

1

Injection Drug Use and HIV/AIDS

Injection Drug Use and HIV/AIDS: The Facts

*This info sheet reviews what is known about
HIV/AIDS and injection drug use in Canada.*

This is one of a series of 11 info sheets on injection drug use
and HIV/AIDS: legal and ethical issues.

1. Injection Drug Use and HIV/AIDS: The Facts
2. The Current Legal Status of Drugs
3. Drug Use & Provision of Health & Social Services
4. Treatment
5. Prescription of Opiates & Controlled Substances
6. Drug Users & Studies of HIV/AIDS & Illegal Drugs
7. Information about the Use & Effects of Drugs
8. Needle Exchange Programs
9. Methadone Maintenance Treatment
10. An Obligation to Act
11. Essential Resources

The Urgency of the Situation

Canada is in the midst of a public health crisis concerning HIV/AIDS and injection drug use. The spread of HIV (and other infections such as hepatitis C) among injection drug users in Canada merits serious and immediate attention.

- The number of HIV infections attributable to injection drug use has been climbing steadily. *By 1996, half of the estimated new HIV infections were among injection drug users.*
- There have been several studies documenting a rise in the prevalence and incidence of HIV among injection drug users in the larger cities of Canada, but *a rise in the number of injection drug users with HIV infection has also been observed outside major urban areas.*
- Given the geographic mobility of injection drug users and their social and sexual interaction with non-users, the dual problem of injection drug use and HIV infection is one that *ultimately affects all of Canadian society.*

Studies undertaken in different parts of Canada illustrate the urgency of the problem:

- HIV prevalence among injection drug users in *Montréal* increased from approximately five percent prior to 1988 to 19.5 percent in 1997;
- in *Vancouver*, HIV prevalence among injection drug users increased from about four percent in 1992-93 to 23 percent in 1996-97;
- HIV prevalence among injection drug users in *Toronto* increased from 4.8 percent in 1992-93 to 8.6 percent in 1997-98;
- in *Ottawa*, a 1992-93 study of injection drug users found an HIV prevalence of 10.3 percent among persons who attended needle exchange programs; a 1996-97 study showed that prevalence had increased to 20 percent;
- data from needle exchange programs in *Québec City* and smaller cities in Québec indicate that HIV prevalence among injection drug users is 9.0 percent in Québec City and as high as 9.6 percent in some semi-urban areas;
- similar findings were documented in the *1999 Winnipeg Injection Drug Epidemiology Study*, which showed that in Manitoba injection drug use is an increasingly important risk factor for HIV and that approximately one in every three new diagnoses is now among injection drug users.

Risk Behaviours

Drug injection and sexual risk behaviours among injection drug users are prevalent.

- The sharing of needles is a very efficient mode of transmission of HIV (and other infections), and is relatively common among injection drug users. Sharing of other injection drug equipment such as spoons/cookers, filters, and water is also associated with HIV transmission.
- A shift from heroin use to increasing use of cocaine may be a significant factor in the escalation of HIV prevalence and incidence. Cocaine users typically have a high injection rate; they may inject as much as twenty times a day. Rates of injectable cocaine use are especially high in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montréal, but cocaine use is also an emerging problem in other cities, including Calgary, Winnipeg, and Halifax.
- Sexual risk behaviours are also prevalent. Many injection drug users are involved in unprotected commercial sex, and condom use with regular and casual partners is low.

The Populations Most Affected

The dual problem of injection drug use and HIV infection affects all of Canadian society. However, some populations are particularly affected.

Women injection drug users in Canada are at high risk of HIV infection. For women, the proportion of AIDS cases attributed to injection drug use increased from 0.5 percent during the period before 1989 to 25.8 percent during 1994-98. For men, the increase over this same time period has also been pronounced, but less dramatic: from 0.8 percent to 7.6 percent.

Injection drug use is a severe problem among *street youth*: for example, one-third of a sample of Montréal street youth had injected drugs in the previous six months.

Injection drug use is also a problem among *prisoners*. Estimates of HIV prevalence among prisoners vary from one to four percent in men and from one to ten percent in women, and in both groups infection is strongly associated with a history of injection drug use. Once in prison, many continue injecting. For example:

- In a federal prison in British Columbia, 67 percent of inmates responding to one survey reported injection drug use either in prison or outside, with 17 percent reporting drug use *only in prison*.
- In a 1995 inmate survey conducted by the Correctional Service of Canada, 11 percent of 4285 federal inmates self-reported having injected since arriving in their current institution.

Finally, existing data clearly indicate that *Aboriginal people* are overrepresented in groups most vulnerable to HIV, such as sex-trade workers and prisoners. In particular, they are overrepresented among inner-city injection drug use communities, including those using needle exchange programs and counseling/referral sites.

Additional Reading

Bureau of HIV/AIDS STD and TB Update Series, Laboratory Centre for Disease Control. *HIV/AIDS Among Injection Drug Users in Canada*. Ottawa: Health Canada HIV/AIDS Epi Update, May 1999. More details about the HIV/AIDS epidemic among injection drug users in Canada. Contains numerous references and is regularly updated. For more info: tel: 613 954-5169; fax: 613 954-5414.

Bureau of HIV/AIDS, STD and TB Update Series, Laboratory Centre for Disease Control. *Risk Behaviours Among Injection Drug Users in Canada*. Ottawa: Health Canada HIV/AIDS Epi Update, May 1999. More details about the drug injection and sexual risk behaviours among injection drug users in Canada, with many references. More info at the numbers above.

HIV/AIDS in Prisons – Info Sheet 2: High-Risk Behaviours behind Bars. Montréal: Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, 1999. One of a series of 13 info sheets. All you need to know about risk behaviours behind bars. Available at <www.aidslaw.ca/elements/factpris-e/e-pfacttofc.htm> or through the Canadian HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse (tel: 613 725-3434; email: aids/sida@cpha.ca).

The information in this series of info sheets is taken from *Injection Drug Use and HIV/AIDS: Legal and Ethical Issues*, prepared by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network. Copies of the paper and info sheets are available on the Network website at www.aidslaw.ca and through the Canadian HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse (tel: 613 725-3434, email: aids/sida@cpha.ca). Reproduction of the info sheet is encouraged, but copies may not be sold, and the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network must be cited as the source of this information. For further information, contact the Network (tel: 514 397-6828; fax: 514 397-8570; email: info@aidslaw.ca). **Ce feuillet d'information est également disponible en français.**

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