

Topic	Awareness and Knowledge of Decriminalization among people who use substances: Evidence from the 2022 Harm Reduction Client Survey (HRCS)
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Data source	Harm Reduction Client Survey (HRCS) 2022
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Key messages

- More than half of the 503 survey respondents had some awareness of the decriminalization policy before it came into effect, though knowledge of decriminalization varied by respondent characteristics. Most respondents were not aware of all five drugs included in decriminalization, however 60-70% of people who used stimulants and opioids knew whether the drug they used was included.
- Approximately 40% of respondents correctly estimated the personal possession limit at 2.5 grams. Respondents tended to overestimate the allowable possession limit with an average estimate of 4.9 grams.
- Compared to knowledge of decriminalization in general, respondents were less aware of the specifics of decriminalization. These specifics include whether law enforcement can take away quantities of drugs below the possession threshold and the circumstances under which people can be arrested for trafficking.
- Community organizations that support people who use substances (e.g., harm reduction sites, OPS, and SCS) are the most common source of information about decriminalization for respondents. These sites may play an important role in ongoing education efforts, which should involve multiple methods and locations.
- To ensure that the policy can equitably reduce criminalization, education efforts should focus on people with lower awareness of the policy and its components, including cis women, younger people, and people without access to the internet.

Introduction

Research Questions: Were people who use substances aware of BC’s decriminalization policy before it came into effect? Among those aware of the policy, did they have knowledge of which substances were included, the personal possession limit, and what law enforcement can do under decriminalization? Where did survey participants find information about decriminalization?

- On May 31, 2022, the federal government approved an exemption to the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act to remove criminal penalties for the possession of small amounts (less than 2.5 grams total) of MDMA, cocaine powder, crack cocaine, methamphetamine, and fentanyl for personal use by people over 18 years old within British Columbia. This exemption, referred to as decriminalization, became effective starting January 31, 2023 until January 31, 2026.
- A special version of the Harm Reduction Client Survey (HRCS) was developed to collect baseline information on decriminalization. HRCS respondents completed the survey between November and December 2022, in the months leading up to decriminalization coming into effect.
- Survey questions asked people who use substances if they were aware of the decriminalization exemption, which substances were included, the personal possession limit, what law enforcement can do under decriminalization, and where they found information about decriminalization.
- For results from other decriminalization-related analyses, please see the 2022 section of the [Harm Reduction Client Survey website](#), or the Decriminalization section of the [Harm Reduction Reports website](#).

Study Design and Methods

- The 2022 HRCS was administered at 29 harm reduction sites in BC among adults who reported use of unregulated substances, opioid agonist treatment (OAT), or prescribed safer supply (PSS) in the last 6 months. Data were self-reported and cross-sectional, and collected between November 2022 and mid-January 2023. The total sample for the 2022 HRCS was 503 participants. Please see the Appendix for an overview of the Harm Reduction Client Survey methodology.
- The sample for the present analysis consisted of all respondents who answered the question, “Did you know that British Columbia has a new decriminalization policy starting January 31, 2023? Under this policy, it is not a crime to possess small amounts of some illegal drugs for personal use.” Analyses were stratified based on the response options: yes, no, not sure.
- Analyses examined potential factors associated with awareness of decriminalization:
 - Health Authority of where the survey was completed (Interior, Fraser, Vancouver Coastal, Island, Northern)
 - Community size (1000 to <30 000, 30 000 to <100 000, >100 000)
 - Concern about losing housing in the last 6 months (yes/no)

- Internet access (yes/no)
- Age group (19-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50 or older)
- Sex/gender (cis man, cis woman, trans/gender expansive)
- Drugs used in last 3 days (opioids, stimulants)

