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[Int J Drug Policy](#). 2021 Jan;87:102913. doi: 10.1016/j.drugpo.2020.102913. Epub 2020 Aug 24.

How to be self-reliant in a stigmatising context? Challenges facing people who inject drugs in Vietnam

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Abstract

Background: Stigma works to reinforce dominant social values. The meaning of stigma is therefore not static but dependant on the regime in power. Taking into account the significant socioeconomic changes that took place in Vietnam over the last thirty years, this study explores the meaning of stigma directed at Vietnamese people who inject drugs in different social spheres.

Methods: This qualitative study was conducted as part of an evaluation of a peer outreach program that distributes harm-reduction supplies and information, and provides treatment referral assistance to people who inject drugs in Haiphong, Vietnam. We conducted ethnographic field observations with peer outreach workers, home visits, and 54 in-depth interviews with participants in 2017 and 2018. Grounded theory led our theoretical sampling and analysis.

Results: Stigma towards people who inject drugs seems to centre on the ability to be self-reliant rather than on drug-using behaviours. Participants described how their families and neighbours expressed expectations that they should manage their substance use issues by themselves, without considering the barriers they face in the job market. Participants interpret stigma directed at them in terms of poverty rather than drug use. As a result, they sometimes engage in illegal income-generating activities to pursue financial autonomy and to regain their social status.

Conclusion: People who inject drugs were struggling to conform to social expectations of self-reliance with limited support to realise it. Effective interventions must consider the many facets and challenges individuals encounter in their daily lives.

Keywords: Addiction; Neoliberalism; People who inject drugs; Qualitative research; Southeast Asia; Stigma; Vietnam.

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