

NEEDLE SYNDROME

There is a direct link between the level of welfare provided by a country and its injecting drug user population - and the government would do well to heed this, says **Alex Stevens**.

The recent consultation on drug strategy stressed the government's ambition to help drug users recover to abstinence. But the current assault on welfare will make it harder to achieve this goal.

People who are having problems with drug dependence face a multiple whammy of welfare cuts. The axe is being taken to housing benefit, working tax credits, incapacity benefit and the employment and support allowance.

The proposals to cut housing benefit will make it harder for people to find stable accommodation. Moves to get people off incapacity benefit and the Employment and Support Allowance can only mean tough times ahead for the clients of drug services.

Release - the charity that provides free legal advice to drug users - has already reported an increase in people being denied these benefits, and then winning their case on appeal, after months of uncertainty and lower payments. All these changes conflict directly with the well-known idea that people need welfare assistance to support their recovery.

In the research that I have done with people in both court-ordered and voluntary treatment, we repeatedly found people who could only deal with stabilising and reducing their drug use, once their housing and income needs had been met. People who have no option but to surf sofas to find shelter, or to beg or steal food to eat, find it hard to engage successfully in the demands of drug treatment. They often want to get back on their own feet, paying taxes instead of taking benefits, but this is not a change that can be wished into being by politicians in Westminster.

It is a daily struggle for people who often have high mental health needs, few qualifications and very dodgy CVs. It is hard for them to find legal work at the best of times, let alone at the back end



of a recession when half a million public sector workers are about to be followed onto the dole by a similar number from the private sector.

The idea that welfare support helps to reduce drug problems is supported by new analysis that I have done of international influences on problematic drug use. *The Spirit Level* (by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett) has already shown that rates of drug use and a wide variety of social problems tend to be higher in countries with higher levels of income inequality. Countries with high inequality and with low welfare support also tend to have higher rates of imprisonment.

This got me thinking that there may be an international link between welfare and drug problems. When I tested the relationship between levels of welfare (measured by levels of unemployment benefit, sickness pay

and pensions, wrapped up in an index of 'decommodification') and problematic drug use (using the levels of injecting drug use collated by the WHO as a proxy), I found that there is a moderate to strong, statistically significant, negative correlation between them. Countries which have higher rates of welfare support tend to have lower rates of injecting drug use.

Cutting welfare will make it much harder for the people who suffer most from inequality to avoid and recover from dependent drug use. It is not only the economic recovery that is threatened by current policies.

■ **Alex Stevens** is Professor in Criminal Justice at the University of Kent and author of *Drugs, Crime and Public Health: The Political Economy of Drug Policy* (Routledge)