“Under the Skin”: Effective advocacy for HIV prevention in Canadian prisons

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The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (www.aidslaw.ca) promotes the human rights of people living with and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, in Canada and internationally, through research, legal and policy analysis, education, and community mobilization. The Legal Network is Canada’s leading advocacy organization working on the legal and human rights issues raised by HIV/AIDS.
Background

- In Canada, HIV and HCV prevalence in prison populations is **10 and 30 times higher** than in population as a whole.

- A 2007 survey revealed that **16 percent of men** and **15 percent of women** in federal prisons reported having injected drugs in the previous six months in prison. Of those, approximately **1/2 used someone else’s used needle** and approximately **1/3 shared a needle with someone with HIV, HCV or unknown infection status**.

- Because of the scarcity of needles and syringes in prison, people who inject drugs in prison are **more likely to share** injecting equipment than people in the community.
Background

In Canadian federal prisons, people already have access to:

- condoms, dental dams, lubricant
- bleach
- methadone maintenance treatment

But no prison-based needle and syringe program (PNSP)
Background

As of April 2010, PNSPs have been introduced in over 60 prisons in at least eleven countries:

- Switzerland
- Spain
- Moldova
- Portugal
- Kyrgyzstan
- Tajikistan
- Germany
- Luxembourg
- Iran
- Romania
- Armenia
Background

Evaluations of PNSPs have revealed:

- PNSPs are feasible in a wide range of prison settings, and have effectively employed different methods of needle distribution;
- Providing clean needles and syringes is readily accepted by people who inject drugs in prisons;
- An improvement in the health of incarcerated people;
- Where evaluation included blood testing, no new cases of HIV or HCV and significant reduction of syringe sharing;
- No increase in drug use or injecting, and
- Needles are not used as weapons.
Approach

• Interviewed people from across the country to learn more about their experiences in prison, including their reasons for injecting, their use of needles and make-shift implements and the sharing of these materials.

• Between 2008 and 2009, 50 interviews were conducted documenting the personal experiences of people who had injected drugs in prison. Interviews were conducted in person and over the phone in eight Canadian provinces.

• Everyone given choice of providing a signed affidavit or an unsigned, unsworn testimonial.
Key Findings: childhood environment

“My parents passed away when I was 9 years old. I don’t remember much of my childhood because I was in and out of over 100 foster homes. I was not a happy child. My foster parents treated me like crap and verbally and physically abused me.”

“When I was 11 years old, I got high for the first time on marijuana. That same year, I tried crack cocaine and overdosed on Valium. There was a lot of Valium in my grandma’s house, and one day, I decided to try what everybody else was doing, so I swallowed an entire bottle of pills .... I was in and out of trouble after that, stealing cars, doing all kinds of drugs .... When I was about 13, I smoked heroin for the first time.”
“When I was 21 years old, I sold 20 dollars worth of crack cocaine to an undercover cop and I got 26 months.”

“Before prison, I was mostly injecting heroin. I was doing heroin daily and I believe I was addicted. I was robbing banks to support my heroin addiction and that is how I came to be incarcerated.”
“You name the drug and it was inside the prisons. There were lots of opiates: morphine, Dilaudids, heroin. There was speed, marijuana, hash and acid.”

“They used old needles that had been used before. …. I’ve also seen inmates use needles for people with allergies to bee stings and for diabetics. I’ve also seen people use needles fashioned from pens. I’ve even seen people cut a hole into their vein, and blow drugs into their vein through a pen.”

“…we would use Bic pens to inject drugs. This is very hard on your veins. I have horrible scars on my arms as a result. At the time, we didn’t think about HIV or hepatitis. We would share these home-made needles, which were bloody after each use, but we didn’t think about infection.”
“I never wanted to share a needle; I didn’t choose to share. But when you need to get a hit, and don’t have a rig, you end up sharing. I would estimate that about 80% of the time that I was injecting, I was sharing…. I can’t think of a heroin addict that I knew in jail who did not share a needle at some point.”

“I would tell people I had HIV when we were sharing needles, but they didn’t care. They used the needle anyway.”

“For about three years, ten prisoners, including myself, shared a 3CC needle and I think we all became infected with hepatitis C as a result.”

“I was diagnosed with HIV and hepatitis C in 1999 [in prison]…. I am 100 percent sure I got infected from sharing used needles, because I didn’t have sex inside and I didn’t get tattoos. I didn’t do anything else that would put me at risk.”
Key Findings: support for PNSPs

“It would be good to see a prison-based needle exchange in place, because when guys come back out to the real world, you don’t want to saddle them with a whole new set of problems like HIV or hepatitis C. We already have so many challenges, and a disease on top of that would really make things more difficult. For most people who are drug addicts, that is a bad place to be in, because it would just lead to hiding from life and using drugs again.”

“There must be anonymity for a prison-based needle and syringe program to work. Otherwise, information about people’s injection will go onto their security files. There can be no written record of who uses the program.”
Impact on policy and practice

Conclusion?

Interviewees merely confirm research studies:
• drug addiction in prison
• drugs are readily available in prison
• injection drug use is prevalent in prison
• people resort to sharing used needles
• increasing HIV/HCV infections

A compilation of excerpts from the interviews was published in February 2009 and disseminated to correctional officials, Ministers of Health and Public Safety, and parliamentarians working on health and corrections.

Ongoing advocacy for introduction of PNSPs in Canadian federal prisons.
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