Portland Nonprofit Distributes Free Meth Pipes to Combat Hepatitis C and HIV

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Volunteers with the nonprofit harm reduction group Portland People's Outreach Project (PPOP, pronounced "P-pop") have started handing out free meth pipes to the city's drug users, in a move they hope will cut back on injection drug use and reduce transmission of diseases like hepatitis C virus (HCV) and HIV in their community, Street Roots reports. The controversial move makes the Portland metro area the second city in the country, after Seattle, with an official meth pipe program.

In Oregon, 21 percent of people who inject drugs test positive for hep C, according to a May 2015 report from the Oregon Health Authority. Studies also show that people who smoke methamphetamine and crack have a higher prevalence of HCV than the general population. By encouraging drug users to stop injecting the drug and helping to cut back on pipe sharing—which some harm reduction experts think may also be leading to hep C transmission—the PPOP meth pipe program intends to address both issues.

Under the initiative, 10 PPOP volunteers ride their bikes around the city every Friday night, offering free syringes, hygiene kits, socks and now, meth pipes to homeless people and drug users in the streets. The health outreach workers, most of whom are former or current drug users themselves, aren't interested in referring people to addiction treatment. Instead, they aim to foster a respectful discourse about safer drug habits.

PPOP program follows the lead of Seattle-based People's Harm Reduction Alliance, an umbrella organization for the Portland nonprofit that has been handing out meth pipes since 2015. A recent informal survey by the larger organization showed that 49 percent of meth users serviced in Seattle said they started injecting less often after receiving a pipe.

Regardless, there has not yet been any scientifically sound study showing that meth pipes cut down on transmission or prevent meth users from transitioning to injection drug use. The move may also not be entirely legal in Oregon, which has a relatively strict paraphernalia statute. Portland's police chief has recommended that anyone planning to hand out meth pipes in the city consult a lawyer before doing so, and has not yet promised to halt any "enforcement actions" related to the program.

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