

Needle and syringe programs belong in Canadian prisons: report

By John Bonnar
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Providing access to sterile injecting equipment to prisoners would reduce the risks of harm associated with injection drug use, including the transmission of HIV and hepatitis C virus (HCV), according to a report released Thursday by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network.

The report said that harm reduction measures aimed at preventing HIV and HCV transmission in prisons are neither new nor groundbreaking in Canada. "Prison systems have implemented, to varying degrees, forms of harm reduction such as condoms, bleach and methadone maintenance treatment," said the authors.

"However, as of September 2008, no Canadian jurisdiction had established a prison-based needle and syringe program (PNSP), despite significant evidence that PNSPs reduce risk behaviours associated with HIV and HCV transmission, result in other health benefits for prisoners, do not pose health and safety risks to prisoners or prison staff, and do not increase drug use."

"Implementing needle and syringe programs in federal prisons would ensure that the same access provided to people outside prisons is provided to those in custody," said Anne Marie DiCenso, Executive Director of Prisoners' HIV/AIDS Support Action Network (PASAN). "Community groups across the country that are working to make prisons healthier and safer, including by preventing the spread of HIV and HCV, see the on-going need for such programs. The lack of such programs is a major contributing factor to the extremely high rates of HIV and HCV in Canadian prisons."

Senior Policy Analyst Sandra Chu, the lead author of *Clean Switch: The Case for Prison Needle and Syringe Programs in Canada*, said that PNSPs "have operated successfully in over 60 prisons in at least 11 countries around the world since 1992. Evidence shows no negative consequences such as an increase in drug use or injecting, and no reports of syringes used as weapons in any institution with a PNSP."

Chu added: "Harm reduction measures aimed at preventing HIV transmission in prisons are not new in Canada and the federal government has acknowledged publicly the value of needle exchange programs that have operated for more than 20 years in communities across Canada. But for some reason it has refused so far to let these services operate in prisons, which is at odds with good public health practice and human rights."