

## **POLICE AS ADVOCATES FOR HARM REDUCTION DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IN DURBAN: SHIFTING THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE**

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Law enforcement officers have come under serious scrutiny during the Covid-19 lockdown in South Africa. This was particularly true during level 5 lockdown when the role of the security services was to ensure adherence to regulations that curtailed freedom of movement and association. Cases of human rights violations peppered press reports and there were few reports of positive police responses. Yet a different picture emerged in Durban where a harm reduction programme was established for homeless people in moderate to severe withdrawal from heroin use. Police were involved in planning this medical intervention and played a critical role in securing the programme and its beneficiaries. This article demonstrates, through interviews with police and from notes taken during participant observation, how the police's view of drug use changed dramatically from being prohibitionist and punitive to being supportive and seeking bi-directional relations. Interviews with police who were stationed in the lockdown facilities reveal a humanisation process where for the first time, they were able to comprehend the life stories of the homeless people who use drugs and where the homeless were able to configure the complex mandate of the police. The outcome was that police in Durban who were part of this intervention during the Covid-19 lockdown became advocates for harm reduction, fully supporting not only substitution therapy but also other harm reduction services previously viewed as controversial. A new habitus emerged, albeit temporarily and limited to Durban's Central Business District, within the police occupational culture. This was spurred by a dramatically changed structural field in which they operated during Covid-19 lockdown.

### **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

*Nothing to disclose.*