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Transitions in income generation among marginalized people who use drugs: A qualitative study on recycling and vulnerability to violence

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Abstract

Background: Income is an important determinant of health among people who use drugs (PWUD). However, understanding transitions between differing types of income generation within the formal and informal economy and how they can be shaped by vulnerability to risk and harm remain poorly understood. This study examines how transitions in income-generating activities are shaped by and influence exposure to violence among marginalised PWUD, in Vancouver, Canada's, Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood.

Methods: Qualitative interviews were conducted with twenty-six individuals engaged in informal and illegal income-generating activities in the DTES. Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically, focusing on relationships between income generation and violence during the study period between January 2014 to April 2015 and drew upon concepts of social violence when interpreting these themes.

Results: Participants' engagement in informal and illegal income-generating activities represented a means to negotiate survival given multiple barriers to formal employment and inadequate economic supports. Our findings highlight how informal and illegal income-generating activities in the DTES are characterized by structural, symbolic and everyday violence, while transitions from 'high risk' (e.g., sex work, drug dealing) to perceived 'low risk' (e.g., recycling)

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activities represent attempts to reduce exposure to violence. However, participants emphasized how informal income generation was nonetheless shaped by structural violence (e.g., gendered hierarchies and police harassment), experienced as everyday violence, and introduced exposure to alternate risks.

Conclusion: Our findings underscore the critical role of income generation in shaping exposure to violence, highlighting the need for low-threshold employment interventions targeting PWUD as a central component of harm reduction strategies.

Keywords

Income Generation; Informal Recycling; Violence; Risk; Harm Reduction

Introduction

North American labour market participation trends have increasingly been characterized by under-employment and precarious employment, accompanied by a rapid reduction in social and economic supports and increased criminalization (Kalleberg 2011; Waquant, 2009). Commonly characterized as neoliberal policies, economic deregulation, welfare retrenchment, and the expansion of policies criminalizing the poor (e.g., by-law infraction ticketing), have resulted in social, economic and spatial inequalities that shape labour markets to the detriment of structurally vulnerable populations (Grabb & Hwang, 2009; Katz, 2003; Waquant, 2010). Here, structurally vulnerable populations are understood as groups occupying marginal positions within societal hierarchies, including labour markets (Farmer 2004), due to how socioeconomic and political arrangements intersect with socio-cultural processes (e.g., racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination) to shape opportunities and produce disparities in health and social outcomes over time (McNeil et al., 2015; Quesada et al., 2011). Potential linkages between neoliberal labour market restructuring and inequalities in health are a critical nexus for investigation given the embeddedness of multiple forms of disadvantage in processes that link labour market and health trajectories.

People who use drugs (PWUD) represent one population negatively impacted by neoliberal labour market structures (Bourgois, 1995; valentine, 2011). Unemployment among PWUD is common (Galea & Vlahov 2012; Henkel 2011; Richardson 2012), with drug-using populations typically characterized as incapable of and adverse to participation in formal employment (Richardson et al., 2013), despite evidence suggesting the capacity of PWUD to manage concurrent drug use and employment (French et al, 2001; see also Moore et al., 2017). The neoliberal rhetoric of individual responsibility, which shifts responsibility from the state to the individual, further serves to characterize unemployed PWUD as unproductive and culpable, obscuring the influence of macro systemic factors (Fraser & Moore, 2008). Problematic substance use and drug use are too often framed as solely an individual health and/or criminal and moral issue, and in the context of neoliberalism are often discussed without reference to contextual and systemic forces that shape drug use. However, this framing of the willingness and readiness of PWUD to engage in formal employment ignores a lack of systematic empirical evidence to support this claim. Further, it oversimplifies heterogeneous causal pathways linking drug use and labour market trajectories, as well as

the considerable social and structural barriers that limit their access to labour markets, including but not limited to: health status, limited work skills or experience, lack of education, criminal record, low self-esteem, intimate partner violence, minority status and the stigmatization of drug use (Boyd & Boyd, 2014; Chandler et al., 2004; Gutmen et al., 2003; McCoy et al., 2007; Morgenstern et al., 2003). Paradoxically, barriers faced by many marginalized PWUD who experience socio-economic vulnerability stem from a convergence of structural factors and policies that shape access to housing, encounters with criminal justice, welfare, addiction treatment regulations, and employment (Bungay et al., 2010; DeBeck et al., 2011; Galea & Vlahov, 2002; Henkel 2011; Richardson et al., 2012, 2013 & 2016). Unemployment and poverty are significant determinants of health disparities among marginalized PWUD (Galea & Vlahov, 2002; Najman, 2008). However, the substantial stigma experienced by PWUD, driven by multiple factors including the criminalization of drug use, impedes labour force involvement, while further contributing to health disparities (Damon et al., 2017; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013; Livingston et al., 2012; Strathdee et al., 2012). Although the quality and quantity of labour market involvement significantly impacts health, access to formal employment for marginalized PWUD remains limited (DeBeck et al., 2011; Kalleberg, 2011; Richardson, Wood and Kerr, 2013; valentine, 2011).

