

# Harm Reduction Through a Social Justice Lens

*Harm reduction is a philosophy that deals with issues related to drug use from a value neutral standpoint.*

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## What you need to know

Unequal health outcomes and unfair access to health care has been identified as a major problem in Canada, even though publically health care is available for all residents. People who use drugs and are street involved face major barriers to health care and their life expectancy is lower than those of the general public. A person's social position is strongly tied to his/her

quality of life and those at the bottom of the social ladder generally have the poorest health. The individual values of health care staff often get in the way of those that need health care the most.



## What is this research about?

The focus of this paper is the unfair access to health care faced by people who use drugs and are street involved due to social structures such as poverty and unemployment, lack of quality housing, social support and education. Dr. Pauly looks for fair responses to drug use that reduce the health related harms for both the individual who uses drugs and society as a whole. A primary focus is on the study of harm reduction practices as part of a comprehensive approach to reducing the problems associated with drug use. Harm reduction is a philosophy that deals with issues related to drug use from a value neutral standpoint. It shifts the focus away from fixing the individual to dealing with the harm associated with drug use.

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### VISIT

[www.homelesshub.ca](http://www.homelesshub.ca)  
for more information

### ARTICLE SOURCE

The article *Harm Reduction Through a Social Justice Lens* by Bernadette Pauly was published in the *Journal of International Drug Policy* 19(1): 4-10 in 2008.

### KEYWORDS

*harm reduction, health, drug use*

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## What did the researcher do?

The researcher studied the underlying values of harm reduction which are grounded in respect for all individuals, an understanding that many of life's activities carry risks and an approach to drug use and users that is free from judgments about drug use. These values were applied to an understanding of distributive justice as it relates to fair access to health care. Dr. Pauly describes distributive

justice as the fair distribution of rights and responsibilities in society and states that it is the most commonly used idea of fairness in health care. Social justice is proposed as an alternative conceptual framework underpinning a comprehensive response to the harms of drug use that encompasses both unfairness in the conditions that shape health and access to health care.

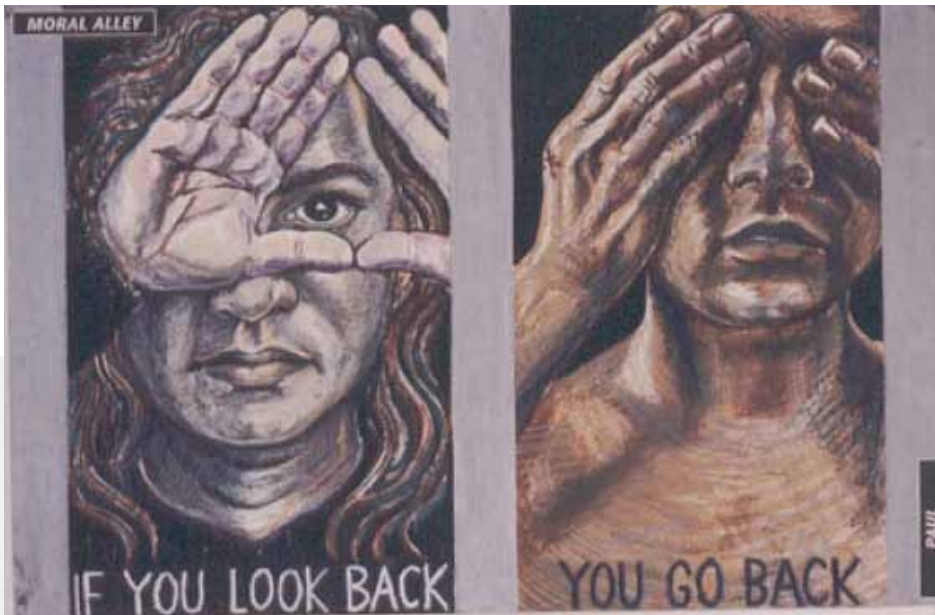


Image: Canadian Harm Reduction Network / [www.canadianharmreduction.com/voices/art/moral-alley](http://www.canadianharmreduction.com/voices/art/moral-alley)

## What did the researchers find?

Dr. Pauly found that **harm reduction practices can help improve access to health care for people who use drugs**. However, relying on harm reduction practices alone tends to ignore the social structures that disadvantage people. Transportation limitations, poor dental coverage and lack of health cards were identified as a few of the social structures that limit the

equal access to health care for drug users. Unstable housing, income and employment policies, along with abstinence and zero-tolerance programs, were also discussed as contributing to the harms of drug use. The researcher also highlighted that stigma of drug use acted as a barrier to health care as people who use drugs often faced discrimination because of her/his known drug use.

## HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This paper can be used to advocate for the use of harm reduction practices to improve access to health care services for drug users who are street involved. It can be used to highlight the fact that current health care policies need to be changed to reduce a broad range of harms associated with drug use, such as homelessness and poverty. The author also highlights the need for further examination of the ways in which current social structures add to the poor health of individuals that are street involved.

### A NOTE FROM THE ARTIST:

*"If you look back you go back" is a prison saying that means if you go back to your past behaviours you will return to prison. In another way, it also suggests that if you review your personal history, you will get stuck in that painful place.*

Paul's contribution to the collection of street sayings and mottos that comprise **Moral Alley** (1998), an artwork by Deborah Waddington.

### ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

**Dr. Bernie Pauly** is an associate professor in the School of Nursing at the University of Victoria and scientist at the Centre for Addiction Research of British Columbia. Her research interests include health inequities, access to health care, ethical practices used in nursing, and homelessness and drug use from a social justice perspective.

