

# HIV/AIDS STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION: INJECTING DRUG USERS



“Addicts are considered the lowest of the low. My name is mud. I used to teach elementary school and was a psychologist assistant. The assumptions made about me because I am identified as a drug addict are that I have no self-esteem, no respect for my body and that I am not capable of anything. No one listens to me - nothing I say is taken seriously. I have a problem. I am an addict. I don't need to be insulted, discredited, humiliated and ignored”.

## DRUG USE & HIV/AIDS STIGMA

Drug use is a powerful source of stigma and discrimination, and people who have acquired HIV through injecting drug use face a double stigma. They are marginalised and discriminated against on the basis of their drug use as well as their HIV status. They may also face stigma and discrimination on the basis of their race or sexual orientation. Therefore, for many, drug use is often inter-related with discrimination, lack of economic and social empowerment, and minority status.

The stigma attached to drug use is reinforced by the fact that it is an illegal and covert activity, and that there is no legal protection available to people who use drugs. There is also a stereotype of drug users as being “junkies” and “bad” when in fact many drug users are employed, bring up families, are financially stable, are good neighbours and good friends.

The stigma attached to injecting drug use and HIV/AIDS is also amplified by the social stigma attached to hepatitis C (HCV) which significantly affects injecting drug users. As with HIV, when an injecting drug user is hepatitis C positive or presumed to be, it is often difficult to know whether they are stigmatised and discriminated against because of their status as a drug user or because they are, or may be, HCV positive.

# DRUG USE, HIV INFECTION & DISCRIMINATION

Injecting drug use is intimately connected with HIV:

- Use of needles to inject drugs is common amongst those who use certain drugs, particularly heroin. Cocaine, speed and other drugs can also be injected. But injecting brings with it significant health risks. The HIV/HCV risks can be minimised by using clean injecting equipment with every injecting episode, or never sharing injecting equipment.
- Increasing use of cocaine may also be a significant factor in the escalation of HIV prevalence and incidence. The effects of cocaine last a much shorter time, which means many more injecting episodes, and greater risk of overdose or HIV/HCV risks.
- Drug use can lead to increased sexual risk-taking which can also result in HIV transmission. A small number of injecting drug users work in the sex industry and may accept their client's request not to use condoms because they need the money to buy drugs.

Taken together, injecting drug use and HIV amplify the stigmatisation and discrimination against drug users. IDUs are discriminated against because of their drug use and because of stereotypes in the public's mind (i.e. injecting drug use is mistakenly associated with "deviant" lifestyles, promiscuity and HIV infection).

Discrimination against Injecting Drug Users (IDUs) is widespread, especially in the health care area, with some health professionals refusing to provide proper medical care or access to social services. IDUs are also likely to be discriminated against by the police, not just because of the illegality of injecting drug use, but also because of their status as "second class citizens".

Prejudice and discrimination against IDUs makes those not yet infected with HIV and HCV more vulnerable, so facilitating the progression of HIV and HCV infection. Drug users have problems accessing preventative materials (clean injecting equipment, information and education about safe injecting and safe sex), and are often denied treatment when infected. This 'double' discrimination leads to social isolation and stress, and has a detrimental effect on the psychological and physical health of those infected.

## ORGANISATIONS:

### Mainliners

Tel: 020 7582 5434  
[www.mliners.org](http://www.mliners.org)

### RELEASE

Tel: 020 7729 5255  
[www.release.org.uk](http://www.release.org.uk)

### European NGO Council on Drugs and Development

Tel: + 32 3 237 74 36  
[www.encoded.org](http://www.encoded.org)

### International Harm Reduction Association

Tel: +61 3 9278 8104  
[www.ihra.net](http://www.ihra.net)

### National Drug Users Development Agency (NDUDA)

Tel: 020 8986 5475

# ARE YOU HIV PREJUDICED?