

Election 2008

Vote for action on AIDS

At issue: The War on Drugs

The spread of HIV and hepatitis C virus (HCV) is a serious public health crisis in Canada, and unsafe drug use is a key factor driving the epidemic.

Studies continue to show the benefits of health services that help prevent disease and death, including harm reduction programs like needle exchanges and supervised injection sites — initiatives that protect the health of people who use drugs as well as the public at large.

The need

Drug addiction and drug use are complex problems. Simplistic, moralistic “solutions” don’t work.

But pragmatic steps to prevent deaths from overdose and the spread of diseases such as HIV and HCV from sharing needles are absolutely possible.

More and better programs are needed to help prevent and treat addiction — and they need be complemented by harm reduction services.

The situation

For years, the federal government strategy for dealing with drugs has included harm reduction. But in 2007, the federal government launched a new National Anti-Drug Strategy that omits any harm reduction approach.

As part of that strategy, the federal government introduced legislation to “get tough on crime” by creating mandatory prison sentences for some drug offences. Meanwhile, the government has barred key harm reduction programs from prisons, despite evidence that shows they are urgently needed to reduce the risk of HIV and HCV spreading through needles shared when injecting drugs.

Countries around the world have spent enormous amounts of money trying to stop drugs from entering prisons — but they still get in. Just weeks ago, the federal government announced more money (\$120 million) to “sniff out” drugs from prisons with dogs and detectors.

Meanwhile, key health services that have been proven to work in reducing the risk of HIV and HCV spreading in prisons have been cancelled or rejected.

Canada still does not have needle exchange programs in prisons, ignoring a decade’s worth of proven success in prisons in other countries. And the government has cancelled a ground-breaking “safer tattooing” pilot project that an internal evaluation found to be beneficial and cost-effective.

The debate

The facts are clear. Even federal prison and public health officials acknowledge that “prisons house the highest proportion of people with substance abuse problems in Canada” and that drugs get into them despite efforts to block them.

Some claim mandatory prison sentences only target “drug dealers”, but any distinction between drug dealers and drug users is artificial. Harsh minimum sentences are mandated for dealing in any quantity of an illegal drug — so people with addictions involved in small-scale, street-level activity, who are most easily targeted for arrest, bear the brunt of such penalties.

Research by Justice Canada found the evidence doesn’t support having mandatory minimum prison sentences for drug offences. Why? Because no proof exists that they reduce drug use or drug-related crime. Even the former Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court has said that mandatory sentences as a means of “getting tough on drug criminals” makes for good politics, but is bad policy.

In fact, evidence indicates they make matters worse. In the U.S., mandatory sentencing policies have led to record rates of imprisonment for non-violent drug users, with all the added costs of a growing prison population.

Throwing more people with addictions in jail also leads to higher levels of infection with blood-borne diseases such as HIV and HCV. In Canada, the rate of HIV infection is 10 times higher in prisons than in the population as a whole; HCV infection is 20 times higher. A recent study found the number of known HIV cases in Canadian prisons has risen by 35 percent in the last

five years. A prison sentence shouldn’t mean getting sentenced to infection with disease.

Opponents of needle exchange programs in prisons suggest they encourage drug use by prisoners. But repeated evaluations of prison syringe programs in other countries have shown this is not the case. Needle exchange programs are endorsed by the Public Health Agency of Canada, the World Health Organization and Canadian medical professionals as making prisons safer for prisoners and staff alike by reducing the spread of diseases.

The decision you need to make

This election, cast your vote for a federal government that will:

- put in place sensible policies and programs that are based on solid scientific evidence, sound public health principles, and respect for human rights;
- recognize drug treatment as more cost-effective than law enforcement;
- reverse course on the proposed law for harsher drug penalties;
- support measures to curb the spread of infectious disease in prisons; and
- put public money into protecting and promoting health through addiction treatment and harm reduction services, including in prisons.

For more information

www.aidslaw.ca/election2008
www.aidslaw.ca/drugpolicy