

The Reporter

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Drug Misuse in Canada: Moving Toward a Harm Reduction Approach

In Canada:

- *Injection drug use is the second most common method of transmitting HIV in men.*
- *The criminal justice system spent approximately \$400 million on dealing with drug law violations in 1992.*
- *80% of offenders report using illicit drugs during their lifetime.*

In Canada, enormous amounts of money have been spent in an attempt to combat the war on drugs. During the past twenty years, there have been numerous efforts to address the key issues related to drug and alcohol misuse, involving multiple disciplines. However, it has only been in recent years that harm reduction approaches and policies have been piloted and debated.

What is Harm Reduction?

Harm reduction policies and programs are those that work toward reducing the negative consequences associated with drug use. They use a public health approach to dealing with drugs and drug-related issues. Harm reduction policies arose from the need to reduce the spread of AIDS/HIV through injection drug use.

A harm reduction policy or program can take several forms, most of which can be found in some form or another operating

in Canada. Examples of harm reduction programs include: syringe and needle exchanges, education and outreach programs for those at risk of contracting infectious diseases, methadone programs, law enforcement policies, tolerance areas or safe injection sites supervised by medical personnel, and alcohol and tobacco policies/programs.

Harm reduction has never been concretely defined; however, it has a number of characteristics that set it apart from other drug policies. Amongst harm reduction's identifiable features is its *pragmatism*. The pragmatism behind harm reduction is that it accepts that

“Harm reduction policies arose from the need to reduce the spread of AIDS/HIV through injection drug use.”

drugs are part of our society and, although they carry risks, they provide the user with benefits, such a means of coping and escaping from current life circumstances. Understanding these benefits is important if drug-using behaviour is to be understood. From a community perspective, pragmatism means that

efforts are made to contain drug-related harms rather than trying to eliminate the drug use entirely. Respecting the dignity and rights of the user through *humanistic values* is another feature of harm reduction. Harm reduction accepts, as a fact, the drug user's decision to use drugs.

Harm Reduction cont'd

While harm reduction focuses its attention on the reduction of drug related harms, it also recognizes that abstinence is an option for some. Treating every user on an individual basis means that there is no room for moralistic judgements in harm reduction programming. The drug use is neither condemned or supported. The extent of an individual's use is secondary to *focusing on the harms* related to his or her use. The harms can be related to the individual (such as their mental and physical health), family or community. Harm reduction policies also work using a *hierarchy of goals*. Hierarchy of goals is the series of goals set out to deal with drug misuse, starting with the most pressing and immediate needs of the user. While the final goal is abstinence or safer use of drugs, it is the user who sets the goals in his or her hierarchy. All of these harm reduction features attempt to *balance the costs and benefits* of drug use, ensuring that the immediate needs of the user are addressed but that the risks of use are also identified and monitored. These features contribute to the popularity of harm reduction policies because they offer more options for attending to drug abuse. Harm reduction also diverts unnecessary cases away from an over-burdened criminal justice system.

Canada and Harm Reduction

The growth of harm reduction programs in Canada represents society's willingness to see drug misuse as a health and social issue rather than one solely to be dealt with by the criminal justice system. As harm reduction programs gain momentum in Canada, we begin to see creative contributions being made by the police, corrections, courts and other social service agencies. Several organizations, such as the Correctional Service of Canada, Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, Health Canada, and the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, have all contributed to research and program development oriented toward the reduction of harm as it relates to drug use.

The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) has committed to doing all that it can to reduce the negative consequences of drug use in its prisons. In 1997, 158 cases of HIV were known to the CSC. There were twenty additional AIDS cases known to the Service and there is an increasing possibility that offenders are acquiring these diseases through intravenous drug use while incarcerated. In response to the increasing numbers of infectious diseases within federal corrections, CSC has brought into its institutions bleach kits, condoms and the methadone program.

The Ottawa-Carleton Health Department, along with the Youth Services Bureau, developed the SITE needle exchange

program. The program is designed to reduce the risk of contracting HIV or Hepatitis by providing needle exchanges, condoms, bleach kits, health education, anonymous HIV testing, counselling and referrals. In Toronto, a drug court has been set up to assist the underlying medical and social needs of the accused. The court's staff, including the judge, prosecutor and defence counsel, all have a working knowledge of the issues surrounding drug use. Montreal police in the Parc Extension district get tough on those selling drugs but offer treatment to those in simple possession of a narcotic. These approaches provide other options besides criminalization.

International Perspectives on Harm Reduction

Although harm reduction is new in North America, it is not new to other parts of the world. Amsterdam has had needle exchanges in operation since the early 1980s and methadone programs have been available since the 1970s. Mobile methadone clinics offering liquid methadone to drug dependent persons have been related to more people entering into drug treatment programs in Amsterdam. The police in both Germany and the Netherlands focus enforcement efforts toward harm reduction. Officers work with health officials and drug user groups to ensure that there is adequate access to social programs, while targeting large-scale drug trafficking.

Many cities in Australia, United Kingdom, Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands have facilities known as injection rooms. Switzerland opened its first injection room in the late 1980s. These centres offer drug users the opportunity to "obtain clean equipment, condoms, advice and medical attention" in a safe, contained environment. Research on the rooms regards them as a safer option to open injection and as an effective means to reduce the transmission of infectious diseases. Such programs have been cost-effective in dealing with drug use.

The John Howard Society and Harm Reduction

The John Howard Society recognizes that Canadians are somewhat reluctant to accept harm reduction policies because they are seen as condoning drug use. However, the Society sees that the number of options available for addressing drug related problems are greater using harm reduction policies. There is no room for options using the zero-tolerance policy. The John Howard Society views treating drug dependent persons in the community, where he or she can receive support and where more programs are available, as a more suitable option to incarceration.

