



Research paper

Interest in low-threshold employment among people who inject illicit drugs: Implications for street disorder

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ABSTRACT

Background: Income generation opportunities available to people who use illicit drugs have been associated with street disorder. Among a cohort of injection drug users (IDU) we sought to examine street-based income generation practices and willingness to forgo these sources of income if other low-threshold work opportunities were made available.

Methods: Data were derived from a prospective community recruited cohort of IDU. We assessed the prevalence of engaging in disorderly street-based income generation activities, including sex work, drug dealing, panhandling, and recycling/salvaging/vending. Using multivariate logistic regressions based on Akaike information criterion and the best subset selection procedure, we identified factors associated with disorderly income generation activities, and assessed willingness to forgo these sources of income during the period of November 2008 to July 2009.

Results: Among our sample of 874 IDU, 418 (48%) reported engaging in a disorderly income generation activity in the previous six months. In multivariate analyses, engaging in disorderly income generation activities was independently associated with high intensity stimulant use, as well as binge drug use, having encounters with police, being a victim of violence, sharing used syringes, and injecting in public areas. Among those engaged in disorderly income generation, 198 (47%) reported a willingness to forgo these income sources if given opportunities for low-threshold employment, with sex workers being most willing to engage in alternative employment.

Conclusion: Engagement in disorderly street-based income generation activities was associated with high intensity stimulant drug use and various markers of risk. We found that a high proportion of illicit drug users were willing to cease engagement in these activities if they had options for causal low-threshold employment. These findings indicate that there is a high demand for low-threshold employment that may offer important opportunities to reduce drug-related street disorder and associated harms.

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Introduction

There are many established links between chronic illicit drug use and engagement in illegal income generation activities (Ball, Shaffer, & Nurco, 1983; Bretteville-Jensen & Sutton, 1996; Deschenes & Anglin, 1991; Fischier, Medved, Kirst, Rehm, & Gliksman, 2001; Hammersley, Forsyth, Morrison, & Davies, 1989; Nurco, Cisin, & Ball, 1985; Silverman & Spruill, 1977). People who use illicit drugs and are struggling with addiction are often unable to acquire and sustain formal employment, and yet the high costs associated with obtaining

illicit drugs requires individuals to find means of generating income (Bretteville-Jensen & Sutton, 1996; Cross, Johnson, Davis, & Liberty, 2001; McCoy, Comerford, & Metsch, 2007; Platt, 1995; Richardson, Wood, Zhang, Montaner, Tyndall, & Kerr, 2008; Richardson, Wood, Li, & Kerr, 2010). Given these constraints, the income generation opportunities available to illicit drug users frequently involve illegal activity and are often associated with street disorder (Bretteville-Jensen & Sutton, 1996; DeBeck, Shannon, Wood, Li, Montaner, & Kerr, 2007). For example, common income generation strategies include street-based sex work, drug dealing, panhandling and recycling/salvaging/vending which often take place on public streets and are generally considered to be undesirable activities from a community perspective (Bose & Hwang, 2002; Collins & Blomley, 2003; DeBeck et al., 2007; Kerr, Small, Johnston, Li, Montaner, & Wood, 2008; Shannon, Bright, Allinott, Alexson,

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Gibson, & Tyndall, 2007a). In Vancouver, Canada these types of disorderly income generation activities are a well-described feature of the city's drug use epicentre known as the Downtown Eastside [DTES] (DeBeck et al., 2007; Kerr et al., 2008; Shannon et al., 2007a).

To date, policy responses to address problems associated with illicit drug use, including street disorder resulting from the income generation activities of illicit drug users, typically rely on law enforcement to deter and manage undesirable practices and behaviours (Boyum & Reuter, 2005; DeBeck, Wood, Montaner, & Kerr, 2006; Maher, 2000; National Research Council, 2002). However, it has been documented that in many instances law enforcement initiatives seeking to reduce street disorder result in displacing disorderly activities to surrounding neighbourhoods (Aitken, Moore, Higgs, Kelsall, & Kerger, 2002; Maher & Dixon, 1999; Wood et al., 2004). This has been shown to negatively impact communities and separate vulnerable drug users from familiar health and social services (Aitken et al., 2002; Cooper, Wypij, & Krieger, 2005; Maher & Dixon, 1999; Wood et al., 2004). Given these harms and the limited effectiveness of law enforcement in this area, alternative approaches to managing street disorder are required.

