



Study Encourages Expansion of Needle Exchange Programs in Prisons

Harm reduction programs in Canadian prisons have reduced hepatitis C cases and lowered health care costs.

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In 2024, Canada implemented its [2024-2030 Sexually Transmitted and Blood-Borne Infection Action Plan](#) to carry out [harm reduction](#) programs and expand Prison Needle Exchange Programs (PNEPs).

Now a study published in the [Canadian Medical Association Journal](#) (CMAJ) found that expanding the program to 50% of people in all federal prisons who inject drugs over the next five years (to 2030) would prevent 15% of new [hepatitis C](#) (HCV) cases and 8% of injection-related infections, according to a [University of Minnesota news release](#).

HCV is a blood-borne virus [most easily transmitted through](#) direct blood-to-blood contact. People who inject drugs and share needles, syringes and other paraphernalia are at the highest risk for HCV. Even people who experimented with drugs one time many years ago may unknowingly carry the virus.

“[Needle exchange](#) programs are evidence-based strategies that prevent transmission of blood-borne viruses, reduce injection-related infections, improve access to medical care and facilitate entry into substance dependence programs for people who inject drugs,” study coauthor Farah Houdroge, PhD, wrote.

Additionally, researchers developed a model that showed that every dollar spent on PNEPs saves an estimated two dollars in treatment costs for HCV and injection-related infections.

“This study adds to the growing body of evidence supporting PNEPs as effective harm reduction strategies that are also cost-saving. Given that they show both health and economic benefits, PNEPs should be a priority not just in Canada but globally,” the authors wrote.

In a separate study [published in CMAJ](#), researchers found that as many as one in three federal prison inmates in Canada reported using drugs in the previous six months while incarcerated.

Researchers encourage the implementation of [prison](#)-based programs that could help mitigate the harms of substance use by inmates throughout Canada.

“Without systematic expansion of and increased access to such programs, prisoners in Canada will remain at unnecessarily high risk of ill health and death from the adverse consequences of substance use,” the study authors wrote.

In related news, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that the [number of lives lost due to viral hepatitis is on the rise](#).

Indeed, data from 187 countries show that the estimated number of deaths from viral hepatitis increased from about 1.1 million in 2019 to 1.3 million in 2022. Of these, 83% were caused by hepatitis B and 17% by hepatitis C. Every day, 3,500 people die around the world due to hepatitis B and C infections.

“This report paints a troubling picture: Despite progress globally in preventing hepatitis infections, deaths are rising because far too few people with hepatitis are being diagnosed and treated,” said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, PhD.

To read more, click [#Harm Reduction](#). There, you’ll find headlines such as “[Syringe Exchange Fears Hobble Fight Against West Virginia HIV Outbreak](#),” “[People in Prisons Need Access to HIV Prevention and Harm Reduction, Urges UNAIDS](#)” and “[Fentanyl Use Tied to Higher Risk for Hepatitis C](#).”