Changes in public order after the opening of a medically supervised safer injecting facility for illicit injection drug users

Evan Wood, Thomas Kerr, Will Small, Kathy Li, David C. Marsh, Julio S.G. Montaner, Mark W. Tyndall

Abstract

Background: North America’s first medically supervised safer injecting facility for illicit injection drug users was opened in Vancouver on Sept. 22, 2003. Although similar facilities exist in a number of European cities and in Sydney, Australia, no standardized evaluations of their impact have been presented in the scientific literature.

Methods: Using a standardized prospective data collection protocol, we measured injection-related public order problems during the 6 weeks before and the 12 weeks after the opening of the safer injecting facility in Vancouver. We measured changes in the number of drug users injecting in public, publicly discarded syringes and injection-related litter. We used Poisson log-linear regression models to evaluate changes in these public order indicators while considering potential confounding variables such as police presence and rainfall.

Results: In stratified linear regression models, the 12-week period after the facility’s opening was independently associated with reductions in the number of drug users injecting in public (p < 0.001), publicly discarded syringes (p < 0.001) and injection-related litter (p < 0.001). The predicted mean daily number of drug users injecting in public was 4.3 (95% confidence interval [CI] 3.5–5.4) during the period before the facility’s opening and 2.4 (95% CI 1.9–3.0) after the opening; the corresponding predicted mean daily numbers of publicly discarded syringes were 11.5 (95% CI 10.0–13.2) and 5.4 (95% CI 4.7–6.2). Externally compiled statistics from the city of Vancouver on the number of syringes discarded in outdoor safe disposal boxes were consistent with our findings.

Interpretation: The opening of the safer injecting facility was independently associated with improvements in several measures of public order, including reduced public injection drug use and public syringe disposal.

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Many cities are experiencing epidemics of blood-borne diseases as a result of illicit injection drug use, and drug overdoses have become a leading cause of death in many urban areas. Public drug use also plagues many inner city neighbourhoods, and the unsafe disposal of syringes in these settings is a major community concern.

In over 2 dozen European cities and, more recently, in Sydney, Australia, medically supervised safer injecting facilities, where injection drug users (IDUs) can inject previously obtained illicit drugs under the supervision of medical staff, have been established in an effort to reduce the community and public health impacts of illicit drug use. Inside these facilities IDUs are typically provided with sterile injecting equipment, emergency care in the event of overdose, as well as primary care services and referral to addiction treatment. Although anecdotal reports have suggested that such sites may improve public order, reduce the number of deaths from overdose and improve access to care, no standardized evaluations of their impact are available in the scientific literature.

On Sept. 22, 2003, health officials in Vancouver opened a government-sanctioned safer injecting facility as pilot project. The facility, the first in North America, is centrally located in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, which is the most impoverished urban neighbourhood in Canada and home to well-documented overdose and HIV epidemics among the estimated 5000 IDUs who reside there. Federal approval for the 3-year project was granted on the condition that the health and social impacts of the facility be rigorously evaluated. Although evaluation of the facility’s impact on certain outcomes (e.g., HIV incidence) is ongoing and will take several years, it is now possible to examine the impacts of the site on public order. Therefore, we conducted this study to test the hypothesis that changes in improperly discarded syringes and public drug use would be observed after the opening of the safer injecting facility.

Methods

The present study was designed before the opening of the safer injecting facility in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and involved standardized data collection protocols that were developed before the surveyor was trained and before the study protocol was implemented in the field. The city of Vancouver’s activities for collecting used syringes were not modified during the study period, to avoid this potential source of confounding. The study design was approved by the University of British Columbia / Providence Healthcare Research Ethics Board more than 3 months before the opening of the safer injecting facility.

The survey protocol involved measuring specified public order indicators within a predefined geographic area and at predefined times of the week during the 6 weeks before and the 12 weeks after
the facility opened. Specifically, we obtained maps of the neighbour-
hood’s network of roads and alleyways and selected a pre-
defined study area consisting of the 10 city blocks that surrounded
the safer injecting facility. Data collection times were spread evenly
throughout the week and involved walking through the study zone
in the same pattern from 10 am to noon on Monday, from 1 pm to
3 pm on Wednesday and from 3 pm to 5 pm on Friday each week.
One of us (W.S.), who had over 3 years’ experience conducting
ethnographic research in the neighbourhood and is trained in envi-
ronmental surveying and mapping techniques, conducted all of the
field surveys.

We identified 5 indicators of public disorder for measurement.
Public injection drug use, publicly discarded syringes and injection-
related litter were identified as measures of public drug use. Injection-
related litter was defined as syringe wrappers, syringe caps, sterile wa-
ter containers and “cookers” (containers used to heat drugs before
injection). We chose to measure injection-related litter in addition to
discarded syringes because Vancouver has multiple locations for sy-
ringe distribution and return. The city’s largest exchange location has
observed a return rate of used syringes of about 95%,21 and although
publicly discarded syringes are not an uncommon sight, syringe-
related litter is a much more prevalent sign of public drug use in the
neighbourhood, because wrappers and other debris are not often re-
turned to needle exchange sites.22 For the fourth indicator of public
disorder, we counted the number of suspected drug dealers as a back-
ground measure, since we assumed that this variable would not be di-
rectly affected by the facility’s opening. Finally, because law enforce-
ment activities are known to have an impact on the location of
injection drug use,23,24 we also evaluated the total number of police pa-
trols that were encountered during the hours of data collection.

