades and construction labour force, its well-being, and the ability to develop evidence-based responses that mitigate substance use-related harm and support the needs of this occupational group.

Objectives: We seek to fill critical research and knowledge mobilization gaps in this area, working in close collaboration with workers, unions, people with lived and living experience of substance use, employers and clinicians to make concrete progress towards **reducing substance use-related harm and improving employment outcomes among the trades and construction workforce.**

Planned Activities: For maximum impact, we seek to pair complementary scientific and knowledge mobilization platforms to fill important gaps in knowledge and move towards evidence-based change.

Research funded in July 2025 includes:

- Anonymous **surveys of workers/union members** to assess substance use, workplace policy and related harm, SUD treatment barriers, and the impact of stigma, among other topics.
- A **process evaluation** recruiting participants following a positive drug test and/or referral to an independent medical exam (IME) focused on worker trajectories and experiences to identify ways to minimize occupational and health harm and prioritize stay at/return to work supports.
- The creation of an **occupational monitoring cohort** that links worker's compensation claims, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Health and other data to retrospectively and prospectively follow workers wellness and employment trajectories after they make a claim.

Knowledge mobilization efforts organized around different actors are planned to include:

- **Clinicians:** Developing protocols that support employers, workers, and efficient use of health care resources, e.g., whether and how to provide medical monitoring through the public system, clinical guidance on SUD treatment in the workplace, assessing impairment.
- **Workers:** Developing tools and guidance to support worker understandings of labour protections, entitlements, SUD treatment and support options and return-to-work pathways.
- **Employers:** Providing evidence-based supports for navigating employee substance use, differentiating between different types of "safety sensitive" work, support for worker autonomy and worker retention, and best practice workplace substance use policy.
- **Unions:** Collaboratively developing an evidence base that supports bargaining efforts, the development of worker resources and supports and workforce preservation.

Anticipated impact: There has been considerable enthusiasm for developing academic research and knowledge mobilization to better support worker safety and well-being, access to treatment and job retention; evidence-informed substance use policy; effective clinical support; and workforce sustainability. With initial funding in place, we are currently assembling a team and operationalizing research protocols with key community, industry and health system partners, with a vision to develop and implement a collaborative, action-oriented evidence base to promote worker well-being.