

Harm Reduction (HR) policy and potential effects
Reflections in Healthcare
Lenny Collado
20:831:541:90 ECON FOR PA
Professor Joseph Howe
11.09.2023

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HR offers everyday strategies meant at reducing undesirable costs (human, economic, legal, etc) associated with drug use (NHRC 2023). Greer et al (2020) conducted a study on “peer engagement in 2016–2018 where the authors learned from peer research assistants and [people who use drugs] PWUD that labor equity [for example] was an issue that mattered” to them, that is the authors gained valuable insight into engaging the population being served by hiring them thereby empowering them and assisting their momentum toward holistic betterment. The act of hiring peer workers (people with lived and living experience with drug use and drug adjacent behaviors) for example reverberates tenets of harm reduction as peer work is often sought after by PWUD to combat the broader injustices of high unemployment and mediocre assistance from social welfare programs they face (Greer et al 2020). The authors point to a series of serious issues faced by PWUD including anxiety, alienation, and powerlessness in addition to the more prevalent dangers and barriers already faced by the group (Greer et al 2020). Sherley-Bervan et al (2017) note barriers to health care include denial, subnormal care, lengthier waits, internal referrals (to lower ranking staff), limiting connection to care. Plessis (2022) embellishes critical thought regarding HR suggesting advocates are “ill-informed of the epistemological and ontological assumptions that underlie their theories and interventions.” He continues saying, “When some of these assumptions are accepted as ‘self-evident’, harm reduction can become beleaguered with internal inconsistencies and uncertainties in its core goals” (Plessis 2022; Keane 2003; Mugford 1993; Weatherburn 2009). This in theory can lead to disregarding support for policy and implementation of such lifesaving policy. The author goes on to infer that it is easy to assume that people who have been disregarded and deprived, all too common a perception of PWUD, are often blamed for prevalence when in fact historically the more privileged members of our societies have pushed drugs, have upheld the behaviors and consequences associated with drug use, as they have better means to do so (Plessis 2022; Mugford and O’Malley 1991, p24).

HR is an evidence-based, critical appeal to people who use drugs (pwud) to arming them with life-saving tools & materials (SAMHSA 2019). As indicated by Greer et al (2020), employment among pwud and their peers combats social-cultural detriments that have plagued their lives, considering drugs and the coping role it plays for them. Grace-Rose et al (2023) speak to the notion of anonymity, the need of which implies person (which is often forgotten in the context of drug use, misuse, behaviors, and institutional actions such as policy formation and arrest) as another tool in the toolbox of harm reduction techniques and uplifting people from challenging circumstances. Grace-Rose et al (2023) also note the use of fentanyl test strips, which help determine the presence of a great cause for overdose in recent history (83% of overdoses have occurred due to fentanyl since 2020, according to the authors). Simple tools to combat difficult circumstances. Treatment goes beyond familiarity in the context of drug use. It requires partnership, implied by the role of peer workers, considering the expert knowledge they bring to the work required of healthcare. Marshall et al (2015) argue that the peer is paramount to the voice they provide in legislation, as policy impacts public health and wider issues, but more needs to be done regarding the organizational support they lack in healthcare and legislative contexts.

References

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