

Violence and stigma experiences from people who use drugs and workers in harm reduction settings

Authors:

Jauffret-Roustide M¹

¹ Centre d'Etudes des Mouvements Sociaux, Inserm U1276, CNRS UMR 8044, EHESS, Paris, France

Background

People who use drugs may live in very precarious conditions, suffer psycho-trauma and be confronted to social exclusion. These experiences can sometimes give rise to episodes of violence in harm reduction services. We did sociological research to understand the context in which such violence occurs, the different forms of violence to which harm reduction workers and people who attend services may be exposed an or involved in.

Methods

We implemented a qualitative methodology including ethnographic on-site observations, individual interviews and focus group with harm reduction workers and people who attend services. In 2024-2025, 120 people recruited in 20 different services from 15 cities participated in the research.

Results

The forms of violence most frequently mentioned by professionals were the structural forms of violence with which people who use drugs are confronted (living in very precarious conditions, criminalization of practices), leading professionals to feel powerless to respond to their needs. Professionals tend to report feeling themselves to be in a violent position vis-à-vis the public they receive, as they feel unable to meet these demands due to the lack of appropriate political resources as well as their workload. Workers reported little about the direct physical and verbal violence. When professionals talk about violence from the people they care for, they speak about the violence from narratives of people who use drugs, stories riddled with psycho-trauma, gender-based violence, violence linked to migration and precariousness and, lastly, to stigmatization.

In echoing, narratives of people who attend services mostly produce shame and guilt about their personal situation. They speak freely about the physical violence they experience, in the street and with peers but very little from harm reduction professionals.

Conclusion

Violence and stigma call for a dialogue with public authorities to ensure that drug policies are based more on human rights.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: The author has no conflict of interest to declare.