

HARM  
REDUCTION  
IS  
NOT  
A  
METAPHOR

*Living in the 21st Century with  
Drugs, Intimacy, and Activism*

A zine by [What Would an HIV Doula Do?](#) and [Visual AIDS](#),  
at the invitation of [MoMA PS1](#) for [Homeroom](#) on the occasion of  
[Niki de Saint Phalle: Structures for Life](#) and [Gregg Bordowitz: I Wanna Be Well](#).

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## *Table of Contents*

- 03 **Indigenous Harm Reduction**  
Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network and the  
Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development
- 04 **Foreward: Harm Reduction– Through Art and Activism**  
Visual AIDS
- 08 **Introduction**  
Abdul-Aliy A. Muhammad
- 14 **Harm Reduction = Life**  
AIDS ACTION NOW!
- 16 **Needle Exchange + Junkie Union + Jon Stuen-Parker**  
What Would an HIV Doula Do?
- 22 **Communities of Drug Use**  
Tamara Oyola-Santiago
- 26 **Desenredando la Maraña (Untangling the Weave)**  
Bronx Móvil + El Punto en la Montaña and community activists
- 30 **How To Get Narcan**  
Jodi Bosin
- 32 **Collectivities in Kensington**  
David Oscar Harvey
- 37 **Opioid Crisis is Still Not Just a 'White' Problem**  
Abdul-Aliy A. Muhammad
- 40 **Decriminalization vs. Legalization: What You Need to Know**  
VOCAL-NY
- 43 **Boof It!**  
Sessi Kuwabara Blanchard
- 44 **As a Woman With HIV, I Make My Sex Partners Sign  
a Disclosure Contract: Here's Why**  
Tiffany Marrero
- 47 **Safer Sex + Play Fair + How To Have...**  
What Would an HIV Doula Do?
- 51 **Don't Yuck My COVID Yum!**  
Molly M. Pearson
- 57 **Sustainable Safety:  
I Don't Need You. I Want You. A Year of Feeling the Difference**  
Nick Melloan-Ruiz
- 60 **Is Holding Space a Harm Reduction Practice?**  
What Would an HIV Doula Do?
- 65 **Housing and Support + STAR House**  
What Would an HIV Doula Do?
- 68 **Abolition as Harm Reduction**  
charles ryan long
- 72 **The Challenge of Multiple Epidemics**  
Project SAFE
- 74 **Harm Reduction Stickers**  
jade forrest marks and ripley soprano
- 76 **Voting is Not Harm Reduction**  
jade forrest marks and ripley soprano
- 80 **Voting is Not Harm Reduction**  
Indigenous Action
- 82 **Where Will HIV Be in 10 years?**  
Alexander McClelland
- 88 **Harm Reduction and the Archive**  
Salonee Bhaman
- 90 **Credits**

# Indigenous Harm Reduction

## Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network and the Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development

*“Mainstream harm reduction practices such as needle exchange programs, naloxone distribution and opioid substitution therapies have been established as a main approach in the prevention of HIV, hepatitis C, and overdoses. While these approaches are lifesaving, they are not enough to make a meaningful difference within Indigenous communities. Mainstream harm reduction models focus too narrowly on substance using behaviours, neglecting the broader social and system-wide issues that contribute to and intersect with substance use for Indigenous peoples in the first place. For Indigenous communities, harm reduction = reducing the harms of colonization. It is inclusive of, but much broader than, a focus on using substances or safer sex. Indigenous harm reduction is a way of life, rooted in Indigenous Knowledges and worldviews, combined with the best of what the Western world can offer, and focused on mitigating the living legacy of colonization. Among Indigenous communities however, harm reduction can be contentious and contested. If Indigenous approaches to harm reduction are to be successful, communities and community leaders must find ways to engage in conversations informed by evidence and understanding to facilitate inclusion of all Indigenous people in ceremony, programs and community life.”*

From the introduction of the 2019 report, [Indigenous Harm Reduction](#).