Past quantitative research has characterized the absence of and barriers to formal opportunities as prompting some PWUD to engage in informal or illegal survival work, such as drug dealing, sex work, theft, recycling, squeegeeing (windshield washing) and panhandling (Krebs et al., 2016; Richardson et al., 2015a). While the heterogeneous forms of informal and illegal income generation among socio-economically marginalized drug-using populations may be characterized by fewer entry barriers and increased flexibility, they commonly involve a broad range of occupational vulnerabilities, including employer exploitation and limited access to social and formal legal protection such as employment insurance, workplace protections and workers' compensation (International Labour Organization, 2014). In many settings, PWUD engaged in informal and illegal income generation are not protected by labour laws and are subject to varying degrees of stigmatization, harassment, violence, apprehension and arrest (Miller & Neaigus 2002; Parizeau, 2015; Pivot Legal Society 2016; Richardson et al., 2015b). How PWUD move *between* forms of income generation, however, including their attempts to and motivations for such transitions, remains poorly understood, particularly empirically.

Importantly, there is cause to consider how PWUD's income generating activities are framed by *social violence*, a combination of violence operating at the structural, everyday, and symbolic levels. Structural violence refers to social structures or institutions embedded within our social world (i.e., capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, drug criminalization) that perpetuate and normalize inequality and produce social suffering among structurally vulnerable populations (for example, through socio-economic marginalization, institutionalized gender inequality and racism, as well as criminalization) (Galtung, 1969; Farmer, 2004). With symbolic violence, the mechanisms that sustain and perpetuate inequality are naturalized to such an extent that the structurally vulnerable blame *themselves* for their social-structural subordination (Bourdieu, 2001). Neoliberal policies (e.g., divestment in social service provisions) and discourses (e.g., of self-management and individual responsibility) have further entrenched structural and symbolic violence (Million

2013). The interconnection of structural and symbolic violence shape the ‘everyday’ violence experienced by PWUD in diverse contexts (Bourgois et al., 2004; Bungay et al., 2010; Shannon et al., 2008ab) while simultaneously rendering social violence invisible. Here, social suffering is normalized and thus legitimized, thereby obscuring how structural violence also shapes interpersonal violence, among a range of other adverse outcomes (Bourgois et al., 2004; McNeil, 2014). Common drivers, such as stigma and criminalization, produce and entrench the social disadvantage that characterize both socio-economic marginalization and vulnerability to violence, as well as health disparities. As such, there is a need to turn attention to the relationship between manifestations of social violence and income generation activities of PWUD to better understand how broader social-structural factors mediate their everyday experiences and, in turn, shape their vulnerability to violence, exploitation, and adverse health.

Vancouver, Canada’s Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood is the site of complex social-structural tensions inherent to neoliberal policies, with entrenched poverty and drug use occurring in the context of rapid gentrification and economic restructuring. Social-structural inequality stemming from neoliberal urbanism, including federal disinvestment in low-income housing, increased contract and temporary work, insufficient and stagnant levels of income assistance and the emergence of new forms of carceral control (e.g., surveillance expansion, targeted policing), shape the everyday lives of PWUD in this neighbourhood (Boyd et al., 2016; Krebs et al., 2016). Over the past several decades, these forms of structural violence have driven epidemics of gendered violence (Bungay, 2010; Culhane, 2003; Jiwani & Young, 2006; Oppal, 2012; Shannon et al., 2008b), fatal and non-fatal overdose and infectious disease outbreaks (HIV, Hepatitis C) (BC Coroners Service 2017; Wood et al., 2007), while disproportionately impacting women, gender minorities, and Indigenous peoples (Amnesty International 2009; Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, 2014; Lyons et al., 2016). The province’s extensive adaption of neoliberal labour and social policy measures (Grabb, E., & Hwang, M., 2009; Katz, 2003; Teghtsoonian, 2003), along with the increasingly stringent restrictions on and stagnation of social assistance rates for over a decade and aggressive gentrification pressures (Burnett 2014; Klein et al., 2017; Wallstam et al., 2016), contribute to entrenched poverty in the DTES.

