

Normalization and harm reduction: Research avenues and policy agendas

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Abstract

An affinity between the evidence and arguments for drug normalization and the policy and programme directions favoured by harm reduction is often assumed but seldom critically examined. This commentary looks at parallels and contradictions emerging with respect to different cultures, social settings, types of problems and responses where the match is less than perfect. Mounting evidence of normalization has also led to backlash in some countries and the mobilization of forces reaffirming prohibition. We call for further research on normalization that focuses on substance use, risks, harms, and social context across a broader spectrum of the population, and in a variety of cultures. By emphasizing the most serious harms experienced by persons in the smallest segments of drug using populations, harm reduction often has neglected broader research and policy suggestions that might be implemented to benefit controlled, recreational drug users. Future policy development with respect to normalization will require more research and more serious discussion of its implications for informing the transition toward a global public health approach to substance use.

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