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Structural Violence and the Dilemma of Reintegration: Stigma, Institutional Bias, and Drug Users in China

Xiangdong Gui

University of Florida, The United States

Abstract

People Who Use Drugs (PWUD) in mainland China are strongly disadvantaged in practical life despite the non-criminalization of drug use. The legal framework and societal behavior function in line with punitive rather than biomedical rationales and lack any space for social acceptance. Instructively, this paper explores how the above influences PWUD reintegration in employment and reputation using the framework of Structural Violence, Legal Pluralism, and Marginalization. In this analysis, the paper employs both quantitative data from the survey of 537 PWUD administered in conjunction with local care providers in the communities, in addition to ethnographic observation and semi-structured personal interview analysis from 10 other PWUD participants. In our analysis, it has emerged how mechanisms of institutional governance and societal reaction result in long-lasting negative stigma from drug use, leading to disadvantage in employment, association at workplaces, access to public services, and social interactions. The conclusion to emerge therefore presents unanimous evidence of the disabling impacts of punishment in the wider socio-structural context on the reintegration prospects of PWUD despite detox treatment. Hence, the recommendation in the paper presents the need to transform punishment to support and linkage cooperation between security, medical, and social service sectors in facilitating reintegration of PWUD.

Keywords: Stigma, Drug Users, Social Reintegration, China's Drug Policy, Employment Discrimination, Structural Violence