Against this backdrop is a robust informal and illegal economic economy and visible street scene, including drug selling, sex work, and informal recycling (DeBeck et al., 2007; Parizeau 2017). Informal recycling involves the salvaging of discarded material for the purpose of reselling, repurposing, or recycling for income (Gowan, 1997; Tremblay et al., 2010; Wittmer & Parizeau, 2016). In Vancouver, such survival strategies are more often a target of policing, framed as ‘public disorder’, exacerbated by the proximity of the drug scene with urban redevelopment (DeBeck et al., 2011; Parizeau 2017; Richardson et al., 2015b; Small et al., 2013; Shannon et al., 2008a).

Attentive to the need to further comprehend transitions between forms of income-generating activities among PWUD, this study was undertaken to better understand attempts to and motivations for movement between formal, informal and illegal income-generating activities among marginalized PWUD in Vancouver’s DTES. Also of interest was how such transitions were influenced by, and produce exposure to, social violence. Understanding

income-generating pathways among PWUD has important implications for the development of interventional approaches to promote greater material security and thus improved health among PWUD.

METHODS

This study harnessed an ethno-epidemiological research infrastructure involving two prospective cohort studies of drug-using populations (19 and older): the Vancouver Injection Drug Users Study (VIDUS; HIV-negative); and, the AIDS Care Cohort to evaluate Exposure to Survival Services (ACCESS; HIV-positive). Between January 2014 and April 2015, this study was undertaken to examine influences underlying transitions between types of income-generating activities among PWUD.

Cohort participants were eligible to participate if they reported the following during baseline or bi-annual cohort surveys in the study period: (1) illicit drug use (other than marijuana) in the previous six months; and, (2) involvement in informal recycling resulting in weekly income of at least CAD \$100 (men) or \$50 (women). A lesser amount of income was chosen for women to promote their representation in the qualitative study sample, given their underrepresentation in the cohorts. All participants were involved in at least one non-recycling-related form of income generation, although this was not part of the eligibility criteria. Following their cohort interviews, eligible participants were referred by cohort study interviewers to the study Research Coordinator, who explained the study procedures and invited them to participate. In addition, one man was recruited from outside the cohort studies, who was part of a recycling partnership with a cohort participant.

The Research Coordinator (SA) and Senior Author (RM) conducted all interviews at the cohort study research office. Interviewers explained the study procedures and obtained written informed consent prior to the interviews. The interview guide contained questions to facilitate discussion of a range of topics, including: (1) past employment in the formal economy; (2) transitions into and between types of informal and illegal income generation; (3) structural inequities related to labour force participation (e.g., poverty, education, and incarceration shape employment opportunities); and, (4) relationships between income generation, drug use, and health. Twenty-six individuals participated in this study (see demographics in Table 1), twelve of whom took part in follow-up interviews approximately six months after their initial interview to enable follow-up on themes that emerged during initial analyses. All interviews were approximately 45 min in length, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants each received a CAD \$30 honorarium following the completion of their interview.

Interview transcripts were imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, and analyzed by the Lead and Senior Authors (JB, RM) using inductive methods (Creswell, 2009). Interviews were analyzed by generating emergent categories while coding data (Creswell, 2009) with an emphasis on individual and extra-individual influences on transitions between forms of income generation, and their relationships to violence and health-related risks. An intersectional lens attentive to structural vulnerabilities was employed while coding data to identify how overlapping systems of oppression, domination

and discrimination were experienced by participants on the basis of their social identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status; Collins, 1990; Varcoe et al., 2008) and how these shaped their income generating opportunities, health, and well-being. Finally, concepts of social violence (Bourgois et al.; 2004; Farmer, 2004) were drawn on to interpret the thematic categories and further delineate social-structural forces underlying income generating opportunities (structural violence), routinized violence (everyday violence), and the internalization of extreme poverty (symbolic violence) in the lives of participants, including on the basis of their social identities.

All participants engaged in informal recycling as a means of income generation (some had been recycling for over a decade), and almost all had engaged in full-time employment at some point in their lives. Participants' ages ranged from 33–63. Eleven of the 26 participants were women, nine self-identified as Indigenous (as First Nations, Inuit or Metis) and one participant reported Hispanic ethnicity. During interviews, respondents indicated they experienced social and economic marginalization; they were also all precariously housed at the time of the interview, and reported regular illicit substance use, including crystal methamphetamine, crack cocaine, opiates and injection cocaine.

