

14.4 No major 'honeypot' effect after safer injecting centre opens

Findings Australia's only safer injecting centre has confounded fears that it would prove a 'honeypot' for drug use, dealing and crime.

The facility opened in Sydney in May 2001 in an inner city neighbourhood notorious for drug use, prostitution and gambling, offering injectors a medically supervised site in which to inject plus harm reduction and referral services. Police records for just over two years before the opening were compared against roughly a year and a half afterwards. Despite a spike due to a national heroin shortage starting four months beforehand, by the time the centre opened, robberies and thefts in the area were trending downward. That it had little impact on crime is suggested by similar trends in the rest of the city, and by the fact that the proportion of the city's drug dealing or heroin and cocaine use/possession crimes accounted for by the area around the centre did not increase after it opened.

Study staff patrolled the immediate vicinity of the centre for about seven months before its opening and 18 months afterwards, recording the number of people 'loitering' and whether this was related to drug use or dealing. Counts were low throughout. Loitering did increase when the centre opened but soon started to decrease. Drug-related loitering fell slightly at the front of the centre but became more noticeable (though still rare) at the back. By six months after the opening (but not before), fairly consistent reports of increased loitering emerged during interviews with local residents, workers and police. The police view was that drug users who previously met elsewhere were now meeting near the centre.

In context On balance [the study](#) suggests a small increase in the number of drug users congregating near the centre and that this concerned some in the community, but also that this was not a major feature, that it probably represented displacement from other areas (implying no net increase in public nuisance), and did not result in an increase in drug-related crime. Little evidence of a 'honeypot' effect, and the fact that after the centre opened residents and businesses saw fewer people injecting and fewer discarded syringes, may partly account for increased community support after its opening. This included a reduction in the proportion of local residents and workers who believed such facilities attract drug users to the area. However, all this must be seen in the context of a tightly controlled, limited capacity service with some security presence at the entrance.

An evaluation of the first 18 months of the centre ([Additional reading](#)) reported 56,861 visits by 3810 registered users who experienced 409 overdoses, of which in a year at least four and perhaps nine would otherwise have been fatal. However, given its small capacity the centre made no discernable impact on the local overdose rate. Elsewhere researchers have demonstrated decreased health risks for injecting centre users and improvements in the local environment due to less public injecting and drug-related litter.

Practice implications To be used, centres need to be conveniently located, which will often mean near or within business and residential districts, but they will only be considered if these areas also have a pre-existing concentration of drug-related activity. In such areas, relatively small centres with adequate security need not cause a problematic increase in numbers of drug users or in related crime, and can reduce the offence and alarm caused by public injecting and injecting-related litter, as well as contributing to health gains for injectors and their associates. Compared to needle exchanges (which they should supplement, not replace), injecting centres offer a greater opportunity to reduce infection spread and foster safer injecting techniques, potentially reducing the need for medical care. They also offer more opportunities to engage injectors in therapeutic and social re-integration initiatives with a view to ending dependent drug use.

Featured studies Freeman K. *et al.* "The impact of the Sydney Medically Supervised Injecting Centre (MSIC) on crime." *Drug and Alcohol Review*. 2005, 24(2), p. 173–184 [DS](#) **LINKS** Nuggets 13.7 12.8

Additional reading MSIC Evaluation Committee. *Final report of the evaluation of the Sydney Medically Supervised Injection Centre*. 2003. Download from www.sydneymxic.com/pdf/FinalReport.pdf

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