Findings

- Fifty-eight percent (n=290) of survey participants had some awareness of decriminalization before it came into effect (Table 1). Awareness was highest among those who participated at sites in Vancouver Coastal Health (64%), sites in medium population centres (62%), who feared losing their shelter (65%), who had internet access (61%), were 40-49 years old (63%), or identified as cis men (60%). Awareness was lower among cis women (53%), people aged 19-29 (51%), people without access to the internet (43%), and people in Northern Health (48%), see Table 1.
- Of the 189 participants aware of decriminalization and who entered an estimate for the allowable quantity question, 44% estimated correctly (2.5g) (Table 2). In general, participants overestimated the allowable quantity with an average of 4.9g. The median estimate was 2.5g with estimates spanning 0.6g to 128g. (See Figure 1)
- Across all survey participants, awareness of the individual drugs included in decriminalization varied. People generally knew if a drug they took in the last month was decriminalized, even if they didn't know all the drugs that were exempted. (Table 3).
- Respondents were less sure of what actions are allowed under decriminalization. For each true and false statement, almost one quarter of the respondents answered that they were unsure (Figure 2). Among respondents aware of decriminalization, over half correctly thought that police cannot confiscate drugs if they are holding less than the allowable amount (Table 4a). Nearly 60% of respondents aware of decriminalization thought that bylaw offenses for public consumption of substances continued under decriminalization (Table 4b). Over half of respondents aware of decriminalization responded that people can be arrested for trafficking no matter how much drug they have on them is true, which is correct – selling drugs remains illegal under decriminalization (Table 4c).
- Over half of respondents get information about decriminalization from harm reduction sites/OPS/SCS and community organizations (Table 5). Many respondents get information from friends (37%), the news/media (24%), their health care provider (23%), and/or from a drug user group (22%). Interestingly, almost 40% of all respondents said they received information about decriminalization from this survey. Among respondents not aware of decriminalization, over 50% reported they received information about decriminalization from this survey. It is unclear whether respondents were indicating sources of information they have used, what sources of information they would like, or

whether some sites may have handed out the information sheet about decriminalization that was intended to accompany the survey before people completed the survey.

Interpretation

- Prior to decriminalization coming into effect over half of the participants had some awareness of the policy. Education about the policy and the rights of people who use substances under the policy should be an ongoing component of qualitative and quantitative work in this area.
- Decriminalization education should be targeted at those in small population centers and Northern communities. Varied communication approaches including posters, information cards, and community education campaigns are necessary as not all people who use substances have access the internet or access harm reduction or OPS/SCS sites.

Limitations

- The 2022 HRCS is a convenience sample and therefore not representative of all people who use substances in BC. Though these findings provide some insight into awareness and knowledge of decriminalization across people who access harm reduction services in BC.
- The survey design is cross-sectional and self-reported so we cannot assess temporality and there may be recall bias among participants.

Supporting Information

Acknowledgements

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Document citation

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Tables and Figures

Table 1. Awareness of Decriminalization policy by participant characteristics. 2022 Harm Reduction Client Survey (n=503)

Characteristic	Aware of Decriminalization N (%)	Not Aware of Decriminalization N (%)	Not sure N (%)
Total participants	290 (58%)	184 (37%)	29 (6%)
HA of survey			
Interior	83 (60%)	47 (34%)	9 (6%)
Fraser	59 (58%)	39 (38%)	4 (4%)
Vancouver Coastal	34 (64%)	13 (25%)	6 (11%)
Island	63 (61%)	39 (38%)	2 (2%)
Northern	51 (48%)	46 (44%)	8 (8%)
Community size			
Small population centre	92 (54%)	72 (42%)	7 (4%)
Medium population centre	101 (62%)	49 (30%)	14 (8%)
Large urban centre	97 (58%)	63 (38%)	8 (5%)
Concerned about losing housing in the last six months			
Yes	175 (65%)	82 (30%)	13 (5%)
No	99 (51%)	84 (43%)	12 (6%)
Internet Access			
Yes	251 (61%)	138 (34%)	20 (5%)
No	39 (43%)	45 (49%)	7 (8%)
Age group			
19-29 years old	38 (51%)	33 (44%)	3 (4%)
30-39 years old	90 (57%)	57 (36%)	12 (8%)

Characteristic	Aware of Decriminalization N (%)	Not Aware of Decriminalization N (%)	Not sure N (%)
40-49 years old	80 (63%)	42 (33%)	5 (4%)
50 years or older	76 (58%)	47 (36%)	7 (5%)
Sex/gender			
Cis woman	95 (53%)	77 (43.0%)	7 (4%)
Cis man	177 (60%)	96 (33%)	20 (7%)
Recent drug use			
Opioid use in last 3 days	168 (56%)	117 (39%)	17 (6%)
Stimulant use in last 3 days	179 (56%)	128 (40%)	15 (5%)