FINDINGS

Barriers to formal employment

Intersecting macro-social and structural forces interrupted and constrained access to formal employment opportunities among participants. The majority of participants reported prior engagement with 'formal employment', ranging from trades (e.g., roofing, carpentry) to other forms of manual labour (e.g., landscaping, factory work) and service-sector jobs (e.g., housecleaning, restaurant work). Formal employment in Canada involves some labour protections, and thus increased security.

Although many participants expressed a desire for formal employment, they cited multiple overlapping factors that propelled their transition from formal to informal employment. This included an inability to maintain previous standards of productivity due to health-related issues such as injury, disability and substance use-related causes, as well as discriminatory barriers to formal employment. Participants expressed the difficulties of maintaining formal employment stemming from drug use patterns, including a lack of time and space to consume drugs while managing work schedules under drug criminalization and a lack of legal access to drugs, as is illustrated by the following participant's comment:

My whole paycheck was going to heroin [and work] eventually starts to slide [...] Who do you want drug addicts to work for? Would you trust someone who's a drug addict working for you? I wouldn't. [...] If they legalize heroin or something, if you can go and you can get your shot in the morning [and] a shot at night, that would be great. (Participant #12, White Man, 49 years old)

Negotiating drug use within a labour context that values abstinence amidst a broader culture of criminalization is complex. The linkage between structural conditions characterizing drug use, specifically discrimination, stigma and criminalization (structural violence), and individual capacities and opportunities to engage with the labour market (often framed

through narratives of symbolic violence, evidenced in the above respondent's query of "trust") was prevalent throughout participant narratives.

In addition to the complex and multiple overlapping structural vulnerabilities leading to severe marginalization, participants experienced unequal treatment across a range of axes of difference, including those relating to race, age, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, social-class and as part of their status as drug users who are criminalized. One Indigenous woman related experiences of racial discrimination as instrumental to her labour trajectory:

It just seems harder to get a job. [...] There's a lot of prejudice out there and I know that's one reason why they, that stupid [local company] wouldn't hire me. [It] doesn't have one Native person working in that place. [...] It just seemed like a lot of jobs that I put applications in for just...you could almost feel the, you know, the hatred coming from a person...I could just tell by the way they talked to me and treated me. The questions they asked me. (Participant #3, Indigenous Woman, 49-years-old)

Likewise, an Indigenous man described the intersectional discrimination of drug use and racism, framed by the structural violence of drug criminalization and colonialism, as impacting his ability to find formal employment:

They [employers] just look at you and say 'uh we're not hiring', even though really they are. Even if you're experienced. I don't know [why], probably 'cause they think we're [Indigenous people] lazy and always on drugs or drunk or... (Participant #5, Indigenous Man, 47 years old)

This occurrence and intersection of racialized and drug use stigma (along with poverty), was implicated as a driver of labour market discrimination among multiple participants, including those who were members of other disadvantaged groups. Individuals faced with discrimination across multiple axes of difference sometimes 'misrecognized' their exclusion from formal employment as justifiable due to their status as PWUD (an example of symbolic violence). This magnification operated through their membership in groups already discriminated against based on stigmatizing characteristics inimical to successful engagement in the labour market.

Engaging in informal and illegal income generation

Given barriers to formal employment and inadequate economic and social supports, participants looked to the informal economy to subsist. Participants' engagement in informal and illegal income-generating activities represented a means to negotiate survival within the context of the structural violence of neoliberal policies, and reflected the loss of labour opportunities and retrenchment of social welfare systems. Informal income generation activities, characterized by participants as 'low risk,' along with low income reward, included informal recycling (known locally as "binning"), panhandling and squeegeeing. Illegal income generation activities, perceived as 'high risk' among participants with the possibility for higher income reward, included low-level street dealing, theft, and survival sex work. While sex work is not illegal in Canada, some activities associated with it are (e.g., communicating for the purpose of solicitation in specific settings or situations,

advertising sexual services) and the criminalization of purchasing sex upholds a model of asymmetrical criminalization. It is notable that risk perceptions of participants fell along lines of whether activities were sanctionable or implicated within criminal justice frameworks.

