

PLANNING FOR INCLUSIVE AFRICAN CITIES: ENGAGING WITH STREET LEVEL HEROIN USERS IN DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA

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Transformation in a nutshell

We need to start talking about drugs! More importantly, we need to talk about solutions to reduce the harms caused by drugs and the way we enforce laws in our city. Despite great efforts by police, and communities – tough love, zero tolerance and the war on drugs - have not made our city safer nor have they helped the majority of people who use drugs. Whoonga use is becoming more prevalent despite all attempts to rid the drug through strong armed law enforcement and through abstinence based 'rehabilitation'. Through evidence based research, this study engages with the drug-use community in a way that is not discriminatory to their drug use disorder and it uncovers solutions which can help them in normalising their lives.

Key components

A Harm reduction approach is used in this study, and it entails viewing people who use drugs as deserving of respect and equal rights, and aims at supporting them rather than punishing problematic drug users. This is because evidence from across the world indicates strongly that a punitive and criminalising approach to drug use only leads to greater public health and public safety problems, and drug users likely to be further marginalised as a result of arrest and criminal records.

Part of the Harm Reduction package that the World Health Organisation promotes for people who use drugs is making Opioid Substitution Therapy (OST) available to heroin users. This is literally the substitution of heroin for a legal medication that allows for mood stabilisation in much the same way as heroin does but without the euphoric effect. Across the world OST has been proven effective in getting people with drug user disorders out of crime behaviour while living healthier and safer lives.

Benefits to eThekweni Municipality

This study gathers insights from a key population group who are vulnerable and lack a voice in eThekweni municipality.

The solutions which are presented can drastically improve the quality of life for the people who have a drug use disorder.

This study will also assist the police, Department of Social Development, Kwa-Zulu Natal and eThekweni Municipality health departments in deeply understanding the heroin use disorder and how to deal with it.

- **Summary**

A growing challenge for African cities in recent years is the increase in problematic drug use, particularly heroin use. Yet little attempt has been made to understand the drivers of this social issue, nor how city management can respond to reduce the harms that drugs can create to individual users and city dwellers. This paper explores the drivers through examining what emerged from a series of focus groups with young, street level heroin users in Durban. The focus groups reveal fascinating information about how this very vulnerable population grouping accesses – or does not – public health and welfare facilities in the city. They also reveal the choices that drug users make in making the streets into their homes, and the family bonds that are created in the drug use community. Drug users are viewed, in this paper, as rational actors who have the capacity to contribute in very positive ways to urban planning that is aimed at improving public health and safety outcomes through harm reduction programmes. We argue that engaging drug users as active participants in urban planning and policy making is presently not taking place in any African cities that we are aware of. Yet, in other parts of the world, city managers recognise that to reduce the harms of drugs, the drug use community should be viewed as planning participants who are able to offer workable solutions to the benefit of the public good and in ensuring that the right to the city is a lived reality even for those most stigmatised and marginalised.



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