



Question #4

Beyond reducing the adverse health, social, and legal consequences of drug use, what other areas can benefit from harm reduction policies, programmes, and practices in furtherance of the right to health and related human rights? Examples may include, but are not limited to, the decriminalisation of sex work, the decriminalization of abortion, and safe sex programmes.

Harm reduction policies, programs, and practices are beneficial as they are flexible approaches based on protecting the well-being, respect, and lives of people who use drugs (PWUD) and their communities. These methodologies can be used in a variety of public health and socioeconomic contexts. Focusing on safety concerns and measures is a good starting point. Marginalized populations experience several barriers to services, while they may be readily available, they may not be accessible as they have the potential to expose someone as a drug user. This is isolating and has a direct impact on their vulnerability to overdose.

During 2022, there were a total of 7,328 deaths from opioid overdose in Canada. Many PWUD face increased vulnerability due to severe implications of disclosing their use, leaving them to use alone. Newcomers, parents/caregivers, youth and those experiencing concurrent disorders require approaches and programs that are tailored to their specific needs and experiences. Raising awareness of mental health concerns and eradicating the stigma associated with them might motivate people to seek help sooner rather than later, which can avert more serious outcomes. Educating the public in mental health first aid can aid in recognizing and assisting those going through a mental health crisis. This is an important method because public education needs to incorporate concepts that address how culture influences how mental health is understood and treated. In addition to addressing the barriers, this strengthens the capacity of the community to react appropriately in the event of a mental health emergency. This education also needs to incorporate pieces around safety of BIPOC communities, parents and others who are overly scrutinized and criminalized. Partnering with grassroots organizations, businesses, faith-based organizations and other trusted community members can foster relationships where this education can be developed and shared.

Harm reduction principles extend beyond drug use to various facets of public health and human rights. An example of where harm reduction policies and practices can make a positive impact is within the homeless population. Harm reduction approaches in addressing homelessness focus on providing stable housing as a fundamental human right. Housing-first initiatives prioritize getting individuals into stable housing, acknowledging that it's a foundational step in addressing



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various health and social issues, including mental health, substance abuse, and overall well-being.

Another area that would benefit from harm reduction policies, programmes, and practices in furthering the right to health and related human rights is the prison reform sector. Harm reduction principles can be applied in correctional facilities by offering drug treatment programs, mental health support, and education to reduce recidivism rates. This approach emphasizes rehabilitation over punishment and aims to address the root causes of criminal behaviour while respecting the rights and dignity of incarcerated individuals. In essence, harm reduction principles advocate for policies and programs that prioritize human rights, dignity, and public health. By addressing the underlying societal factors that contribute to various health and social issues, these approaches aim to create a more equitable and supportive environment for vulnerable populations.