One participant took up informal recycling in an attempt to avoid further criminalization and the violence-related risks associated with robbery (which led to his imprisonment) and drug trafficking (an occupation that began during incarceration). He explained that after being released from a thirteen-year prison sentence that began at age seventeen, he lacked the necessary and expected experience with formal employment which was further complicated by his status as someone who uses drugs with a criminal record and, consequently, experienced extreme difficulties pursuing legal avenues of income generation: “I didn’t wanna get involved in any more crime after that [laughter], It was enough” (Participant #8, White Man, 55-years-old).

Many participants unsuccessful in finding formal employment turned to social assistance (such as disability and welfare) as a means of support. However, they found welfare and disability rates inadequate for subsistence and expressed a need to further supplement their incomes through informal income generation. The following participant noted his transition from formal employment to social assistance and informal employment due to injury:

I couldn’t work and welfare wasn’t very much money. I wanted spending money, so I figured without going and having to go out and steal or something, just pick up some bottles and cans. [I couldn’t work because] I had massive broken bones and stuff, and after I was able to get around and walk I figured I might as well do something. [...] At work, I fell and shattered my ankle. (Participant #5, Indigenous Man, 47-years-old)

Similarly, the following man also described initiation into informal recycling as a non-criminal means to supplement inadequate income from social assistance. He articulates several structural barriers to entering the formal labour market including specific reference to earning allowance thresholds that set caps on the amount of money people can make while on income assistance without penalty, noting that if he engages in part-time precarious employment, he risks losing social assistance —yet he is unable to acquire full-time work.

I was making a \$185 a month [on social assistance after rent] and, for my [drug] habit and everything else on top of it I mean, it just didn’t cut it... And, I’m just not into crime. It’s just not one of my things. So there was basically not very much going on [in terms of employment]. Urn, I could work for the temp [agency] but [...] then you had to have the materials and stuff [work boots, work clothes, etc.]. But anyways, I noticed people were binning and that’s when I first came to Vancouver and I thought I’d give it a try and that’s how I started it. [...] [Work from the temp agency] could be two or three days a week, and it could be one day. You don’t know. And I didn’t wanna risk anything happening to my assistance then. Just for that. If it was a full-time thing, then it woulda been okay but, just for off and on [employment], I didn’t wanna chance that. (Participant #18, White Man, 53-years-old)

For PWUD, having a reliable source of income can offer a means to manage drug use and economic instability. Experiences of extreme poverty and homelessness also proved to be substantial factors in transitions into informal income-generation:

Binning. Picking up bottles. I had no choice. You know cause, out here, fine they let you stay at a hostel for that period of time and give you five dollars in meal tickets but, that doesn't cover you for the whole day most of the time and you're starving when you go to bed (Participant #4, White Man, 54-years-old)

For many, poverty was perpetuated by the structural violence of inadequate social and economic supports services (e.g., insufficient meal tickets) and further entrenched through symbolic violence (e.g., the above respondent's perceived lack of 'choice'). Though informal recycling was described as a necessary, though stigmatized, activity for subsistence, many participants also characterized it as meaningful activity. For example, several participants appreciated its potential for environmental impact:

Anything I can save from the landfill, even just once, even just like say I saved this plate, and somebody uses it one more time, that's one more day that there's gonna be atmosphere for our species to breathe. (Participant #36, White Woman, 41 years old)

Transitions between income generation strategies: negotiating social violence

Participants' income generating activities were framed by intersecting forms of social violence operating at the structural, everyday, and symbolic levels. Labour market exclusion characterized by exposure to symbolic violence through the transmission of discrimination was combined with the structural violence of neoliberal policies that restricted opportunity and welfare system retrenchment. Additionally, although not always successful, participants' income generating activities reflected an attempt to limit exposure to everyday violence (e.g. sexual violence and associated HIV risk for women engaged in sex work) that commonly results from social and structural violence. Many participants' transitions from 'high risk' to perceived 'low risk' income generating activities represented such attempts. For example, one woman who transitioned from sex work to recycling felt safer with less risk of gender-based violence and HIV transmission associated with negotiating sex work transactions under structural conditions, including criminalization and extreme poverty. The following participant also transitioned from sex work to informal recycling to limit her exposure to gendered violence:

I was working the street and I just wanted to quit... I'd already had three bad dates [i.e., sexual assaults] – really bad. [...] I missed the money but I figured that's okay. I can still make money binning – with stuff that I find and all the bottles. I got regulars that save empties for me. [...] [Binning] is safer and more fun... You don't have to put up with the guys [and] worry about your life and anything except for slipping and falling off the bin. (Participant #3, Indigenous Woman, 49-years-old)

As noted by the participants, illegal income-generating activities, shaped by structural and everyday violence, led to exposure, exploitation, (gendered) violence and, for some, HIV risk, whereas informal recycling was perceived as relatively safer.

