

THE AFFECTIVE POLITICS OF THE 'ALBERTA RECOVERY MODEL' AND THE EXPANSION OF ABSTINENCE-ORIENTED AND CARCERAL CARE IN CANADA

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Background

As it enters the second decade of the toxic drug crisis, Canada is experiencing significant political backlash against harm reduction and a renewed emphasis on abstinence-based and carceral models of care. Alberta's United Conservative Party (UCP) government is leading the country in this shift by implementing the 'Alberta Recovery Model,' which includes large investments in bed-based recovery programs and compulsory drug treatment for adult non-offenders. The present study maps the recent history and affective politics of drug policy in Alberta.

Approach

We reviewed provincial government policy texts, public statements, and news media to analyze how political actors in Alberta mobilize emotions and moralized discourses to build support for the Alberta Recovery Model. Our analysis is grounded in literature on the sociology of emotions which contends that action, reason, and emotion are inextricably linked and that all policy discourse is thus emotional discourse.

Analysis

Alberta's UCP government mobilizes emotions of compassion, fear, and disgust to justify abstinence-based and coercive responses to substance use while delegitimizing and defunding harm reduction. These emotions were central for producing 'facts' and 'truth' and assisted policy actors in making select truths feel more 'truthful' while making others feel irrational or false. Through discourse and selective evidence-making, the UCP reframes harm reduction as cruelly enabling addiction and social disorder, while the Alberta Model is positioned as both a compassionate and effective solution to the drug toxicity crisis.

Conclusion

The growing prominence of the Alberta Recovery Model provincially and nationally illustrates the important role of emotions in drug policy discourse, including how they shape the production and legitimacy of evidence in this era of increasing polarization. Our presentation concludes with a reflection on how strategic communication and advocacy informed by the sociology of emotions can help to defend and advance drug policy alternatives provincially, nationally, and internationally.

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