

Reducing the harm of drug use for men in prison

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Despite its castle-like appearance, the Collins Bay Penitentiary in Kingston, Ontario, is a maximum, medium and minimum security prison. Credit: Liz via flickr

The prevalence of drug use prior to incarceration among men in Ontario correctional institutions remains very high, underlining the need for drug intervention programs and services.

In the first Canadian study of the last decade to examine drug use of recently incarcerated men, University of Toronto researchers in the Dalla Lana School of Public Health (DLSPH) found that drug use, including injection drug use, continues to be a big issue in this population.

In the study, published in the May/June issue of the *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, researchers write that evidence-based interventions to reduce the harms associated with drug use—such as [drug abuse treatment](#), hepatitis A and B vaccination, needle exchange, opioid substitution therapy, overdose prevention and naloxone distribution—should be provided during the incarceration period.

"We know this is a vulnerable population with poor

health outcomes. Incarceration offers a unique opportunity to initiate interventions," said Professor Liviana Calzavara, head of DLSPH's Social and Behavioural Health Sciences Division, who has studied risk behaviours of prisoners since 1992.

In a 2003 survey, Calzavara found that about 45,000 people who are incarcerated each year in the province have a history of [injection drug](#) use, which is 30 per cent of the estimated 150,000 people incarcerated each year in Ontario.

"Since many people lack access to health care in the community, incarceration provides a valuable opportunity to provide or refer to services which could decrease drug use and its associated harms," said the study's lead author Dr. Fiona Kouyoumdjian, a Canadian Institutes of Health Research post-doctoral fellow at the Centre for Research on Inner City Health at St. Michael's Hospital and a recent graduate of the PhD in Epidemiology and Public Health and Preventive Medicine Residency Program at DLSPH.

"Access to effective interventions and health care could improve the health of people who are incarcerated and their families and communities, and could also improve community safety and decrease the likelihood of re-incarceration," Kouyoumdjian added.

Provided by University of Toronto

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