'Low risk' forms of income generation, however, also introduced new risks that functioned to perpetuate exposure to social violence as participants negotiated new income-generating milieus. For instance, a number of participants reported experiences of racialized violence from renters/homeowners when recycling. One participant explained:

People [get] violent 'cause you're in their garbage. The only reason you're in there is because you're looking for empties. You know you're not going through their garbage personally. But you can't tell people that. They come right out and call me names: "dirty Indian" and "drunken Indian" and it's like, I'm not drunk!
(Participant #3, Indigenous Woman, 49-years-old)

Participants described not only racialized violence but also gendered violence and discrimination because of the social norms that structured informal income generating opportunities. While many women participants described their transition to informal income generation as a means to reduce risks associated with sex work, they noted that they nevertheless continued to face other forms of gendered violence as they navigated settings and situations within the drug scene governed by social codes structured by gendered power hierarchies (see, for example, McNeil et al., 2014):

They see a single female... Well, you know, look at this bitch. She's just a whore. I get a lot of that from fellow binners. [They] steal my empties. They're just jealous, right, 'cause I find nice stuff. [...] [They think] women shouldn't be out there. It should be boys...It's gotten physical twice. [...] [One recycler] pulled out a knife. They didn't do anything but they just pulled out [the knife] trying to make a point. I said, "Hey, you can have it all [recyclables]. It's not worth my life. (Participant #6, white woman, 42 years old)

Structural violence is further constituted through the criminalization and police profiling of DTES residents. Participants noted that they experienced everyday violence from police through the confiscation of necessities (such as food), goods to be sold through street vending, and recycling materials (such as bottles, resulting in loss of income). Participants also described increased criminalization through ticketing practices meant to deter street vending despite their inability to pay any fines meted out, as well as routine warrant checks when recycling in neighbourhoods outside the DTES.

You're getting pushed around big time by the cops down here [the DTES]. Go get big criminals. Why are you fucking around with us that are picking up garbage, cleaning out and selling it to make a living? (Participant #15, male, 39 years old, ethnicity not reported)

Another homeless participant described being tasered by police and the routine confiscation of their belongings:

Yeah, constantly I [have encounters with police]. You know because when I was homeless they just jacked me up left right and centre and because they could get away with it right. [...] I have a mark on the side because I was hungover, it took me two hours in the rain to get my first beer. I just cracked it and they [the police] snuck up, I didn't hear their car right... he opens the door...you, you, you tasered me! Next thing I was on the ground, heard the doors close, and they drove off....

Because [binning's] against the law, it's a theft, for having a cart for one thing, possession of it. [...] Routinely they've you know [taken everything in the cart], you see they usually do that to me in the evening and you know [take] my bedding, my clothing, my food, my bottles, everything's on that and they pop the trunk, drive away. (Participant # 25, Indigenous woman, 47 years old)

Police practices are not the only violent encounters experienced by participants — stigma, racialized and gender violence, accompanied by new gentrification-related developments such as the locking of dumpsters and relocation of recycle depots, as well as by-law infraction ticketing, configure to limit informal recycling opportunities among participants in the DTES (see Wittmer & Parizeau, 2016).

DISCUSSION

PWUD in this study experienced intersecting macro-social and structural barriers to obtaining and/or maintaining formal employment, including poverty, homelessness, discrimination and criminalization. As a means to negotiate survival within the context of social-structural inequality and inadequate levels of government support, participants engaged in informal and illegal income-generating activities such as sex work, theft, drug dealing and recycling, a finding consistent with past research (Gowan, 1997; Gutberlet et al., 2009; Tremblay et al., 2010; Wittmer & Parizeau, 2016). However, the current study additionally documents how income-generating activities are shaped by social violence, which led to increased exposure to everyday violence, exploitation and in some cases HIV risk among participants. Participants described their transitions from 'high risk' (e.g. sex work) to perceived 'low risk' (e.g. informal recycling) activities as an effort to reduce exposure to such risks. Informal recycling, however, not only introduced new risks, but was also shaped by structural, symbolic and everyday violence.