Figure 1. Histogram of estimates of the allowable quantity under decriminalization exemption among participants aware of decriminalization. 2022 Harm Reduction Client Survey (n=189)

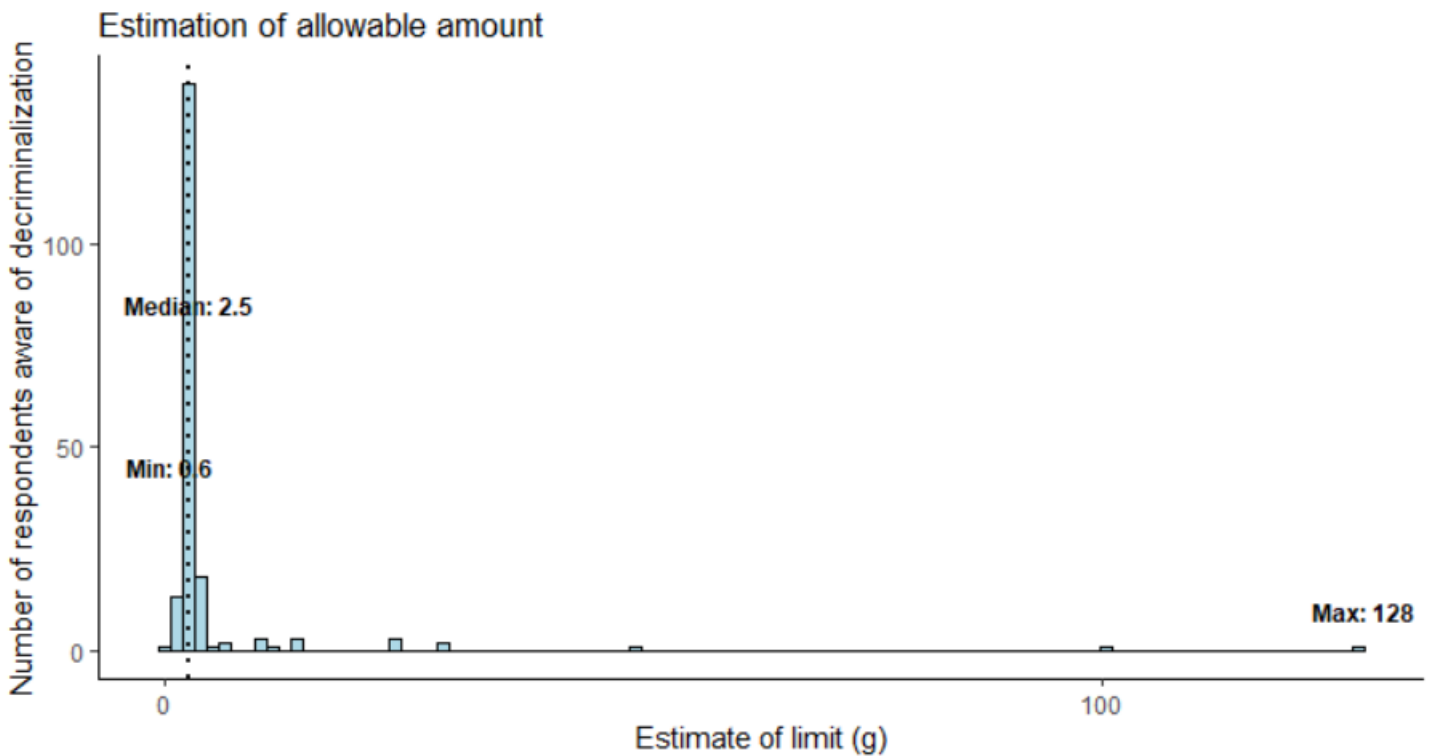


Table 2. Awareness of the allowable quantity under decriminalization exemption among participants aware of decriminalization. 2022 Harm Reduction Client Survey (n=282)

