Should Proposed Safe Injection Sites Open Their Doors to Crack Users?

Some harm reduction advocates in Philadelphia say yes.

March 6, 2018 By Casey Halter

As several cities lay down plans to open safe injection sites (spaces where injection drug users can inject safely), some advocates are pushing for the facilities to also open their doors to people who smoke crack. A recent op-ed in the Philadelphia Inquirer explains why.

According to the article, harm reduction advocates in Canada have already begun distributing safer crack-smoking kits in these facilities. Whereas the kits provided to injection drug users at safe injection sites include clean needles and other injection, these kits are packed with Pyrex crack pipes, metal screens and mouthpieces. They also include lip balm, alcohol swabs, lighters, chewing gum and condoms. The goal is to help cut back on the risk of HIV and hepatitis C virus infection, diseases often transmitted via shared drug paraphernalia.

Advocates argue that because individuals who smoke crack often get sores, burns and cuts on their lips and inside their mouths, they're also at an increased risk of blood-borne infections and should be treated the way heroin users will be at safe injection facilities. They also argue that the distribution of these kits is often the only opportunity community outreach workers have to connect these at-risk individuals to social, harm reduction and health care services.

However, whether Philadelphia will allow individuals to smoke or inhale drugs in its proposed safe injection sites (which could open as soon as this year) remains unclear. A February 14 commentary written by Philadelphia's mayor and district attorney seemed to suggest the site would allow only the use of intravenous drugs. However, during an earlier meeting hosted by the city's Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services, the agency's deputy commissioner said individuals who smoked crack would be welcome.

Those who support the initiative argue that allowing people to use only certain illicit substances and not others could qualify as discrimination or even racism, considering Black Americans are nine times more likely than whites to be dependent on cocaine (including crack).

The op-ed also argues that opening up a safe space for drug users of all kinds would save the lives of individuals of all complexions.

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