Consistent with existing research (Henkel 2011; Richardson et al., 2013), our findings demonstrate multiple barriers to formal employment for PWUD. Though previous research has indicated high risks associated with illegal and informal income generation, less risky forms of income generation for PWUD remains quite limited (McCoy et al., 2007; Richardson et al., 2010). A study of people who inject drugs in this setting reported a willingness to forgo high-risk income generation activities if provided alternatives (DeBeck et al., 2011). Given that marginalized PWUD are limited in their access to formal employment, their income generation strategies frequently involve illegal activities associated with violence, suboptimal health outcomes, and police encounters (DeBeck et al., 2011; Richardson et al., 2015a; Richardson et al., 2015b; Small et al., 2013). The high willingness to work among participants demonstrates a need for employment-related interventions that provide meaningful opportunities for people, such as an increase in peer-led, low-threshold employment opportunities that do not require drug abstinence. For example, in our setting there is emerging evidence that interventions led by people with lived experience of drug use are an effective means for broadening harm reduction service access among PWUD (Greer et al., 2016; Small et al., 2012), a productive area for the employment expansion of PWUD.

Previous research indicates that relationships between drug use and formal employment can be tied to the way in which work shapes daily routines through structured activities, serving in some cases as a strategy to avoid drug use and involvement in drug scenes (Richardson et al. 2016, p.143). As unemployment or suboptimal employment is more often associated with marginalized PWUD (McCoy et al., 2007), informal and illegal income generation activities represent a necessary, though often high-risk, alternative (Richardson et al., 2015a; Richardson et al., 2015b; Small et al., 2013). While participants in our study characterized risks associated with their illegal and informal income generation activities similarly, they described their transitions to informal income generation, and specifically informal recycling as a means to reduce such risk. In order to avoid the potentially considerable harms of perceived “high risk” income generating, participants in our study engaged in informal recycling as an alternate mode of employment that offered participants a means to maintain *both* drug use patterns and income generation in what was perceived as a low risk environment.

While many participants described their initiation to informal recycling as a necessity, participants’ primarily characterized their relationship to recycling as a meaningful (and environmental) activity, offering a range of benefits such as a structured routine that allowed for the maintenance of stable drug use patterns, a steady income, access to food and autonomy. Nevertheless, they were attentive to its status as a particularly public survival strategy associated with the stigma of disorder, theft, poverty and waste materials (Ferrall, 2006; Wittmer & Parizeau, 2016). As such, informal recycling was nevertheless identified as being associated with the risk of violence, and this violence was commonly racialized and gendered.

Women participants described substantial gender-based and racial discrimination as well as multiple structural barriers to employment, including extreme poverty and the criminalization of activities associated with sex work and drug use, which impacted their experiences of health and safety. For Indigenous and other women, the transition from sex work to informal income generating activities is significant given their historical and contemporary vulnerability to male and state violence, especially in the Vancouver area (Culhane, 2003; Huggill, 2010; Pratt, 2005) and as the result of the direct and asymmetrical criminalization of sex work-related activities (Krusi et al., 2014; Krusi et al., 2016; Shannon et al., 2008b). In the DTES, the ongoing effects of colonization, interpersonal and structural violence coupled with legal and social discrimination are realized materially (Bungay et al., 2010; Chesnay et al., 2013; Culhane, 2003; Wittmer & Parizeau, 2016; VANDU Women’s Care Team., 2009). In comparison to other Canadians, Indigenous women have lower incomes (and limited employment opportunities), poorer health (such as higher rates of HIV), and are more likely to be victims of violence compared to other populations of women (Bungay et al., 2010; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2012a; 2012b). This indicates a further need for targeted, adaptable interventions that should be community directed, informed by those affected, culturally appropriate, and responsive to historical and contemporary oppressions. In addition, destigmatizing and legitimizing informal recycling in particular, could offer an even more significant and viable means of income generation for some PWUD.

Because of the public and precarious quasi-illegal status of informal recycling, adverse encounters with law enforcement were common and expected among participants. Much has been written on the penalization, criminalization and restricted access to space experienced by the urban poor, marginalized and homeless in this setting (e.g., Chesnay et al., 2013; Parizeau, 2017; Sommers et al., 2005; Wittmer & Parizeau, 2016). Street-based survival strategies connected to urban inequality are exacerbated by neoliberal governance such as cut backs in social supports that drive marginalized people to search for alternative economies (Ferrell, 2006; Waquant, 2009). Current policy responses to street disorder resulting from the income generation activities of illicit drug users are primarily dependent on law enforcement (Boyum & Reuter, 2005; DeBeck et al., 2007; DeBeck et al., 2011; Ferrell, 2006; Maher, 2000). Policing initiatives have limited success, however, in that they fail to address underlying social and structural factors that a growing body of health research suggests must be accounted for in intervention strategies (Blankenship et al., 2000; DeBeck et al., 2011; Des Jarlais, 2000; Heimer et al., 2002; Rhodes, 2002). There is a need to move away from drug prohibitionist, neoliberal, economic, and social policies that further discriminate against marginalized communities including PWUD. This could include improved social assistance and unemployment policies and benefits, increased funding for social housing, flexible drug substitution programs, and removal of policies and laws that criminalize drug use and PWUD.

