

Homeless youth who use illicit drugs are more likely to begin injecting

What you need to know

Homelessness can increase the risk of injection drug use amongst youth. This means that interventions that address housing may also reduce high-risk drug use behaviours. Programs that address risks associated with drug use are also necessary in order to limit exposure and likelihood of injection drug use and other high-risk behaviours.

What is this research about?

Youth who are experiencing homelessness are considered a high-risk group in terms of their likelihood of contracting HIV and other STIs. One of the reasons for this higher rate of contraction is a higher rate of injected drug use.

New injectors of illicit drugs are known to engage in more risky

actions, such as sharing needles. Another factor that contributes to higher risk is an increasing use of crystal methamphetamine in several large cities.

There has been little research into understanding these trends or the prevalence of injection drug use amongst homeless youth. The

importance of researching this topic is that specific programs can be designed to limit the exposure of homeless youth to risks associated with injected drug use.

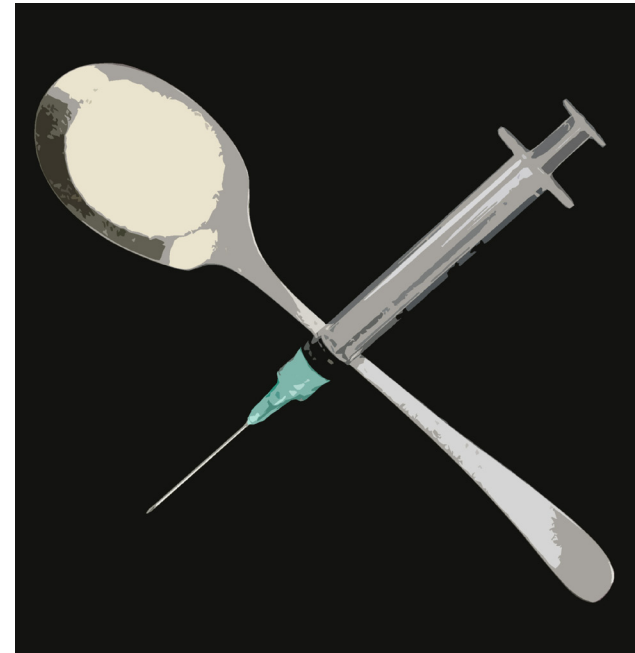
KEYWORDS

youth homelessness, injection, drug use, initiation, Vancouver.

Summary Date: September 2013

ARTICLE SOURCE

Feng, C., DeBeck, K., Kerr, T., Mathias, S., Montaner, J., & Wood, E. (2013). Homelessness Independently Predicts Injection Drug Use Initiation Among Street-Involved Youth in a Canadian Setting. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 52*(4), 499-501.



What did the researchers do?

The researchers mainly focused on youth's housing and their reports of drug use. Youth were eligible to participate if they were homeless or street-involved and if they used an illicit drug other than marijuana in the past 30 days.

The study was conducted in Vancouver and consisted of 422 interviews with streetinvolved youth (aged 14-26). Youth were interviewed between September 2005 and November 2011 as part of the At-Risk Youth Study in Vancouver.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Dr. Cindy X. Feng is an assistant professor at the school of public health, University of Saskatchewan.

Dr. Kora DeBeck is a research scientist as part of the Urban Health Research Initiative at the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, UBC.

Dr. Thomas Kerr is a Co-Director of the Urban Health Research Initiative at the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, UBC.

Dr. Steve Mathias (MD) is a psychiatrist with Providence Healthcare and helped found the Inner City Youth Mental Health Program (Vancouver).

Dr. Julio Montaner (MD) is a Professor and Chair in AIDS Research, Department of Medicine, UBC and a Co-director of British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, UBC

Dr. Evan Wood is a Co-Director, Urban Health Research Initiative; and Founder of the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy

What did the researchers find?

At the beginning of the study, 35% of participants reported non-injection crystal methamphetamine use. During the 6 years of the study, 18% of the participants injected drugs for the first time.

Homeless youth were significantly more likely to begin injecting, they accounted for 74% of the new injectors.

The study found that 32.8% of homeless youth began injecting over the period. Of youth who were not homeless, 15.8% began injecting. This means that homeless youth were two times more likely to begin injecting drugs during the period.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Researchers can expand on this research through testing these findings in other cities, using similar methods. This could contribute to the body of knowledge on homelessness and youth risk.

Service providers and policy makers can see this piece as a contribution to a growing body of research that supports the need for expanded supportive housing for homeless youth.

Healthcare providers can understand the risks associated with homelessness, and use it to focus client-centred and evidence based care in order to address the needs and risks associated with injection drug use amongst youth.

Additional programs are necessary to address a lack of resources for homeless youth such as needle exchange and addictions support.

