

What is Stigma?

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What is stigma? According to the architects behind [British Columbia](#)'s drug decriminalization, stigma is like some internal psychological process.

Decriminalizing small amounts of opioids, [cocaine](#), meth, and ecstasy is designed to “help reduce the barriers and stigma that prevent people from accessing life-saving supports and services.”

With these “life-saving” services, a safe supply of pharmaceutical drugs brought to you by the same [large corporations that profited](#) from the [opioid crisis](#).

Now they're ready to profit from “safe supply.” And B.C.'s provincial Health Officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry, is more than willing to provide academic support.

But what is stigma? Suppose you're doing drugs openly in the street. Are other people's opinions really preventing you from “accessing life-saving supports and services?”

So I asked one of Canada's few reasonable experts on the subject, Dr. Julian Somers.

“It took me a while to figure out what stigma means,” he told CLN. “It's like the scarlet letter,” he says.

But what does that mean?

What is the Scarlet Letter?

The phrase “scarlet letter” is a literary reference to a novel of the same name written by Nathaniel Hawthorne and published in 1850.

In the novel, a woman named Hester Prynne must wear a scarlet “A” on her clothing to symbolize her adultery and social shame. The letter serves as a visible reminder of her transgression and separates her from the rest of society.

The term “scarlet letter” is often used figuratively to describe any form of public shame or stigma someone carries due to their actions or circumstances.

For example, a guy sitting on cardboard on the street asking for change is not literally wearing a physical symbol but is said to be wearing a “scarlet letter.”

In the context of stigma and drug use, Dr. Somers says it's about signs.

“There's a sign about you,” he says. “Maybe you sound less formally educated or you look like you're a little undernourished, maybe you've got some piercings and ink on your neck or something. Things like that.”

And indeed, if you've ever worked retail or with the public, you know what Dr. Somers means.

A man walks into a convenience store wearing a suit and tie and wanders around looking for a particular product. No problem.

A man in an oversized hoodie with a neck tattoo and some piercings doing the same thing? You follow

their every move.

So what does B.C.'s drug decriminalization do to reduce stigma?

Does Decriminalization Reduce Stigma?

What is stigma? It's about the signs you have that tell others what kind of person you may be. One of these significant signs is employment.

Suppose you're middle-class and employed and develop a drug problem that's negatively affecting your life and relationships. In that case, you receive one set of treatment options.

You receive the "safe supply" treatment option if you're poor and unemployed.

"What Dr. Bonnie Henry is talking about is big time stigma reduction," says Somers. "We got to reduce the stigma, we've got to make it more possible for people to ask for help. But if she was faced with a decision, say about one of her kids, who is addicted to [fentanyl](#), benzos, cocaine or alcohol – what is her play? Is she going to say, yeah, I'm going to get my kid hooked up on safe supply? Or is she going to send that kid off to Betty Ford? And I'm thinking it's the latter."

Dr. Somers is right. And taken to its logical conclusion, B.C. decriminalization promotes stigma.

After all, how exactly is safe supply treatment "destigmatizing?" Especially when you're employed and get a completely different treatment option.

"If it's not for your own loved ones, who's it for?" Dr. Somers asks. "And if it's for people who have different signs about them than your loved ones, then it's a pro-stigma intervention. You're actually practicing stigma."

How To Reduce Stigma

B.C. is offering taxpayer-funded drugs to people with mental health issues. They are not doing what's required to help these people move on.

Children cannot visit their drug-addicted parents in many treatment centres and [single-residency occupancy](#) units.

On paper, this may seem like a good idea. But in reality, it's preventing the relationships addicts need to connect with their loved ones and move on from drug abuse.

The problem isn't drugs. It's people's relationship with them. B.C. decriminalization does not address this. Dr. Bonnie Henry is engaging in doublespeak.

"Saying they are anti-stigma is Orwellian," says Dr. Somers. And yet they seem oblivious to it.