Structural violence is often obscured through symbolic and everyday violence (Bourdieu, 2001; Rhodes, 2002). This is evident in our study through some participants' internalization of the lack of opportunities available to them, describing themselves as unfit or undeserving of employment outside of street-based informal and illegal economies that they experience as violent and/or exploitive (e.g. drug dealing, sex work, and also informal recycling). Cultural codes or norms among participant drug users who recycle may further enable gender violence and discrimination as well as serve to normalize everyday violence experienced by recyclers when codes are not followed. This follows the normalization of everyday violence against women as common-sense practice within street cultures that has been previously documented (e.g. Bourgois et al., 2004; Bungay et al., 2010; McNeil et al., 2014; Shannon et al., 2008a). Normalized everyday violence can prove particularly difficult to disrupt. For Indigenous women, it is an on-going aspect of colonial power relations, as is state and gendered violence (Million, 2013), thus, those affected must be central in framing social and economic policy (i.e., Indigenous-led employment interventions).

There are a number of limitations with this study. First, the small sample of PWUD in the DTES might not reflect the complete range of income generating opportunities or experiences of all people involved in them. In addition, these activities are more directly criminalized in many jurisdictions, which would potentially increase the risks of violence and policing described here. Our sample included individuals from specific groups who consistently face social and structural disadvantage, but did not include all groups who do so. The composition of the sample may therefore have shaped the specific descriptions of discrimination violence included in the results. Further, the study relied upon self-reported data, thus participants' accounts are subject to recall bias. Despite these limitations, the findings indicate that individuals who engage in informal recycling are a vulnerable population and this has implications for health and social policy.

In conclusion, this study highlights informal recycling as a meaningful activity for participants. However, the research findings also illustrate the risks and harms associated with engagement in informal and illegal income generation and illustrates the need to explore the potential of interventions that reduce risks for informal recycling and promote access to employment in the promotion of risk reduction and safety. It also demonstrates how experiences of violence are mediated by social location and state practices. These conclusions are consistent with previous research that highlights the need for the establishment of more low-threshold employment that accommodate the on-going use of health and social services, episodic absences due to drug use and health comorbidities, and do not require abstinence (Richardson et al., 2016). Further, there needs to be a reconsideration of policies that penalize people who receive income assistance when they engage in low-threshold employment. Future research should continue to consider PWUD involvement in legal and illegal income generation activities and health status. Ultimately, employment-based strategies should be informed by the experiences of PWUD and aligned with their diverse needs.

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Table 1:

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Participant characteristic	n (%) N=26
Age	
Mean	47 years
Range	33 – 63 years
Gender	
Men	15 (58%)
Women	11 (42%)
Race	
White	16 (61%)
Indigenous	9 (35%)
Hispanic	1 (4%)
Current housing	
Single Room Occupancy Hotel (Social Housing)	20 (77%)
Emergency Shelter	3 (12%)
Apartment	2 (8%)
Single Room Occupancy Hotel (Privately-owned)	1 (4%)
Unsheltered	1 (4%)
Substance use (Thirty days prior to interview)^a	
Crystal Methamphetamine	14 (54%)
Crack Cocaine	13 (50%)
Heroin	12 (46%)
Cocaine (injected)	11 (42%)
Other Opiates	5 (19%)
Lifetime income generation^a	
Full-time Employment	25 (83%)
Part-time Employment	18 (60%)
Drug Dealing	13 (43%)
Theft (Shoplifting, Boosting, etc.)	9 (30%)
Sex Work	6 (20%)
Income generation (Thirty days prior to interview)^a	
Informal Recycling	26 (100%)
Reselling Goods	22 (85%)
Social Assistance	20 (77%)
Stipend Volunteering	4 (15%)
Drug Dealing	2 (8%)
Sex Work	1 (4%)

Participant characteristic	n (%) N=26

^a PARTICIPANTS WERE ABLE TO SELECT MORE THAN ONE RESPONSE

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