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#STIGMAKILLS

Understanding  
Substance Use  
Related Stigma

*What perpetuates  
stigma?*

**Discrimination**

**Stereotypes**

**Social exclusion**

**Prejudice**

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# The Origin Of Stigma

Stigma: derived from the Greek root word stig-, meaning to puncture or prick.

In Ancient Greece, a stigma was an involuntary tattoo often put on the face. People who were enslaved and viewed as untrustworthy received a stigma to mark ownership and ensure social exclusion.

# The War On Drugs

Prohibitionist criminal law is Canada's primary mode of addressing substance use. However, there is no substantial evidence that criminal law improves the issue. Rather, it increases potential for harm via:

- Stigmatization.
- Facilitating the illegal drug market.
- Deflecting from the heart of the issue – addressing the "why".

Canada's War On Drugs disproportionately affects people who are Black, Indigenous, and low-income.

In 2016, Indigenous peoples represented about **4.9%** of the general population. In 2019, **30%** of the prison population was Indigenous. At least **7 in 10** people in prison used substances before their incarceration.

"...We couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or Blacks, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and Blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both [drugs] heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders...and vilify them."  
- **John Ehrlichman**, Richard Nixon's Assistant

## Stigma:

- Dehumanizes and ostracizes.
- Creates feelings of shame and isolation.
- Creates barriers to access of essential resources (housing, health care, etc.).
- Creates fear of punishment or loss that prevents people from seeking help.
- Blocks new policy that can address the heart of the issue and save lives.

## Overdose Deaths

Stigma significantly increases the risk for accidental overdose death. Racism, classism, and substance use-related stigma intersect to affect risk.

In 2020, overdose deaths in Ontario alone increased **60%** from the year prior. **79%** of those deaths occurred after the COVID-19 State of Emergency was declared.

# Toward Harm Reduction and Health-Based Policy

In Canada, injection substance use among clients of InSite safe consumption site dropped by **23%**, with **53%** entering treatment and a **71%** decrease in public injection. InSite saves taxpayers well over **\$6 million** per year by preventing HIV and death.

In Switzerland, home-theft decreased by **98%** after the introduction of a safe supply program for heroin.

# Combat Stigma

- Learn and share the facts about substance use, stigma, and harm reduction.
- Get trained to use Naloxone and carry it.
- Support policy change.
- Learn how stigma intersects with racism and classism.
- Recognize common threads among experiences of addiction.
- Become curious about how your own beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are influenced by stigma.
- Name stigma when you notice it.
- Use person first language.