

# European drug experts sound warning on austerity

November 25 2013, by Derek Gatopoulos

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A drug user prepares a syringe as a staff member watches, at a supervised injection site in central Athens on Monday, Nov. 25, 2013. Drug experts and policy makers from around Europe are gathering in Athens to urge their governments to exclude drug treatment from economic austerity programs, citing an alarming rise in HIV infections among drug users in Greece. The number of reported new infections among drug users in Greece shot up from 22 in 2010 to 245 in 2011, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Experts blame the rise on a number of factors, several related to Greece's major financial crisis. (AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris)

Drug experts and policy makers from around Europe gathered in Athens to urge governments to exclude drug-abuse treatment from austerity budget cuts, citing an alarming rise in HIV infections among drug users in Greece.

The number of reported new infections among [drug users](#) in Greece shot up from 22 in 2010 to 245 in 2011, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control—despite a general decline in the European Union. Experts blame the rise on a number of factors, several related to Greece's financial crisis.

The experts on Monday visited a newly opened supervised [drug](#) injection site set up in central Athens. The declaration to European governments was to be formally made Tuesday.

"There are alarming figures (in Greece). So I think it's very important that vulnerable people are targeted for treatment," said Thomas Kattau, top official for drug programs at the Strasbourg, France-based Council of Europe.

Greece has imposed steep cuts for health care and social services since being bailed out in 2010 by other eurozone countries and the International Monetary Fund. Sudden cuts imposed in 2011 also disrupted needle distribution programs—seen as a key cause for the rise in HIV cases.

"Our aim is to distribute 200 needles per year to each intravenous drug user, and at the moment we have got the number up to 135," said Meni Mallioni, head of the state-run Organization Against Drugs. "During the (crisis) that number fell to as low as nine."



A staff member holds a drug preparation kit at a supervised injection site in central Athens on Monday, Nov. 25, 2013. Drug experts and policy makers from around Europe are gathering in Athens to urge their governments to exclude drug treatment from economic austerity programs, citing an alarming rise in HIV infections among drug users in Greece. The number of reported new infections among drug users in Greece shot up from 22 in 2010 to 245 in 2011, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Experts blame the rise on a number of factors, several related to Greece's major financial crisis. (AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris)

The European Union-funded injection site—the first of its kind in Greece—was opened in a run-down part of central Athens on Oct. 3, but only announced Monday due to concerns over how local residents would react.

Addicts are paid small sums of money for visiting the facility and providing data for anonymous surveys, as well as returning to pick up

their HIV test results.

Kattau said similar programs had been regarded as successful in Germany, the Netherlands and other European countries, as well as Canada.

"The experience in those countries shows they don't use to the money to buy drugs, but things like hygiene products. So it puts them on a road to recovery."

He added: "In the end the goal is to stop the spread of HIV-Aids. Every euro invested into drug treatment is an investment to public health and public safety. When people get sick, it's much more expensive. Just one ambulance trip can cost 350 euros (\$475)."

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