"...the number of options available for addressing drug related problems are greater using harm reduction policies."

Harm Reduction cont'd

The John Howard Society supports any social policy that attempts to address the problems of individual drug misuse by relying on harm reduction rather than enforcement approaches. The Society acknowledges the features of harm reduction and recognizes that some misuse of mind altering substances is inevitable in today's society. The Society also recognizes that the drug users decision to use drugs should neither be condemned nor supported. This recognition ensures that the rights and dignity of the user are respected. The extent of an individual's drug misuse is secondary to the harms resulting from their misuse. Therefore, measures taken to address the misuse should focus primarily on those resulting harms.

The John Howard Society fully supports any services that assists drug misusers with monitoring their physical and mental health. Any service or policy that assists drug

Practices in prisons which reflect public health practices and that apply in the community are endorsed by the Society. More specifically, the Society supports access to HIV testing, equipment and supplies that reduce the spread of diseases and confidentiality in prison practices. Finally, any drug enforcement policies that do not themselves contribute to harm are supported by the John Howard Society.

Harm reduction measures are a vital first step towards reducing the negative consequences of drug use, and as we embark on a new millennium, it is important that the relationships established to address drugs and drug related issues in Canadian society continue to grow. Although Canada has come far in terms of dealing with drugs from a harm reduction perspective, there is still plenty left to be done.

Highlighting a Harm Reduction Initiative

In Alberta, a consortium of organizations including Alberta Justice, other government departments and community groups like the John Howard Society of Alberta are working together to examine non-prescription needle use. The purpose of the consortium is to reduce the harm associated with non-prescription drug use and related issues. This three-year project is currently into its second year. During the first year and half, the consortium answered important questions concerning prevention, research, policy, and programming as they relate to non-prescription needle use. At this point in time, the consortium is attempting to put identifiable themes into actionable items. The consortium is working on 8 major themes: needle exchange and harm reduction program, surveillance, public and government awareness, law enforcement and incarceration, youth, addictions and mental health services, aboriginal groups and social and income supports for non-prescription needle users. As the project heads into its third and final year it is hopeful that through the commitment and cooperation of numerous agencies it can find innovative ways to reduce the harms associated with non-prescription needle use. The consortium is working simultaneously with Alberta Health's HIV in Alberta 1998/99 – 2000 Health Strategy. This strategy outlines the concerns linked to HIV and the means to address those concerns. Injection drug use and HIV, education, care and treatment for offenders and ex-offenders are among the themes identified with action plans to be achieved by 2000 years end.

PROGRAM IN BRIEF

Community Conferencing Project

John Howard Society of Calgary

The Calgary John Howard Society, in conjunction with the City of Calgary Youth Probation Services, Mennonite Central Committee; Calgary Police Service, Calgary Board of Education and Calgary Family Services, has embarked on a Community Conferencing Project.

The Project has 3 components: court, schools and residential/treatment. The Court component has been in operation since April 1998, with the aim of providing alternative sentencing for young offenders who are prepared to take responsibility for their actions. The Residential/Treatment component is currently under development.

The School component is a 1-year pilot project that will begin operation in 4 to 5 Calgary area schools in September, 1999. The aims of this component are to decrease suspensions and

Community Conferencing Project cont'd

expulsions in participating junior-high school, decrease the incidence of criminal charges, and reconcile harmful incidences as soon as possible.

Community Conferencing recognizes the need for intervention to reconcile conflicts in a timely and effective manner. It incorporates a restorative justice model that recognizes that crime is a violation of people and is a community responsibility. Harm must be repaired and communities restored to an environment of safety. The integral members to the resolution of conflict include the victims, offenders and the community.

The key to community conferencing is to hold young people accountable for their actions and to make right any harm caused. Victims are involved in setting appropriate consequences and young people are provided with the opportunity to see the impact of their actions on others, with the hope that this will create understanding and prevent the young person from committing that type of crime in the future.

The Community Conferencing Project is similar to the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP) that has been in operation for almost 15 years. The two programs are based on the same principles, but the conferencing model involves the victim, the offender, and the family and supports of the offender. Every person affected by the crime has the

opportunity to be involved in the conference.



The Calgary Police Service has used similar methods in elementary and junior-high schools since early 1998. Over 100 informal conferences have been completed and anecdotal data suggests that none of the young people who have participated in the conferences have been charged with subsequent offences. The Community Conferencing Project partnership was formed because the Calgary Police Service was not equipped to deal with the organization and facilitation of formal conferences. The creation of the Community Conferencing Project will ensure that conferences will be more in-depth, and will be perceived as more neutral when not delivered solely by the Calgary Police Service. Within a few months volunteers, following a mentorship program with one of the current facilitators, will facilitate conferences.

CONTACT US

The John Howard Society of Alberta "Reporter" is distributed free of charge to a wide audience of citizens, educators, agencies and criminal justice system staff. Our goal is to provide information and commentary on timely criminal justice issues. We welcome and encourage your feedback on the "Reporter."

The John Howard Society of Alberta is an agency composed of citizens in Alberta who are interested in criminal justice reform and preventing crime and its control is as much the responsibility of the community as it is of government.

We gratefully accept donations to help offset the costs of our efforts in criminal justice reform and crime prevention. Donations are income tax deductible.

To provide feedback, obtain information or make a donation, please contact us at:

The John Howard Society of Alberta
 2nd floor, 10523 - 100 Avenue
 Edmonton, Alberta T5J 0A8
 Phone: (780) 423 - 4878
 Fax: (780) 425 - 0008
 E-mail: info@johnhoward.ab.ca

Visit our website at: www.johnhoward.ab.ca
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