“WE NEED SOMEWHERE TO SMOKE CRACK”: STUDY OF AN UNSANCTIONED SAFER SMOKING ROOM IN VANCOUVER, CANADA

BACKGROUND & METHOD

- Between January 2011 and December 2013, the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), a drug user-led organization, operated a makeshift safer smoking room in a washroom in its facility in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood.
- This safer smoking room accommodated the smoking of pre-obtained crack cocaine in accordance with a harm reduction policy which prohibited crack pipe sharing.
- This study tried to understand crack smoking within the DTES, and to explore how this safer smoking room influenced crack smoking practices and public crack smoking.
- In-depth interviews were conducted with 24 people who smoked crack within the safer smoking room, and 50 hours of observation at the facility were completed over a four-month period.

FINDINGS

- Smoking crack in unregulated settings in the DTES such as alleyways increased exposure to drug scene violence and police.
- Crack pipe-sharing was common in the DTES due to social norms which shape crack pipe-sharing.
- People primarily accessed the safer smoking room in order to minimize their exposure to drug scene violence and police.
- The safer smoking room reduced crack pipe-sharing through access to a regulated drug use setting in which people had access to crack smoking supplies and sharing was not permitted.

IMPLICATIONS

- Safer smoking rooms demonstrate potential to reduce the health and social harms associated with crack smoking, including crack pipe sharing and public crack smoking.
- There is an urgent need to implement safer smoking rooms in settings with high levels of crack smoking, and to deliver these interventions alongside expanded crack pipe distribution programs.