

# Canada to test first needle exchange program in a North American prison

Program aims to stop the spread of infections such as HIV, Aids and hepatitis C among inmates who are drug users

[Leyland Cecco](#) in Toronto

**The Guardian -Tue 15 May 2018 16.40 BST**

**Last modified on Tue 15 May 2018 16.50 BST**

[Canada](#) is set to test the first needle exchange program in a North American prison in a bid to stop the spread of infections such as HIV, Aids and hepatitis C among drug users behind bars. The pilot project will be launched in June, in a men's facility in New Brunswick and a women's prison in Ontario – both chosen for high rates of injection drug use. While diabetic inmates have had access to needles for years, this marks the first time drug users will be given similar resources.

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Over the last decade, the percentage of HIV-positive Canadian inmates has fallen by nearly half, but rates of infection remain 200 times more common in the country's prisons than among the general public. Hepatitis C is 260 times more common among prisoners than the general public, according to public health officials.

"We're focused on ensuring that correctional institutions are secure environments conducive to inmate rehabilitation, staff safety and the protection of the public," said public safety minister Ralph Goodale in a statement.

Advocacy groups applauded the move. "This is something we've been working toward for more than 20 years," said Sandra Ka Hon Chu of the Canadian HIV & Aids Legal Network, who said that needles can sometimes be shared more than 50 times between inmates.

The union representing correctional officers said the scheme set "a very dangerous precedent", arguing it puts their staff at greater risk.

"Correctional Service Canada has decided to close its eyes to drug trafficking in our institutions," Jason Godin, the union's president, said in a statement.

The program is partly a response to ongoing litigation against the government by legal advocacy groups and a former inmate, Steven Simons, who was infected with hepatitis C while incarcerated. The litigants argue the current "zero tolerance" policy on drugs and needles violates a constitutional right to life, liberty and security of the person.

While the program is the first of its kind in North America, a number of European countries have experimented with needle exchanges since 1994.

A World Health Organization survey of 55 European needle exchanges found no increase in drug use, nor did they find any instances of needles being used to threaten prison staff.

*Thomasine, Sweden*