



HOMELESSNESS A KEY FACTOR IN PUBLIC DRUG USE

BACKGROUND & METHOD

- It's common in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside for drug users to inject illegal drugs in public places, with alarming consequences. People who inject drugs in unhygienic public places tend to rush their injections and are more likely to develop abscesses and endocarditis, to overdose, and to share needles.
- It also goes without saying that members of the public are understandably disturbed by the sight of people openly injecting drugs and by the associated public disorder.
- By learning more about the people who inject drugs in public, it may be possible to develop better policy responses that both support public health objectives and minimize the occurrence of public drug use.
- From December 2003 to November 2005, researchers surveyed 620 people who said they had recently injected drugs.

FINDINGS

- Of the 620 individuals surveyed, 142 (23%) said they 'usually' or 'always' injected their drugs in public.
- There were a number of important differences between the people who frequently injected in public and those who injected in public less often.
- Primarily, frequent public injectors were almost seven times more likely to be homeless. They were also more likely to use crack cocaine daily and to inject heroin daily.
- In addition, frequent public injectors were half as likely to cook and filter their drugs before injecting—greatly increasing their risk of developing infections and abscesses.

QUICK FACT

*PEOPLE WHO FREQUENTLY
INJECTED DRUGS IN PUBLIC WERE
ALMOST SEVEN TIMES MORE
LIKELY TO BE HOMELESS.*

IMPLICATIONS

- It appears that people who frequently inject drugs in public places do so because they have nowhere else to go. As a result, they face additional health risks that could be avoided.
- The study further shows that frequent public injectors are people suffering from the most extreme forms of addiction.
- To reduce health risks and cut down on the occurrence of public drug use, the most promising policy approach therefore would be to provide supportive housing for individuals with high intensity addictions.
- Improving access to medically supervised injection facilities could also reduce public injecting.

DeBeck K, Small W, Wood E, Li K, Montaner J, Kerr T. **Public injecting among a cohort of injection drug users in Vancouver, Canada.** *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 2009; 63(1): 81-86.

