

Harm Reduction: Questions and Answers

What is Harm Reduction?

Harm Reduction focuses on reducing the harms related to drug use rather than eliminating drug use itself. Harm Reduction aims to: prevent the spread of infections including HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis and other blood-borne infections; reduce the risk of overdose and other drug-related fatalities; and lessen the negative effects drug use may have on individuals and communities including poverty and crime.

Harm Reduction approaches drug use from a realistic and pragmatic public health perspective and focuses on feasible goals. Further, by preventing the spread of blood-borne infection among IDUs, Harm Reduction helps to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS among the entire population.

Key Harm Reduction strategies include:

- Needle and Syringe Exchange Programs (NSPs)
Providing clean needles and syringes in exchange for used injecting equipment.
- Substitution Treatment (opioid maintenance treatment)
Using a synthetic drug, usually methadone or buprenorphine, to treat patients who are dependent on “street” opioids (like heroin and morphine). Substitution treatment keeps patients from going into withdrawal, prevents cravings for street opioids, and blocks the effect of street opioids. Methadone works like morphine or heroin but is longer-lasting. It is not associated with euphoria (getting high) and is ingested orally rather than injected.
- Counseling and Education
Person-to-person counseling or printed educational materials can help drug users to understand their own behaviors and learn ways to reduce their risk when using drugs. Printed materials do not promote drug use but do teach safer injecting techniques such as sterilization, and instruct on condom use.
- Referrals for Health care
Drug users often do not seek health care because they fear legal consequences or are separated from mainstream society. Harm Reduction urges drug users to seek adequate care, and urges health care providers to provide adequate and comprehensive care without discrimination or judgment.
- Safer Injecting Rooms
Sterile, monitored locations for injecting so that drug users need not inject on the street or alone (risking overdose). Also teach safer injecting techniques and thus prevent physical harms such as abscesses.

- Depenalization of drug-related offenses
Lessening the severity of punishments for drug possession for personal use.

Why do we need Harm Reduction?

Drug use is widespread. The United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention estimates that 185 million people each year consume illicit (“street”) drugs.¹

Injection drug use is the main method of spreading HIV in Central & Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

According to the World Health Organization, successful programs to prevent illicit drug use **do not exist**.² High quality and accessible treatment services for drug users is a shared and compatible goal, but is often complicated, costly and time-consuming, and has a low rate of success. Thus, for those who do not want to quit, cannot quit, or relapse into drug use, Harm Reduction can effectively prevent HIV and other drug-related harms. Harm Reduction programs often provide the first or only link that drug users have to the health and social care system thereby opening doors to a broader range of needed treatment services.

Does Harm Reduction Work?

YES. Substantial evidence shows that Harm Reduction programs help to prevent the spread of HIV and delay or avoid opportunistic infections related to AIDS.³

This evidence comes from scientific, systematic studies in many different nations and populations. Doctors, social scientists, drug control experts and government bodies have all examined Harm Reduction programs, and their effectiveness is widely and consistently reported.

Harm Reduction has worked regardless of cultural and economic differences between regions, in areas as diverse as the USA, Sweden, Hong Kong, Australia and Thailand.^{4,5}

Harm Reduction programs like needle and syringe exchange programs, substitution treatment and safer injecting rooms also help outreach workers connect with drug users, and can help drug users to:^{6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13}

- Stop injecting
- Stop sharing injecting equipment
- Enter and stay enrolled in rehabilitation programs
- Learn about and practice safer sex
- Reduce the risk of drug overdoses

Harm Reduction programs are also associated with lower levels of crime and public drug use in surrounding areas.¹⁴

Over 30 years' worth of criminological research shows that depenalization does not increase drug use, and harsh penalties do not prevent illicit drug use.^{15,16,17,18,19,20}

Is Harm Reduction legal?

NSPs are legal and operating in almost every country in Central and Eastern Europe/former Soviet Union. Substitution treatment is legal and operating in Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine. Recently, Russia considerably lessened penalties for personal drug possession.

How much do Harm Reduction programs cost?

Harm Reduction programs are cost-effective from a human and economic standpoint.

Harm Reduction programs preserve and improve people's lives. Quality of individual and community life is the top priority for successful interventions and policies. Harm Reduction also calls for the non-judgmental, non-coercive provision of services and resources to people who use drugs; ensures that drug users have a real voice in the creation of programs and policies designed to serve them; affirms drugs users themselves as the primary agents of reducing the harms of their drug use; and seeks to empower users to share information and support each other in strategies which meet their actual conditions of use.

Economically Harm Reduction programs are less expensive than the medical care, drug treatment, and legal fees that would be necessary without them. Harm reduction programs have also been proven to reduce crime, thus making communities safer and reducing the amount spent on courts and prisons.

Thus, both human and economic benefits support Harm Reduction. International studies by economists and experts show that by investing in Harm Reduction programs, communities and governments end up saving money.^{21,22,23,24,25}

Does Harm Reduction encourage drug use?

No. Harm Reduction programs do not:

- Increase drug use^{26,27,28}
- Negatively impact drug treatment^{29,30,31,32,33,34}
- Increase rates of injecting equipment (such as needles, syringes) in the street^{35,36,37,38,39}

In areas with less severe penalties for drug possession there are no higher rates of drug use than in other areas.^{40,41} Instead, drug users can safely seek help, find jobs and remain integrated in society. Thus, Harm Reduction programs have the side-benefit of not only preventing disease but also improving quality of life.

Is there International support for Harm Reduction?

Yes. International bodies that specialize in both health and drug control encourage Harm Reduction.

The United Nations Office on Drug Control recommends care for drug users that includes “outreach services, HIV/AIDS education, access to clean needles and syringes, condoms, drug dependency treatment (including substitution treatment and, where appropriate, rehabilitation), voluntary HIV testing/counseling, and psychosocial support.”

The UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS declaration states that effective prevention, care and treatment strategies require non-discriminatory access to “vaccines, condoms, microbicides, lubricants, sterile injecting equipment, drugs, including antiretroviral therapy, diagnostics and related technologies, as well as increased research and development.” (paragraph 23)

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