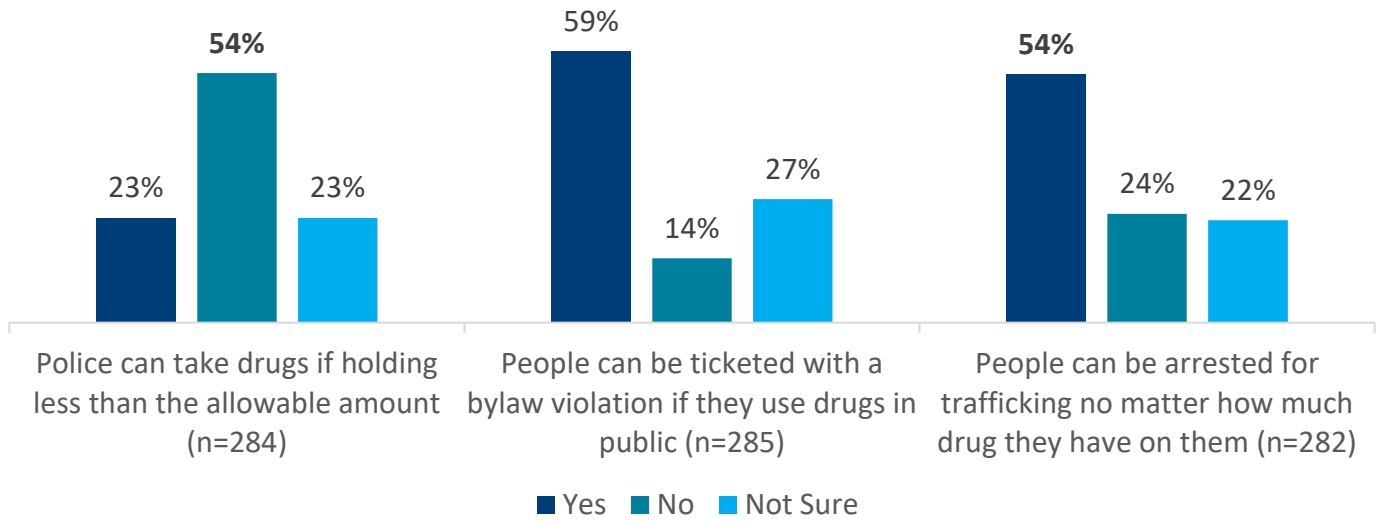
	Entered any value for the limit		Estimate of the possession limit (grams) mean (min-max)	Correct response (2.5g)	
	N	%		N	%
Responses from all survey participants	251	54%	4.96 (0.6-128)	105	42%
Responses from survey participants aware of decriminalization	189	67%	4.94 (0.6-128)	84	44%
HA of survey					
Interior	51	64%	3.1 (1.0-14)	27	53%
Fraser	36	63%	11.0 (1.5-128)	19	53%
Vancouver Coastal	23	68%	2.7 (1.0-10)	10	43%
Island	52	83%	3.1 (0.6-30)	22	42%
Northern	27	55%	5.7 (1.0-50)	6	22%
Concerned about losing housing in the last 6 months					
Yes	117	69%	4.9 (1.0-100)	55	47%
No	66	68%	5.3 (0.6-128)	28	42%
Age group					
19-29 years old	27	71%	13.7 (0.6-128)	12	44%
30-39 years old	59	66%	3.1 (1.0-30)	29	49%
40-49 years old	49	64%	3.4 (1.0-25)	20	41%
50 years or older	50	69%	4.0 (1.0-30)	23	46%
Sex/gender					
Cis woman	55	61%	3.5 (1.0-128)	22	40%
Cis man	123	70%	5.5 (0.6-50)	59	48%
Recent drug use					
Opioid use in last 3 days	109	66.5%	5.6 (0.6-128)	47	43%
Stimulant use in last 3 days	119	67.6%	5.9 (0.6-128)	50	42%

Table 3. Awareness of individual drugs included in decriminalization exemption among participants aware of decriminalization. 2022 Harm Reduction Client Survey (n=290)