Measurements were taken for 6 weeks before and 12 weeks af-
fter the opening of the safer injecting facility. We chose these 2
periods to obtain sufficient follow-up to afford statistical power
while minimizing the potential effect of seasonal changes on drug
use patterns. In addition, because we recognized that rainfall pat-
terns could still confound rates of public drug use and other pub-
lic order measures, we also obtained daily rainfall statistics from
Environment Canada for the days measurements were taken.25

We applied a statistical protocol, defined a priori, to examine the
potential relation between the public order measures and the opera-
tion of the safer injecting facility. First, for the presentation of the
the crude weekly data, we recognized that measures within the same
week would likely be highly correlated. Therefore, for each public
order measure, we calculated a daily average for each week from the 3
daily counts that week. To test for changes in the various measures,
we compared the daily averages for the 6-week period before the
opening of the facility with the daily averages for the 12-week period
after the opening, using the Wilcoxon rank-sum test for non-
normally distributed data. Second, we recognized that, if there were a
relation between the public order measures and the operation of the
facility, it would likely be highly dependent on the rate of use of the
facility. We therefore evaluated the number of times that the facility
was used by IDUs on the days data were collected and tested for cor-
relations between daily use of the facility and the daily counts of each
public order measure using Spearman’s correlation coefficient.
Third, we fit Poisson log-linear regression models with the daily
counts of each of the public order measures as the independent vari-
able and potential explanatory variables (e.g., police presence, rainfall) as
the independent variables. Although most IDUs do not discard their
syringes in public in Vancouver, each public order measure was con-
sidered in separate regression models because we assumed that the
measures would be highly correlated.21 We examined the indepen-
doent variables in unadjusted linear regression models and then ad-
justed for rainfall, police presence and study period (before v. after
the facility’s opening). Parameter estimates from the unadjusted re-
gression models were used to calculate the predicted mean daily
numbers (and 95% confidence intervals [CIs]) of IDUs injecting in
public, publicly discarded syringes and injection-related litter in the 2
study periods. Finally, as an external measure of the impact of the
safer injecting facility on public drug use, we examined data from the
city of Vancouver on the number of syringes discarded in the 6 out-
door safe disposal boxes in the study area during the 2 study periods.
All p values were 2-sided, with a significance level of p < 0.05.

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Fig. 1: Mean daily numbers of injection drug users (IDUs) who
visited Vancouver’s safer injecting facility, IDUs who injected
in public, publicly discarded syringes and injection-related litter
counted during the 6 weeks before and the 12 weeks after
the facility opened. Dotted line represents opening of facility.
Results

The operating hours of Vancouver’s safer injecting facility were 10 am to 4 am every day. The mean number of visits to the facility in the first week of operation was 184; this number increased to 504 visits 2 months later (Fig. 1).

When we compared data before the periods after and before the opening of the facility, we found statistically significant reductions in the daily mean numbers of IDUs injecting in public (4.3 [interquartile range (IQR) 4.0–4.3] v. 2.4 [IQR 1.5–3.0]; \( p = 0.022 \)), publicly discarded syringes (11.5 [IQR 7.3–14.3] v. 5.3 [IQR 3.0–8.0]; \( p = 0.010 \)) and injection-related litter (601.7 [IQR 490.0–830.3] v. 305.3 [IQR 246.3–387.0] ; \( p = 0.014 \)) (Fig. 1). When we tested for correlations between daily counts of facility usage and daily counts of the 3 public order measures, we found that the correlations were statistically significant (\( p < 0.001 \)) in each case (public injection drug use, \( r = -0.48 \); publicly discarded syringes, \( r = -0.56 \); and injection-related litter, \( r = -0.62 \)). The daily mean number of suspected drug dealers was 45.2 in the period before and 40.7 in the period after the opening of the facility; the difference was not statistically significant (\( p = 0.34 \)).

In the Poisson log-linear regression model in which the number of IDUs injecting in public per day was the dependent variable, the period after the opening of the safer injecting facility was associated with a statistically significant reduction in the count (\( \beta \) coefficient = –0.59; \( p < 0.001 \)), whereas daily rainfall (\( \beta \) coefficient = –0.008; \( p = 0.42 \)) and police presence (\( \beta \) coefficient = 0.004; \( p = 0.91 \)) were not. In the model considering the number of publicly discarded syringes observed per day, all 3 variables were independently associated with a reduction in the number: period after opening of facility, \( \beta \) coefficient = –0.76 (\( p < 0.001 \); daily rainfall, \( \beta \) coefficient = –0.02 (\( p = 0.025 \); and police presence, \( \beta \) coefficient = 0.05 (\( p = 0.040 \)). Similarly, in the third model the 3 variables were independently associated with a reduction in the count of injection-related litter observed per day: period after opening of facility, \( \beta \) coefficient = –0.66 (\( p < 0.001 \)); daily rainfall, \( \beta \) coefficient = –0.006 (\( p < 0.001 \); and police presence, \( \beta \) coefficient = 0.04 (\( p < 0.001 \)). After adjustment for rainfall and police presence, the period after the opening of the facility remained associated with a reduction in public injection drug use (\( \beta \) coefficient = –0.61; \( p < 0.001 \)), publicly discarded syringes (\( \beta \) coefficient = –0.72; \( p < 0.001 \)) and injection-related litter (\( \beta \) coefficient = –0.72; \( p < 0.001 \)).

