

# HARM REDUCTION IN POLICING: RESPONDING TO PERSONS UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF ILLICIT DRUGS

by Sgt. Rick Parent & Dr. Margaret Kalacska

The Public Health Agency of Canada estimates between 75,000 and 125,000 injection drug users are addicted to drugs that include heroin, cocaine or amphetamines. Over fifteen thousand drug users are estimated to reside in the Greater Vancouver area; 69% have reported sharing needles. The Greater Vancouver region, with special consideration for the Downtown Vancouver Eastside, Canada's poorest neighbourhood and the epicentre for injection drug use (IDU), has a high rate not only of illicit drug use but also illicit drug possession and trafficking. It is estimated that nearly half of Vancouver's IDUs (4,700 IDUs and 1,000 street youth) reside in this area covering approximately ten city blocks. On a day-to-day basis, police officers routinely interact with individuals that are under the influence of illicit drugs placing themselves at risk not only of potential violent confrontation but also of inadvertently exposing themselves to communicable diseases.

The following table illustrates statistics for Vancouver proper for drug related incidents from 2004 – 2006.

**Table 1: Total drug related offenses in Vancouver 2004 – 2006**  
(Source: Statistics Canada)

Year	Total drug related incidents	Total Drugs – Rate per 100,000 population
2004	12,282	575.8
2005	12,178	563.9
2006	12,063	553.0

In addition to the City of Vancouver, the surrounding area of Vancouver, known as the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) has a population of roughly 2 million. Injection drug use is wide spread and occurs throughout the GVRD and within British Columbia's second largest urban population, the Great Victoria Region (GVR).

Injection drug use is now the main route of transmission of HIV in Canada. Rates of HIV and hepatitis C (HCV) infection among habitual local injection drug users (IDUs) in the Downtown Eastside are among the highest in North America. In addition, studies have indicated a higher incidence of HIV infection among Aboriginal IDUs. This may be due to a lack of culturally appropriate interventions that address the needs of this unique population. Aboriginal youth specifically were found to have a significantly elevated rate of incidence of HIV in the Downtown Eastside (27.8 per ppy) vs non-Aboriginal youth (7.0 per ppy) (Source: BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/Aids).

Some of the major harmful consequences of illicit drug include:

- *Sharing of injection equipment which can lead to the transmission of blood borne diseases such as HIV and Hepatitis*
- *Social costs of widespread drug use*
- *Psychological and emotional costs that may result in suicide*

- *Economic costs of treating people infected with HIV/AIDS*
- *Legal costs of prosecuting and sentencing drug users*
- *Criminalization of drug use leading to the denial of basic health care and other social services*

Injection drug users are also at risk of overdose; the annual BC Coroners Service reports for 2005 and 2004 state 211 and 171 deaths attributed to illicit drugs for the province of BC. Thirty seven percent of the deaths from 2005 were from the Vancouver area.

## Law Enforcement and Harm Reduction Associated with Injection Drug Use

All three levels of policing, operational street-level, mid management and executive management have attempted to engage harm reduction strategies and to minimize the transmission of communicable diseases such as HIV and Hepatitis C among IDUs. The standard approach of contemporary policing in dealing with illicit drug use is by way of law enforcement strategies that serve to reduce the supply of drugs and/or demand for users. Unfortunately, these strategies have proven to have limited impact on habitual IDUs who, while continuing to use and/or sell drugs pose a danger to themselves, the community and front-line police officers.

Canada's Drug Strategy (CDS) includes the aim of "reducing the harm associated with alcohol and other drugs to individuals, families and communities". A new strategy document prepared by the Advisory Committee on Population Health and four federal and provincial committees on substance abuse, AIDS, and corrections and justice stresses that "the misuse of injection drugs is a health and social issue that has and will continue to have significant consequences for individuals, families and communities in Canada. Failure to act now will result in escalating health, social and economic impacts. It is time for all jurisdictions and stakeholders to work together to renew their commitment to reducing the harms associated with injection drug use".

Law enforcement agencies have realized that this "societal problem" cannot be controlled by simply arresting the individuals who traffic or are in possession of injection drugs that include cocaine, heroin, etc. In addition, the rapid spread of HIV and Hepatitis C among IDUs requires that other strategic initiatives in the form of harm reduction must be implemented. Research in other countries has shown that when police advocate harm reduction and are actively involved in reduction strategies, community programs tend to be very effective. However, without police support many of these initiatives will ultimately fail.

British Columbia has been one of the first provinces in Canada to address injection drug use and the City of Vancouver in particular has developed a four-pillar framework to address the problem of drug use in the city. One of the fundamental goals of this framework is the balance of public order

and public health. While there have been some gains with the Vancouver approach there is a need for this initiative to extend beyond the boundaries that have been established. There is a need for a provincially coordinated and enhanced approach in implementing harm reduction programs. Community health programs and law enforcement agencies throughout the province require a strategic focus that acknowledges that addiction requires treatment and criminal behaviour requires law enforcement.

If Canada's Drug Strategy is to be achieved, federal and provincial funding must be directed towards front-line operational policing, empowering individual officers in harm reduction techniques. With increased resources and harm reduction specific training, police officers would be better equipped to meet the multi-faceted challenges associated with illicit drug usage. Street-level policing requires dedicated resources and a comprehensive training program focused upon advocating harm reduction and effective methods of interacting with IDU populations. This would include methods of promoting strategies to enhance the lives of IDUs and prevent further transmission of communicable diseases among IDUs. Educating and empowering police officers in the goals of harm reduction

and the difference between community service and law enforcement will allow them to be not only more effective in combating the problem of injection drug use but also to contribute to the overall safety of the community and front-line policing.

**Rick Parent is a serving police officer and crisis negotiator in the Vancouver area. He is presently the manager of Research and Academic Development at the Justice Institute of British Columbia – Police Academy and the author of several publications and books. For further information visit: [www.theppsc.org/Staff/Parent/Rick.htm](http://www.theppsc.org/Staff/Parent/Rick.htm) Contact via e-mail: [rparent@jibc.ca](mailto:rparent@jibc.ca).**

**Dr. Margaret Kalacska is a former sessional instructor in the School of Criminology at Simon Fraser University and currently an assistant professor in geography at McGill University. She is director of Titan Analysis Ltd. Her major research focus is the application of hyperspectral technology to ecological and forensic problems. For more information: [www.mkalacska.com](http://www.mkalacska.com) Contact email: [mk@titananalysis.com](mailto:mk@titananalysis.com)**

# SUPPORT GOOD ANIMAL CRUELTY LEGISLATION!

Canadians must speak out to stop the passage of ineffective, outdated animal cruelty legislation from being passed in our House of Commons.

Bill S-203 is a private member's bill in the Senate. It has passed the Senate, passed Second Reading in the House and is awaiting debate by the Justice and Human Rights Committee, likely this fall. Bill S-203 makes NO changes to today's archaic and wholly inadequate offences; it will only increase the penalties. Increased penalties are important, but ultimately meaningless when the offences are so problematic that many cases can't even be prosecuted.

## Bill S-203:

- *makes it difficult to prosecute cases of neglect, even when dozens of animals have been starved to death*
- *allows the training of animals for dog fights, cockfights or other types of animal fighting fight other animals*
- *permits killing stray or wild animals for no particular reason*
- *provides extra protection for cattle and other animals and less protection for stray or wild animals*
- *doesn't make it a crime to kill animals brutally or viciously*
- *considers animal cruelty a property offence*
- *doesn't offer specific protection for law enforcement animals*