	N	% aware MDMA	% aware cocaine	% aware crack	% aware meth	% aware fentanyl/ heroin	% aware of all five drugs included
Responses from survey participants aware of decriminalization	290	37%	56%	53%	59%	60%	30%
HA of survey							
Interior	83	37%	52%	47%	65%	63%	30%
Fraser	59	37%	46%	46%	54%	51%	31%
Vancouver Coastal	34	56%	68%	71%	65%	68%	44%
Island	63	33%	71%	68%	64%	68%	33%
Northern	51	26%	47%	43%	47%	49%	18%
Community size							
Small population centre	92	37%	63%	61%	57%	55%	28%
Medium population centre	101	28%	47%	43%	58%	57%	23%
Large urban centre	97	45%	59%	58%	63%	66%	40%
Concerned about losing housing in the last 6 months							
Yes	175	35%	57%	54%	63%	63%	28%
No	99	39%	58%	54%	57%	55%	35%
Access to the internet							
Yes	251	36%	58%	55%	62%	61%	30%
No	99	39%	41%	41%	44%	51%	33%

	N	% aware MDMA	% aware cocaine	% aware crack	% aware meth	% aware fentanyl/ heroin	% aware of all five drugs included
Age group							
19-29 years old	38	40%	58%	61%	71%	71%	37%
30-39 years old	90	42%	57%	53%	60%	63%	33%
40-49 years old	80	35%	51%	49%	53%	56%	26%
50 years or older	76	29%	59%	55%	61%	54%	26%
Sex/gender							
Cis woman	95	22%	43%	44%	47%	50%	20%
Cis man	177	43%	63%	58%	66%	64%	35%
Recent drug use							
MDMA / Ecstasy use in last 30 days	22	27%	50%	55%	59%	64%	.
Cocaine (powder) use in last 30 days	66	33%	68%	65%	62%	64%	.
Crack cocaine use in last 30 days	113	32%	63%	62%	56%	62%	.
Crystal meth use in last 30 days	199	40%	56%	55%	67%	68%	.
Fentanyl or Heroin use in last 30 days	169	39%	56%	55%	65%	72%	.

Figure 2. Responses to True and False Statements* About Actions Permitted Under Decriminalization among Respondents Aware of Decriminalization. 2022 Harm Reduction Client Survey



***Correct answer percentage is bolded. Almost 60% of respondents thought they could be issued a bylaw violation for using drugs in public – there is no correct answer as this varies by municipality.**

Table 4a. Responses to T/F statement*, “Police can take my drugs if holding less than the limit” among participants aware of decriminalization. Stratified by respondent characteristics. 2022 Harm Reduction Client Survey (n=284)

	Survey respondents	True		False		Not Sure	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Total	284	65	23%	155	55%	64	23%
HA of survey							
Interior	82	20	24%	39	48%	23	28%
Fraser	57	14	25%	31	54%	12	21%
Vancouver Coastal	34	10	29%	18	53%	6	18%
Island	63	10	16%	43	68%	10	16%
Northern	48	11	23%	24	50%	13	27%
Concerned about losing housing in the last 6 months							
Yes	172	37	22%	97	56%	38	22%
No	97	24	25%	55	57%	18	19%
Age group							
19-29 years old	38	5	13%	25	66%	8	21%
30-39 years old	88	19	22%	52	59%	17	19%
40-49 years old	78	22	28%	37	47%	17	22%
50 years or older	74	18	24%	41	55%	15	20%
Sex/gender							
Cis woman	91	18	20%	47	52%	26	29%
Cis man	175	42	24%	100	57%	33	19%
Recent drug use							
Opioid use in last 3 days	166	37	22%	97	58%	32	19%
Stimulant use in last 3 days	177	38	22%	103	58%	36	20%
* Correct answer is false							

Table 4b. Responses to T/F statement*, “People can be ticketed for a bylaw violation if they use drugs in public (even if they are holding less than the allowable amount)” among participants aware of decriminalization. Stratified by respondent characteristics. 2022 Harm Reduction Client Survey (n=285)

