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# Research to Community

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## Incarceration Not Found to Deter Drug Use

Although addiction is increasingly understood to be a health issue, many of the policy responses to drug use are based on criminal justice approaches, such as policing and incarceration. In Canada, we spend an estimated \$573 million each year to imprison individuals for drug-related offences, with little to indicate that these investments are producing the intended effect of deterring future drug use. To investigate whether incarceration deters drug use, researchers at the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS looked at drug use patterns among a large group of injection drug users surveyed regularly from May 1996 to December 2005.

This study found that, among the 1,603 injection drug users surveyed, those who were recently incarcerated were two times less likely to cease their drug use for a period of six months or more. Conversely, drug users who were recently on methadone maintenance addiction treatment were significantly more likely to report ceasing their drug use for a period of six months or more.

To further investigate the potential impact of incarceration on subsequent drug use, researchers identified drug users who reported having been incarcerated during the study period and compared their drug use patterns before and after a period of incarceration with those of drug users who reported having never been incarcerated. It was expected that if incarceration had an effect on future drug use, this analysis would find measurable differences in the drug use patterns of the incarcerated and non-incarcerated groups. However, the study found no statistically significant differences in drug use patterns between the two groups. In this study of injection drug users, incarceration was shown to be ineffective in deterring or reducing drug use.

Given the number of individuals incarcerated for drug use and the health and social harms associated with incarceration, it is greatly concerning that the findings of this study do not support the current policy assumption that imprisoning high-risk drug users deters and reduces their drug use.

To ensure that resources are not being invested in policy approaches that are harmful and ineffective, further research is required to establish the benefits, if any, of incarcerating individuals for drug use. If such evidence cannot be produced, policy-makers have an obligation to revise their approach to illicit drug use. This is especially relevant in Canada, where the federal government's 'National Anti-Drug Strategy' relies heavily on incarceration as a means to address problematic substance use.