



# What You Should Know About: Needle Exchange Programs

Office of National Drug Control Policy 2007

## Overview

Needle exchange programs (NEPs) were once touted as effective deterrents against disease and drug use. Today, research shows that the programs' effect is questionable, and may, in fact, lead to an increase in disease incidence rates, as they do not curb the risky behaviors associated with needle-sharing.

The September 2006 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report provides the most recent comprehensive analysis of the ineffectiveness of needle exchange for reducing HIV and Hepatitis C infection rates.

The report concludes the following:

- A direct link between needle exchange and HIV reduction does not exist, based on current studies. Evidence regarding the effect of needle exchange on HIV incidence is "limited and inconclusive."
- Needle exchange programs have "significantly less impact on transmission and acquisition of Hepatitis C," which remains a serious public health threat.
- Most HIV infections are "the result of sexual transmission, rather than needle sharing." The report further states that because NEPs do nothing to control the risky behavior associated with drug use, incidence rates may well increase, even with the provision of clean needles, as needle sharing is only one of many vectors for disease transmission.
- Evidence is "weak" and "limited," failing to mitigate concerns that needle exchange programs lead to new drug users and increases in crime, as well as expand illegal drug networks.
- There exist "potential unintended consequences of HIV prevention programs that include needle and syringe exchange, such as increases in new drug users or in discarded needles in the community."

### *Additional factors that call into question the effectiveness of needle exchange programs:*

- NEPs may undermine community drug prevention messages and programs.
- Providing needles acts as a way for drug users to sustain and support their intravenous drug use and does not address the primary illness of addiction itself.
- Needle exchange programs direct critical resources away from treatment and intervention programs, which have been proven to significantly affect HIV infection rates and reduce drug use.