# Foreword: Harm Reduction— Through Art and Activism

Blake Paskal and Kyle Croft  
for Visual AIDS

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*“The world has been experiencing a whole pattern of auto-destruction, whether in environmental disasters like Chernobyl or health disasters like AIDS... Young people need to become involved. AIDS is a complex situation that’s sure to bring out the best and the worst in people. And it’s just beginning.”*

— Niki de Saint Phalle, 1988

These words from a [1988 \*People\* magazine interview](#) with Niki de Saint Phalle were published at a time when information about HIV transmission and AIDS prevention was clouded with [inaccuracies](#) and stigma, if it was available at all. Saint Phalle’s words have an uncanny resonance with Gregg Bordowitz’s reminder, a decade and a half later in 2002, that [“the AIDS crisis is still beginning”](#)—words that ring true today, as life saving medication and healthcare remain inaccessible to many within the US and social inequities compound the impacts of the epidemic along racial, economic, and geographic lines.

Bordowitz and Saint Phalle made their first AIDS-related work in the 1980s, when government and health officials offered little guidance about transmission routes and prevention practices. Safer sex techniques and other harm reduction practices like bleaching needles were developed and disseminated by activists responding to a lack of information and services from the government. Bordowitz, Saint Phalle, and many others in the arts realized that they could communicate this life-saving information most effectively through [community-specific messaging](#). Saint Phalle’s [playful and colorful drawings](#)

cut through concerns about taboo subjects with simple and direct statements that could be easily understood by children and adults alike. Bordowitz's [safer sex shorts](#), made with Jean Carlomusto for Gay Men's Health Crisis, illustrated that safer sex could still be sexy with pornographic shorts that were distributed to bathhouses and gay bars.

Today, condoms and other safer sex practices are still effective forms of harm reduction, but the landscape of AIDS has changed. Information about safer sex and HIV transmission is now widely available ([though many states still teach abstinence-only sex education](#)), and [antiretroviral treatment](#), U=U ([undetectable = untransmittable](#)), and [PrEP](#) have created new methods of HIV prevention. However, this new paradigm has also reinstated an emphasis on personal responsibility and "good choices," illustrated through public health campaigns that put the onus of the epidemic on people with HIV ("HIV Stops With Me") rather than the structural inequities at the heart of the AIDS and COVID pandemics.

Though it's been over 30 years since Saint Phalle stated that "the world has been experiencing a whole pattern of auto-destruction," her words feel just as relevant today as we consider pandemics like AIDS and COVID-19 in relation to the threat of global warming and the escalation of white supremacist and state violence. The continued relevance of her words urges us to examine our collective commitment to dissolving inequity,

particularly at a time when activism is often reduced to a social aesthetic or metaphors separated from the lives of those most in need. It prompts the question: *What does it mean to be in a continual and constant practice of activism?*

As an arts-based organization that uses art to fight AIDS, Visual AIDS understands how art often coincides with activism, and vice versa, and the role that both play in educating about harm reduction practices. Our Play Smart safer sex kits and broadsides like “You Care About HIV Criminalization, You Just Don’t Know It Yet” provide educational information about HIV prevention and treatment while also drawing attention to issues like criminalization, stigma, housing justice, mental health, and the structural inequities that exacerbate the epidemic.

On the occasion of Gregg Bordowitz and Niki de Saint Phalle’s exhibitions at PS1, we at Visual AIDS want to consider the work of these artists in relation to ongoing practices of harm reduction today. We asked our friends at What Would an HIV Doula Do? to share their insights about harm reduction as a strategy for navigating and surviving in the present day. Understanding that everyone navigates a pandemic differently, the zine assembles writing and artwork that grapples with the complexity of living through the simultaneous AIDS, COVID, and opioid epidemics from a range of perspectives and positionalities. We hope these materials provide helpful tools, create connections, and prompt meaningful conversations that extend beyond the museum’s walls.



# Introduction: Harm Reduction is Not a Metaphor

Abdul-Aliy A. Muhammad  
(They/Them) 37 yrs old

@mxabdulaliy

I was born to two Black Muslim parents on October 26, 1983, in Philadelphia. This was at the beginning of the crack epidemic in the US.