	Survey respondents	True		False		Not Sure	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Total	285	169	59%	40	14%	76	27%
HA of survey							
Interior	80	39	49%	14	18%	27	34%
Fraser	59	35	59%	8	14%	16	27%
Vancouver Coastal	33	19	58%	6	18%	8	24%
Island	63	48	76%	4	6%	11	18%
Northern	50	28	56%	8	16%	14	28%
Concerned about losing housing in the last 6 months							
Yes	173	108	62%	21	12%	44	25%
No	97	53	55%	17	18%	27	28%
Age group							
19-29 years old	38	20	53%	5	13%	13	34%
30-39 years old	88	55	63%	15	17%	18	21%
40-49 years old	78	50	64%	8	10%	20	26%
50 years or older	75	43	57%	12	16%	20	27%
Sex/gender							
Cis woman	93	49	53%	11	12%	33	36%
Cis man	174	110	63%	25	14%	39	22%
Recent drug use							
Opioid use in last 3 days	166	104	63%	21	13%	41	25%
Stimulant use in last 3 days	177	109	61%	22	12%	47	26%
* The answer to this question depends on location and bylaws in place, no correct answer.							

Table 4c. Responses to T/F statement*, “People can be arrested for drug trafficking/dealing, no matter how much drug they have on them” among participants aware of decriminalization. Stratified by respondent characteristics. 2022 Harm Reduction Client Survey (n=282)

	Survey respondents	True		False		Not Sure	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Total	282	152	54%	67	24%	63	22%
HA of survey							
Interior	80	35	44%	21	26%	24	30%
Fraser	58	36	62%	13	22%	9	16%
Vancouver Coastal	34	19	56%	10	29%	5	15%
Island	63	36	57%	15	24%	12	19%
Northern	47	26	55%	8	17%	13	28%
Concerned about losing housing in the last 6 months							
Yes	171	90	53%	43	25%	38	22%
No	96	57	59%	21	22%	18	19%
Age group							
19-29 years old	37	17	46%	10	27%	10	27%
30-39 years old	87	46	53%	25	29%	16	18%
40-49 years old	77	46	60%	14	18%	17	22%
50 years or older	81	43	53%	18	22%	20	25%
Sex/gender							
Cis woman	92	44	48%	19	21%	29	32%
Cis man	172	96	56%	47	27%	29	17%
Recent drug use							
Opioid use in last 3 days	164	92	56%	36	22%	36	22%
Stimulant use in last 3 days	175	92	53%	45	26%	38	22%
* The correct answer is true							

Table 5. Sources of information about decriminalization exemption. 2022 Harm Reduction Client Survey (n=503)

Source of information	Among all respondents (n=503)		Among respondents aware of decriminalization (n=290)		Among respondents not aware of decriminalization (n=184)	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Checked any source	468	93%	282	97%	175	95%
Harm reduction site / OPS / SCS / community organization	260	56%	165	59%	88	50%
Health care provider	106	23%	71	25%	31	18%
Social media (Facebook / Twitter / TikTok, etc.)	94	20%	68	24%	25	14%
News/media	111	24%	81	29%	28	16%
Friend	173	37%	122	43%	47	27%
Drug user group	105	22%	72	26%	31	18%
Dealer	71	15%	46	16%	22	13%
Posters on the street	58	12%	42	15%	15	9%
This survey	186	40%	91	32%	91	52%
Other	38	8%	21	7%	15	9%

Appendix

Methodology for the Harm Reduction Client Survey

- The survey explores sociodemographic, geographic, and substance use characteristics, Prescribed Safer Supply access and preferences, factors associated with implementation of decriminalization, experiences with overdose, and interactions with police.
- Quantitative survey distributed at 29 harm reduction distribution sites in small, medium, and large population centres across the five regional health authorities (Interior: 7 sites, Fraser: 6 sites, Vancouver Coastal: 4 sites, Island: 6 sites, Northern: 6 sites)
- For responses to be included in the survey, participants must indicate that in the past six months they:
 - Are 19 years of age or older and
 - Used an illegal drug (other than cannabis, alcohol, or tobacco), took opioid agonist treatment (OAT), or took prescribed safer supply (PSS)
- Furthermore, responses were excluded after data collection if responses indicated participants:
 - did not use an illegal drugs in the last 30 days and
 - did not indicate receiving substitution treatment in the last six months and
 - did not have any opioid/stimulant substitution treatment preferences and
 - have not injected or smoked/inhaled (excluding tobacco and cannabis) any drug in the last six months
- Depending on the site, participants may complete the survey independently, or site staff may administer the survey
- Each site is allocated a specific number of surveys to complete
- Participants receive an honorarium for their time (\$15) and sites receive an honorarium for each participant (\$5)