

## **The Accessibility of Harm Reduction Services for Street Involved Youth in Victoria B.C**

### **Introduction**

Harm reduction (HR) services aim to provide people who use substances with the knowledge and supplies to protect themselves and those around them from substance use related harms such as overdose and infectious disease transmission, rather than insisting upon abstinence (Paterson & Panessa, 2008; Pauly et al., 2013). Research has indicated that currently available HR services may not be meeting the needs of street involved youth, and that HR services are underutilized by or inaccessible to youth in comparison with adults (Goldman-Hasbun et al., 2017; Marshall et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2015). The current study adds to the body of research regarding the accessibility of HR services for street involved youth.

### **Methods**

Youth between the ages of 13-24 who identified as "street involved" and self-reported the use of illicit substances or drug substitution alternatives in the past 30 days were eligible to participate. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 participants at a local youth drop-in centre. Interview questions centered around youths' experiences with HR services in Victoria B.C., which organizations they access or avoid, experiences of discrimination, barriers to support, and how changes could be made to improve the accessibility of HR services for youth.

### **Results**

#### ***Demographics***

Of the 16 youth who participated, seven identified as female, four as male, one as both two-spirit and transgender, one as transgender, and three as non-binary. Nine youth identified as part of the 2SLGBTQQIA+ community. Eight youth identified as First Nations, four as Métis, three as white, and one as South Asian.

#### ***1. Types of Services Accessed***

Youth reported accessing certain kinds of HR services, such as safer use supplies and Naloxone kits, much more than others, such as safe injection or inhalation sites. Many participants reported being unable to access harm reduction supplies due to unreliable stocks of supplies, as well as the inability for youth to access safe injection and inhalation sites. Youth expressed finding outreach services very supportive and hoped for an increase to the number of people working in these roles. They also desired more substance use counsellors. Youth wished it was easier to access safe supply for those using street-level substances, and wished service providers helped more youth transition preventatively.

#### ***2. Logistical Considerations Related to Accessing Services***

Participants shared that being able to reach out to HR service providers by phone was important to them. Youth desired HR services to be available later at night, more days of the week, or even

24/7. Location was very salient to participants, who reported that the HR services they preferred were near places they already spent their time. Having a place to hang out and relax was seen as valuable, particularly for those feeling sick from withdrawal symptoms. Participants shared that having youth-specific HR services was important for safety and accessibility. However, flexibility of age cut-offs at adult HR services was also seen as essential, to ensure youth are never left to use alone or with old supplies at any time.

### ***3. Cultural Support for Indigenous Youth***

The majority of Indigenous youth who participated shared that integrating cultural supports (such as having Elders onsite, providing access to traditional medicines, etc.) into HR service provision was important to them, but that the organizations they currently access did not provide this.

### ***4. Two-Spirit, Transgender and Non-Binary Youths' Experience***

Most sexual and gender minority youth who were interviewed expressed that they had not experienced discrimination based on their sexual or gender identity when accessing HR services. Discrimination was sometimes experienced from others utilizing the services, but not from staff.

### ***Overarching Themes***

Youth referred to HR organizations as a second home or family, and reported feeling a sense of ownership, belonging, and safety in HR spaces. Positive relationships with staff were described as a primary reason youth sought out certain HR services, whereas negative experiences with staff were a strong deterrent. Participants seemed to experience internalized stigma regarding their own substance use, and attempted to distance themselves from adults who use substances and some organizations they frequent, as a means of protecting their self-concept. Many participants shared that when they did not access formal HR services, they turned to other youth instead. Youth who felt uncomfortable interacting with service providers had friends acquire supplies on their behalf, or went in groups to reduce feelings of anxiety. HR organizations should be especially attuned to the needs of youth who are not as socially connected, as they may not be able to turn to peers for supplemental HR support.

### ***Pathways Forward***

These semi-structured interviews prompted discussions with youth about their identity, and the circumstances which led them to need access to HR services in the first place. Future research could more deeply explore youths' relationships to staff at HR organizations, as well as youths' practice of relying on one another as a form of HR. HR organizations and staff who work with youth are uniquely positioned to make use of this feedback to improve the HR services meant to keep youth safe. It is imperative that youths' experiences and reasons for accessing or avoiding HR services are taken seriously, as they are the ones making decisions about whether to attempt to access HR services or engage in higher risk substance use behaviours instead.