



BALANCED DRUG STRATEGIES: COMPREHENSIVE OR INCONSISTENT?

BACKGROUND & METHOD

- The City of Vancouver's drug strategy rests on the 'four pillars' of prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and enforcement. Other locations around the world have taken a similar 'balanced' approach.
- Programs are put in place to address health concerns related to illicit drug use, while enforcement initiatives target drug dealers.
- The question is, do these aspects of 'balanced' strategies complement or undermine each other? If some drug users are also drug dealers, do the goals of law enforcement interfere with the goals of health promotion?
- More than 400 injection drug users in Vancouver were asked about their participation in drug dealing.

QUICK FACT

*17% OF PARTICIPANTS SAID
THEY HAD DEALT DRUGS IN THE
SIX MONTHS PRIOR TO BEING
INTERVIEWED.*

FINDINGS

- 17% of participants said they had dealt drugs in the six months prior to being interviewed.
- The drug-dealing users were more likely than the non-dealers to frequently inject heroin or cocaine, to have been incarcerated recently, and to have overdosed recently. In other words, some of the people who are the targets of enforcement activities also have the most severe addictions and are therefore most in need of treatment and other forms of support.
- The drug dealing activities most commonly reported were direct selling, acting as go-between for buyers and sellers, and steering potential buyers to sellers. In other words, these drug users occupy the lowest-level, most visible and most dangerous roles in the drug-dealing hierarchy.
- The most common reasons given for dealing were, not surprisingly, to get drugs and money.

IMPLICATIONS

- Previous studies have identified that drug law enforcement has many negative effects on the health of drug users. Incarcerating drug users puts them in environments where the risk of HIV transmission is high.
- Alternatives to arresting and imprisoning drug-dealing addicts are clearly needed.
- Employment programs and occupational opportunities could help drug users find legal ways of earning money. However, as long as drugs remain illegal, huge profits stand to be made from selling them, and it's inevitable that there will always be people willing to face the risks to make a profit in this way.
- Broad alternative regulatory approaches in which illicit drugs are regulated and medically prescribed may provide some hope of diminishing the appeal and the scope of drug dealing.
- In summary, this study suggests that balanced approaches to drug policy may contain elements that undermine each other, and indicates the need for alternative criminal justice interventions, vocational programming accessible to people with active drug addictions, and alternative regulatory approaches.

Kerr T, Small W, Johnston C, Li K, Montaner JS, Wood E. **Characteristics of injection drug users who participate in drug dealing: Implications for drug policy.** *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 2008; 40(2): 147-152.

