

“Under the Skin”: a people’s case for prison needle and syringe programs

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1 Issues

In Canada, people incarcerated in federal prisons are infected with HIV and hepatitis C virus (HCV) at rates that are at least 15 and 39 times higher, respectively, than those in the population as a whole, in part because they have inadequate access to HIV prevention tools such as sterile needles and syringes. Prison-based needle and syringe programs (PNSPs) are prohibited in Canadian prisons, despite considerable evidence from prisons around the world supporting their effectiveness.



“I’ve seen a needle so used that when I injected with it, it would rip my skin off. I knew I could get HIV and hepatitis C from sharing a needle, but I didn’t think about that because I wanted to get high. After a while, I got addicted to the needle itself.”

2 Description

While much of the public health and human rights evidence supporting the implementation of PNSPs has been gathered, the voices of those who have been placed most at risk of HIV and HCV infection have been missing. The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network sought to bridge that gap by interviewing people from across Canada to learn more about their experiences in federal prison, including their reasons for injecting, their use of needles and make-shift implements and the sharing of these materials. Released in February 2010, *Under the Skin: A People’s Case for Prison Needle and Syringe Programs* is a compilation of excerpts from those interviews. The hope is that hearing first-hand from people in prison will strengthen the case for change, which governments continue to ignore even as a growing body of evidence highlights the need.



3 Lessons learned

Among the individuals interviewed, over half indicated they had been incarcerated for a drug-related offence, and for women, the proportion—two-thirds—was even higher. Interviewees described persistent injection drug use in federal prisons, limited access to sterile needles and widespread sharing of used needles. Many described how the failure to provide sterile needles while they were injecting drugs in prison placed their health at risk, and some reported having become infected with HCV and/or HIV as a result of sharing used needles in prison. Overwhelmingly, interviewees supported PNSPs.



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► www.aidslaw.ca/undertheskin

4 Next steps

Building public support for PNSPs is an important strategy to put pressure on an intransigent government. By underscoring the harms experienced firsthand by people in prison, the objective is to raise the profile of PNSPs, highlight the need for their implementation and mobilize communities into advocating for PNSPs in Canadian prisons.

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