

POINT SOURCE YOUTH PRESENTS:

# THE INTERSECTIONS OF HARM REDUCTION, COVID-19, AND YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Hansel Tookes, MD, MPH  
Frederick Altice, MD, MA  
Drew Gibson, MSW

Harm reduction is the social justice oriented belief in the rights for marginalized communities, especially those who use substances, engage in sex work, and experience housing instability. Harm reduction aims to create community- informed programs that literally reduce the harm that folks encounter. Harm reduction models are needed now more than ever to transform the punitive and carceral systems that shape the lives of youth.



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Harm reduction is inherently tied to abolition and anti-racist work. It is opposite to paternalistic, top down services. Healthcare and social service workers cannot continue to pull youth through systems that ultimately belittle, gate-keep, and incarcerate predominately Black and Brown youth. Harm reduction is a tool to create equitable systems based in community care, restorative justice, empowerment, and equity.



## Q + A

**Can you discuss the importance of implementing a harm reduction framework while supporting youth living with HIV and those at risk?**

At first we couldn't give antiretrovirals to people using drugs. If someone was actively using, the idea was that they couldn't be responsible enough to take meds, which is entirely false. Harm reduction is opposite to paternalistic, top down services. Paternalism doesn't work. People living with HIV, people experiencing homelessness, and people who use drugs are people first. People-first framework is integral to harm reduction and youth have to be an active participant in their care. Engage them in the process.

## Q+A (CONTINUED)

**Many are ignoring the economic crisis COVID-19 is creating. How can we work to better manage and address the stress placed on youth, families, and youth support networks, to prevent a new wave of youth homelessness?**

There is the idea that public health and economic health philosophies are in competition. Public health and a healthy economy are not mutually exclusive. We have to consider the short term against the long term. We are seeing this play out in interesting ways. People are suffering economically and social services will have to take the symptoms of that economic suffering on. There has to be national leadership. We have had governors who see efforts in public and economic health as reinforcing. We need to look at what that formula is and push it at the national level. We have to have a continuation of subsidies, unemployment, and other assistance. This is a long haul problem. We also have a third converging epidemic: universal racism. The BLM movement is a place to think about the collision of these public movements.



**AS HARM REDUCTIONISTS, WE ARE ROOTED IN COMPASSION. WE HAVE TO MAKE SURE AS WE PIVOT AND ADAPT TO THIS NEW WORLD. WE CAN PRESERVE THE ELEMENTS OF KINDNESS, SMILES, AND HOPEFULLY ONE DAY A HUG FOR THE PEOPLE THAT WE SERVE.**

**-DR. HANSEL TOOKES**



## ACTIONS TO TAKE NOW

1. Find your local harm reduction coalition and syringe exchange program. They exist all over the country and are vital resources for folks in your community.
2. Talk to your local government and elected officials about harm reduction. Funding for harm reduction is greatly needed ,and policies around harm reduction strategies have to be championed.
3. People from the community you serve to the front! Ask, advocate, empathize, and employ youth with lived experience in substance use, housing instability, and sex work. Lived experience is just as, if not more important than degrees.
4. Don't let harmful bureaucracy return. Red tape has been removed during COVID-19 and we are able to house, connect, and provide resources quickly, effectively, and with innovative changes. Advocate for these changes to remain.



**HARM REDUCTION IS BORN OF PEOPLE TAKING CARE OF EACH OTHER. WE MADE PROGRAMS TO TAKE CARE OF OUR COMMUNITY BECAUSE NO ONE ELSE IS GOING TO TAKE CARE OF OUR COMMUNITIES.**

***-DR. HANSEL TOOKES***

## RESOURCES & LINKS

- [S.1455 - 114th Congress \(2015-2016\): TREAT Act | Congress.gov | Library of Congress](#)
- [AIDS United](#)
- [Harm Reduction Coalition](#)
- [White Coats For Black Lives](#)
- [The JACQUES Initiative | University of Maryland School of Medicine](#)
- [IDEA Exchange at Miller School of Medicine](#)
- [Police Handcuff Black Doctor Who Tests Homeless for Coronavirus](#)
- [Drug Policy Alliance](#)
- [Interim Guidance for Syringe Services Programs](#)
- [NASTAD](#)
- [North American Syringe Exchange Network | NASEN](#)
- [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30984-3/fulltext#.Xqx1f7oi6xg.twitter](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30984-3/fulltext#.Xqx1f7oi6xg.twitter)
- [Federal Government Approves Methadone Deliveries During Pandemic : Coronavirus Live Updates](#)