Using the parameter estimates from the unadjusted regression model, we calculated the predicted mean daily level of each public order measure in the periods before and after the opening of the safer injecting facility (Table 1). The predicted mean daily number of IDUs injecting drugs in public 4.3 (95% CI 3.5–5.4) before the facility opened and 2.4 (95% CI 1.9–3.0) after it opened. The corresponding values were 11.5 (95% CI 10.0–13.2) and 5.4 (95% CI 4.7–6.3) for the predicted daily mean number of publicly discarded syringes and 601 (95% CI 590–613) and 310 (95% CI 305–317) for the predicted daily mean count of injection-related litter.

When we examined the number of syringes discarded in the neighbourhood’s 6 outdoor safe disposal boxes, the mean number per box per week was significantly higher before than after the safer injecting facility opened (30.9 v. 9.4; \( p < 0.001 \)).

Interpretation

We found significant reductions in public injection drug use, publicly discarded syringes and injection-related litter after the opening of the medically supervised safer injecting facility in Vancouver. These reductions were independent of law enforcement activities and changes in rainfall patterns.

Our findings are consistent with anecdotal reports of improved public order following the establishment of safer injecting facilities\(^{12,13}\) and are not surprising given that a commonly reported reason for public drug use is the lack of an alternative place to inject and that IDUs who go to safer injecting facilities are often homeless or marginally housed.\(^{26}\) Our findings are also highly plausible since more than 500 IDUs visited the facility daily after it opened, and several feasibility studies have suggested that IDUs who inject in public would be the most likely to use safer injecting facilities.\(^{13,27}\) Our observations suggest that the establishment of the safer injecting facility has resulted in measurable improvements in public order, which in turn may improve the liveability of communities and benefit tourism while reducing community concerns stemming from public drug use and discarded syringes.\(^{7,10}\) It is also noteworthy that we did not observe an increase in the number of drug dealers in the vicinity of the facility, which indicates that the facility’s opening did not have a negative impact on drug dealing in the area. Although further study of these issues is necessary, the safer injecting facility may also offer public health benefits, since public injection drug use has been associated with an array of health-related harms.\(^{11,12,18}\)

Our study has limitations. Although we attempted to reduce the effect of seasonality by limiting the duration of the study, a seasonal fluctuation in drug use patterns may have

| Measure                                      | Predicted daily mean no. (and 95% CI)                  |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Before the facility opened                   | After the facility opened                               |
| IDUs injecting in public                     | 4.3 (3.5–5.4)                                          |
| Publicly discarded syringes                  | 11.5 (10.0–13.2)                                       |
| Injection-related litter                     | 601 (590–613)                                          |

Note: CI = confidence interval.
*Parameter estimates from the unadjusted Poisson log-linear regression models were used to calculate the predicted means (see Methods for details).
affected our findings. However, our estimates did not change significantly after adjustment for daily rainfall statistics, and seasonal reductions in public drug use have not been previously observed in Vancouver.\textsuperscript{12,13} The uncontrolled nature of our study also raises the potential for an observer bias. This bias, if it existed, is an unlikely explanation since our findings are consistent with anecdotal reports from police and other agencies in the neighbourhood that have reported reduced public injection drug use in the wake of the safer injecting facility’s opening.\textsuperscript{20-22} and police have reportedly been helping IDUs find the facility. Furthermore, our findings were consistent with the city’s compiled data regarding discarded syringes in the outdoor safe disposal boxes.

In summary, we documented significant reductions in the number of IDUs injecting in public, publicly discarded syringes and injection-related litter after the opening of the medically supervised safer injecting facility. These reductions appeared to be independent of several potential confounders, and our findings were supported by external data sources. Although the overall health impacts of the facility will take several years to evaluate, the findings from this study should be valuable to other cities that are contemplating similar evaluations and should have substantial relevance to many urban areas where public injection drug use has been associated with substantial public health risks\textsuperscript{11,12,13} and adverse community impacts.\textsuperscript{11-13}

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From the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, St. Paul’s Hospi
tal, Vancouver, BC (all authors); the Department of Health Care and Epidemiol
ogy (Wood) and the Department of Medicine (Montaner, Tyndall), University of
British Columbia, Vancouver, BC; the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network,
Montréal, Que. (Kerr); and Vancouver Coastal Health (Marsh), Vancouver, BC.

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Correspondence to: Dr. Evan Wood, Division of Epidemiology and Population Health, BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, 608–1081 Burrard St., Vancouver BC V6Z 1Y6; fax 604 806-9044; ewood@cfenet.ubc.ca