

# BACK TO THE FUTURE FOR CANADA'S NATIONAL ANTI-DRUG STRATEGY:

## HOMELESS YOUTH AND THE NEED FOR HARM REDUCTION

Kristy BUCCIERI

### What do we need to know?

The primary goal of most harm-reduction approaches is to meet individuals where they are at and not ignore or condemn the harmful behaviours, but rather to work with the individual or community to minimize the harmful effects of a given behaviour. Canadian policy on substance use has been moving in the wrong direction since its 2007 National Anti-Drug strategy, which excluded harm reduction. Harm reduction is an important public health initiative needed to promote the health and well-being of marginalized substance users, such as youth experiencing homelessness.

### What did the researcher do?



Qualitative interviews were conducted with 10 youth and 9 service providers in the Ottawa region to discuss their views of the harms associated with substance use among young people

who are homeless. The research focused on the most commonly used substances, reasons for using, and harmful effects that may result either to the youth themselves or to others.

### WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?



This chapter looks at substance use amongst youth experiencing homelessness in Ottawa, Ontario and asks both youth and service providers at which point does substance use become harmful? After determining that substance use can cause harm to homeless youth, the author argues for the federal government to implement harm reduction strategies that will provide support to street-involved youth.

### ARTICLE SOURCE

Buccieri, K. (2013). Back to the Future for Canada's National Anti-Drug Strategy: Homeless Youth and the Need for Harm Reduction. In Gaetz, S., O'Grady, B., Buccieri, K., Karabanow, J., & Marsolais, A. (Eds.), *Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice* (199-215). Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.

# What did the researcher find?

Youth experiencing homelessness use substances for a number of reasons, including to self-medicate and to cope with life on the street. This use however, can cause harm to the youth, particularly by interfering with the attainment of short-term goals such as finding food, and long-term goals such as securing housing, education and employment. Substance use can also cause harm to homeless youth through law enforcement, particularly when they receive tickets.

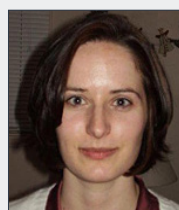
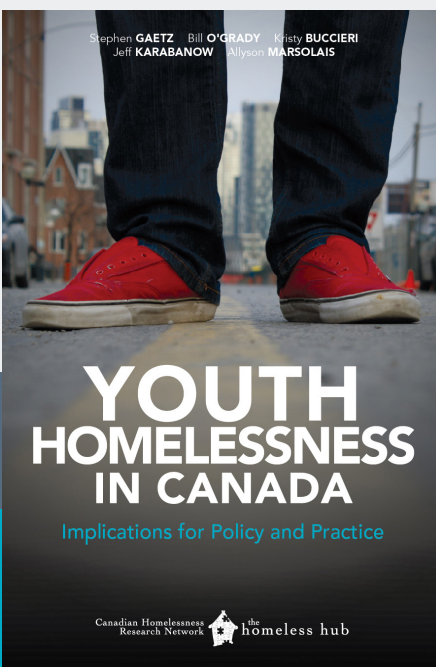
Young people who are homeless can get caught in a cycle in which substance use is both a coping mechanism for life on the street, as well as a stressor that contributes to, and sometimes worsens, their daily struggles. As substance use fulfills a function in youth's lives, quitting may not always be possible, and hence there is a great need for services that reduce the harm in these young people's lives.

*"As substance use fulfills a function in youth's lives, quitting may not always be possible, and hence there is a great need for services that reduce the harm in these young people's lives."*

# How can you use this research?

This research can be used to advocate that harm reduction be a pillar of Canada's national drug strategy. Ensuring that marginalized populations have access to harm reduction services requires a population-informed response where services and supports are tailored to the risk factors, prevalence and severity of use, and the unique characteristics of substance use among specific populations. For homeless youth, this could include services such as the distribution of supplies like clean needles, crack kits, and condoms. Further, young people should have access to education through pamphlets and posters, workshops, and informal discussions, about how to use more safely.

## About the researcher



KRISTY BUCCIERI is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. Her research interests include gender and sexuality, socio-spatial relations on the street, pre-street life, justice and policing issues, health and wellness, and problematic substance use as they pertain to youth homelessness.

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