

Needlestick Injuries: Knowing the Facts as a Law Enforcement Officer

Companion to Video Publication

October 2024

With the rise in overdose cases, law enforcement, criminal justice agencies, and public health sectors are collaborating to better serve the public and improve outcomes for those struggling with substance misuse. However, these evolving responsibilities come with new occupational safety risks, and without proper training and education, they can result in unnecessary physical and mental harm for officers. This paradigm shift necessitates adopting an evidence-based approach to ensure the safety of first responders and the community. Jurisdictional policies may vary, impacting the techniques used to remain safe in the field, further underscoring the importance of a well-informed response.

This publication accompanies the video *Needlestick Injuries: Knowing the Facts as a Law Enforcement Officer*, part of a series that emphasizes the importance of effective tools and evidence-based training to manage high-risk health situations, particularly in relation to the concerns that law enforcement officers may have about needlestick injuries. This video series is a valuable resource designed to equip officers with the knowledge they need to navigate the challenges of the field, including fentanyl exposure and needlestick injuries.

The best practice is to avoid touching a syringe or sharp. To that end, building rapport with an individual can help achieve this. It can increase their willingness to disclose to you they possess an object like a syringe or something else that's sharp.

—Dr. Brandon del Pozo, SHIELD Training Initiative

Addressing Needlestick Injuries in the Field

Law enforcement officers who come into contact with people who use drugs are often concerned about injury due to a needlestick. Therefore, it is imperative to equip officers with the tools and training to handle such situations safely and effectively. With this knowledge and these practical skills, officers can confidently navigate these interactions and minimize risks.

Law enforcement regularly encounters individuals carrying syringes or sharps, whether on their person or in their vehicles. Studies suggest that about 5 to 8 percent of officers experience needlestick injuries at some point during their careers.^{1,2} Such injuries raise concerns about potential infections, like hepatitis or HIV, which can be transmitted through blood.

Although the probability of infection from a single needlestick is low, immediate reporting, testing, and treatment are vital in the event of such incidents. Proper safety training during pat-downs and searches is essential, and officers should use discretion and avoid sweeping motions that may increase the risk of injury. When confiscating or disposing of syringes, proper methods (e.g., using appropriate containers) are crucial to prevent harm to both officers and the community.

Taking a Public Health Approach

In addressing the risk of needlestick injuries and potential infections among law enforcement officers, it becomes evident that mitigating these risks extends beyond safety training and proper handling procedures. While these measures are crucial, a broader perspective shows that there are systemic approaches in place to reduce the potential harm to law enforcement officers as well as the larger community. One such proactive approach is through the implementation of syringe services programs (SSPs). Law enforcement officers' infection risks are also reduced as sterile syringes are made accessible by SSPs throughout the community. SSPs can thus play a vital role in reducing infectious diseases and syringe litter, and research has shown that they do not lead to an increase in illegal substance use or crime.³ By making sterile syringes readily accessible, SSPs effectively contribute to reducing the spread of infectious diseases among individuals who use drugs, thereby indirectly lowering the risk to officers who may come in contact with syringes during their encounters with individuals in the community.

The accompanying video delves deeper into the significance of SSPs in creating a safer environment for both the public and law enforcement officers. By supporting and collaborating with SSPs, first responders can further enhance community well-being.⁴

“Syringe services programs help reduce injection-related health risks if an individual who uses drugs has a sterile syringe and proper equipment for every injection.”

—U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,
Overdose Prevention Strategy

Endnotes

1. Cepeda, Javier A., Leo Beletsky, Anne Sawyer, Chris Serio-Chapman, Marina Smelyanskaya, Jennifer Han, Natanya Robinowitz, and Susan G. Sherman, (2017), “Occupational Safety in the Age of the Opioid Crisis: Needlestick Injury Among Baltimore Police,” *Journal of Urban Health* 94: 100–103, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-016-0115-0>.
2. Davis, Corey S., Jill Johnston, Lisa de Saxe Zerden, Katie Clark, Tessie Castillo, and Robert Childs, (2014), “Attitudes of North Carolina Law Enforcement Officers Toward Syringe Decriminalization,” *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 144: 265–269, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2014.08.007>.
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (n.d.), Safety and Effectiveness of Syringe Services Programs, <https://www.cdc.gov/ssp/syringe-services-programs-summary.html>.
4. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), (n.d.), *Harm Reduction Framework*, <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/harm-reduction-framework.pdf>.

Visit the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) Resource Center at www.cossup.org.

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This report was supported by Grant No. 15PBJA-23-GK-02250-COAP awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART). Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.