A growing body of health research suggests that interventions, such as law enforcement, that primarily target the behaviour of individuals may be limited in their effectiveness and inadvertently produce harm because they fail to recognize and address the role that social and structural factors play in shaping behaviour (Blankenship, Friedman, Dworkin, & Mantell, 2006; Galea, Ahern, & Vlahov, 2003; Rhodes, 2002; Sumartojo, 2000). Rhodes' "Risk Environment Framework" has been used to illustrate the importance of considering factors exogenous to the individual when examining drug-related harm (Rhodes, 2002, 2009; Rhodes, Singer, Bourgois, Friedman, & Strathdee, 2005). According to this framework, social, structural, and environmental level factors create a context that shapes individual behaviour and decision-making (Rhodes, 2002; Rhodes, Lilly, & Fernández, 2003). From this perspective, "risk" is not only a product of individual behaviour, but is shaped and structured by laws, policies, and social relations that surround individuals. Targets for policy intervention, therefore, involve altering social and structural environments (Blankenship, Bray, & Merson, 2000; Des Jarlais, 2000; Heimer, Bray, Burris, Khoshnood, & Blankenship, 2002). The problem of disorderly income generation is therefore not solely a matter of individuals choosing to engage in undesirable practices; rather, disorderly income generation is shaped by environmental, social and structural conditions. In turn, one potential approach to reducing street disorder is to change the structural environment surrounding individuals who use drugs by creating sanctioned low-threshold employment opportunities.

The concept of 'low-threshold' is to create programs that are easily accessible for active drug users and a key component of low-threshold programs is that they do not require abstinence from drug use. A recent longitudinal analysis among Vancouver based IDU revealed low levels of regular employment among study participants and also demonstrated that high intensity drug use was negatively associated with regular employment, highlighting the need for alternative employment strategies for this population (Richardson et al., 2010). Initial research suggests that low-threshold programs can engage street-involved drug users and reduce their participation in some types of disorderly income generation activities. An evaluation of a jewellery making economic empowerment program for women who use illicit drugs demonstrated that the program was associated with reductions in sex work involvement (Sherman, German, Cheng, Marks, & Bailey-Kloche, 2006).

In Vancouver, Canada there are a small number of existing low-threshold employment opportunities available to individuals who actively use illicit drugs. For example, in the DTES of Van-

couver a community café and catering social enterprise company provides an estimated nine low-threshold employment positions (Lougheed-Green, 2004; Potluck catering, 2010), an organization that processes recyclable containers provides roughly 33 low-threshold positions (Dale & Newman, 2008; Lyotier, 2010), a local drug users group provides a small number of stipends for volunteer work undertaken by their members (Hayashi, Wood, Wiebe, Qi, & Kerr, 2010; Lloyd-Smith et al., 2010; VANDU, 2010) and a photo calendar project initiated by a social justice organization offers a program for residents of the DTES to become vendors and sell calendars and books (Grainger, 2008; Hope in Shadows, 2010; Moore & Pell, 2010). Despite the existence of these opportunities, the number of low-threshold employment positions is limited and there is little information available to determine whether there is a significant demand for this type of work among individuals who currently engage in disorderly income generation activities.

Therefore, we sought to characterize the prevalence and correlates of engaging in disorderly income generation activities among a community recruited cohort of injection drug users (IDU) in Vancouver. We then sought to identify whether there was a demand for low-threshold employment among those who were engaged in disorderly income generation to identify if this might be a suitable structural intervention to reduce one component of street disorder.

Methods

Data for this study was obtained from the Vancouver Injection Drug Users Study (VIDUS), which is an open prospective cohort that began enrolling IDU through street outreach and self-referral in May 1996. This study has been described in detail previously (Kerr et al., 2007; Wood et al., 2002). In brief, to be eligible participants at recruitment must reside in the Greater Vancouver Regional District, have injected illicit drugs in the previous month, and provide written informed consent. At enrolment and on bi-annual basis participants complete an interviewer-administered questionnaire and provide a blood sample for serologic testing. At each study visit participants are provided with a stipend (\$20 CDN) for their time. The study has received ethics approval from St. Paul's Hospital/University of British Columbia's Research Ethics Board. The present analyses are restricted to those participants seen for study follow-up during the period of November 2008 to July 2009 as the measure for our outcome of interest was available only for this period. If individuals were seen for multiple study follow-up visits during this study period, only data from their first visit was used.

All participants seen during our study period were asked to identify all their income sources (over the last six months) and to estimate the average number of hours per week they spent engaged in each income generation activity over the last 30 days. Categories of income sources included recycling (includes salvaging recyclable materials and unsanctioned street vending), panhandling, squeegeeing, sex trade work and drug dealing. Other categories of income sources included welfare (including disability, pensions and other forms of government transfers), family and friends, regular job, temporary work (including under the table employment) and criminal activity (category encompasses a range of criminal activities including theft, break and entry, robbery and fraud).

To help determine whether low-threshold employment might have a positive effect on reducing street disorder, we began by evaluating factors associated with engaging in disorderly income generation. In this initial analysis the outcome of interest was engaging in 'disorderly income generation activities' defined as reporting any of the following income sources: recycling, squeegeeing, panhandling, selling drugs and exchanging sex for money. Although we were unable to confirm that all reported drug deal-

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