

# AIDS: Crimean drug users at risk, says NGO

March 20 2014

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More than 14,000 injecting drug users in Crimea risk being cut off from life-saving treatment and services prohibited in Russia, an NGO working to halt HIV spread warned on Thursday.

Most immediately at risk are about 800 Crimeans who depend on opioid substitute therapy (OST), the International HIV/AIDS Alliance said in a statement highlighting a hidden health consequence of the political crisis.

People on OST receive synthetic drug substitutes which are safer than the heroin they replace and are administered under medical supervision, curbing HIV infection through needle-sharing.

"This treatment is prohibited in Russia and current stocks of methadone and buprenorphine on the Crimean peninsula will only last for another few weeks at most," said the alliance.

"With the blocking of highways that connect Crimea to the mainland, getting medical supplies through is challenging and there are concerns that a major public health crisis will arise as a result."

Once treatment is cut off, OST recipients will go into withdrawal and many are likely to revert to their old, unsafe drug habits, the British-based group said.

Contrary to Ukraine, where drug addicts have access to HIV prevention services like clean needle exchanges, condom distribution and HIV-

testing, Russia takes a punitive approach to [drug](#) use that the alliance claimed was responsible for one of the highest rates of new HIV infections in the world.

"Injecting [drug users](#) represent nearly 80 percent of all HIV cases in the country," said the statement.

OST has been available in Crimea for almost a decade under the political control of Ukraine, which saw the number of new HIV cases among people who inject drugs drop from 7,127 in 2006 to 5,847 last year.

Andriy Klepikov, executive direct of the alliance's Ukraine branch, urged Crimean authorities to intervene.

"Any interruption to harm reduction programming is a disaster for health, human rights and the HIV epidemic in the region," he said.

"We urge the authorities in Crimea to step in and ensure that critical supply chains are not disrupted and lives not put at risk as a result of territorial politicking."

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Citation: AIDS: Crimean drug users at risk, says NGO (2014, March 20) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-03-aids-crimean-drug-users-ngo.html>

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