

HARM REDUCTION CALLS TO ACTION

FROM YOUNG PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS IN THE CONTEXT OF UNSTABLE HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

1. We oppose approaches to preventing drug-related harms that are premised on abstinence.
2. Young people's engagement with harm reduction programs and sites should be kept confidential.
3. We demand investment in low-barrier and youth-led harm reduction programs and spaces, including safer consumption sites.
4. Youth-oriented programs and spaces must account for the needs of polysubstance-using youth, BIPOC youth, gender diverse and queer youth, and self-identified young women.
5. Stop pathologizing young people who use drugs (YPWUD) and trying to "save" or "fix" us.
6. The services and systems that YPWUD traverse must be re-designed to foster youth's self-determination in relation to their drug use, harm reduction, care, and families.
7. We add our voices to those demanding the decriminalization of drug use and an end to the war on drugs.
8. We add our voices to those demanding a safe supply of drugs via peer-led compassion clubs.
9. Youth voices should be better integrated into both bottom up, grassroots and top down, state-sponsored harm reduction movements.
10. YPWUD in the context of greater privilege and allies should focus energy on fostering and extending the activism of YPWUD in the context of street involvement.

MORE DETAILS ON THE CALLS TO ACTION:

1. We want accurate information about the risks and benefits of different drugs and how to practice different kinds of harm reduction in our schools and communities.
2. Those providing harm reduction to YPWUD should always collaborate closely with them to determine what (if anything) regarding their drug use and harm reduction practices can be shared.
3. Ideally, youth-oriented safer consumption sites should have a non-clinical, relaxed feel to them, and include a welcoming drop-in space alongside private spaces for safer consumption. They should be staffed by a mix of peers and providers with experience providing non-judgemental care, support, and camaraderie to YPWUD.
4. Youth-oriented safer consumption, drug checking, shelter, and housing programs and spaces should have dedicated programming and hours for young women, gender diverse and queer youth, and BIPOC youth. Mobile outreach vans and safer consumption rooms are critical to making harm reduction and other forms of support more accessible to YPWUD in the context of street involvement, and in particular those who are not residing in city centers.
5. We demand an end to compulsory or involuntary abstinence-based treatment programs. We want to be listened to regarding what drugs do for us, socially, physically, mentally, and emotionally, in our daily lives. Youth-dedicated drop-in centers and service hubs should center relationship- and trust-building and harm reduction.
6. YPWUD who are in government care (i.e., living in foster care and group homes and independent living arrangements) must be able to access harm reduction services without fear of discipline and repercussions.
7. We demand that YPWUD be at the table in a meaningful way (and not just as token participants in the process) as plans for decriminalization and safe supply are rolled out in British Columbia and elsewhere.
8. Harm reduction organizing and programming must be informed by an intersectional lens. It is critical to recognize and respond to how the risks and harms experienced by YPWUD are shaped by intersections of class, race, gender, sexuality, and ability. It is also important to recognize the intersections between drug user activism, anti-poverty activism, housing activism, and sexual health activism.
9. The goal is to grow a diverse and strong collective of YPWUD locally, nationally, and internationally.

These calls to action emerged from a program of community-based participatory research focused on youth substance use and health. Supported by university researchers, a Youth Advisory Council of ten young people (ages 17 to 28) with lived experience of substance use in the context of unstable housing and homelessness collaborated with young drug user activists and allies from Vancouver, Portugal, and Pittsburgh to generate these calls to action.

See the full paper for more details.