My father Gregory Trice, Sr., who was from Germantown and used his Islamic name Sulahuddin Shakur, was jailed due to the trafficking of narcotics in 1974. He was set to do a considerable amount of time. That changed, however, when he petitioned for an appeal, representing himself, arguing that he had received ineffective counsel. The verdict was overturned on August 11, 1982 and my father was released. But before that, in 1980, he met my mother, a Black woman who grew up in the West Park Apartments housing project. They met at FCI Otisville, located in NY State, where he was incarcerated, and she was visiting her brother Tajiddin, also jailed on drug charges. Picture this: my mother's first flirtation with my dad was from a distance, her looking across a prison visitation room, peeking into the eyes of a man she'd soon come to love.

Their romance was brief. It produced me. My dad ultimately found himself engaged with the criminal "justice" system, up until his death in September 2013. My mother died of lung cancer in 2012, after a five year battle with the disease. My mother's name was Melody Ellen Beverly. I miss her so much.

With this background, I consider my very existence inextricably tied to the infrastructures of an anti-Black system. From a young age, I have had a deep

understanding of how Black people are policed. It is from the place of lived experience that I draw my expertise.

It is also from my everyday life. As someone who uses drugs, and as an HIV+ person, I know how stigma places the burden of systems, lack of access, and poverty on the shoulders of the marginalized and criminalized. The responsibility of meeting our material needs is tied to the systems we live within.

It is with this in mind that I have also come to understand harm reduction, a term that often gets co-opted by non-profits and the mainstream media, but as you will read throughout this zine, is rooted, not in metaphor, but in grassroots community practice.

For example, in a text entitled, "Collectivities in Kensington," harm reduction therapist David Oscar Harvey writes, "Institutions hurt us far worse than any pain we bring on ourselves." When I think of my parents, and my own life, this is something that resonates profoundly within my bones.

So what is harm reduction, or rather, how do we reduce harm? Well, I always like to start with systems, because our entanglement with them starts at the colonization of stolen indigenous land and the brutal enslavement of kidnapped Africans, some of whom were thrown overboard and murdered at sea during the middle passage. This system of racialized capitalism has engulfed us generationally and continues its oppressive control

today. This boxing in of people, categorizing each race, found its utility in justifying the system of slavery.

This nation under God (yeah right) has morphed into global hegemony. This system puts undue pressure on people, many of us seeking relief from pain and agony. The use of medicines or substances to care for ourselves is often what allows us to press on and live into the future. There should be safer spaces to consume and engage with substances that allow for access to medical treatment and other critical social services. Otherwise we will continue to lose people who are taking care of their pain and discomfort just for the sake of moralism.

In my own city I see this. [Fatal overdoses increased 40% for Black Philadelphians](#) in the first three quarters of 2020. This coupled with the outsized death that Black, Brown and Indigenous communities have dealt with as the COVID-19 pandemic has crushed communities and families.

Harm reduction is what we do with each other, for each other. In her contribution to the zine, public health educator and harm reductionist Tamara Oyola-Santiago, points to the balm that helps communities impacted by devastation thrive: “Mutual aid networks exist in our communities; in fact, they are part of the fabric of BIPOC and communities often marginalized and deemed hard to reach.”

She goes on to discuss Bronx Móvil, a collective she is in made up of people “impacted by the HIV crisis, who have

lost loved ones to HIV and the opioid overdose crisis, who use drugs, who have experienced homelessness, who are Puerto Rican, Bronx residents, Queer, migrants.” Together, they travel throughout the Bronx with naloxone, harm reduction bags, safer smoking kits, syringes, food, water, socks, juice, PPE.”

In reading about Tamara’s work, I am reminded that we are always the experts, and collectively we see each other through AIDS, the War On Drugs, mass incarceration, and now, COVID-19. It is us that hand out and educate each other about internal and external condoms, us that understand that a clean needle is as vital for our lives as food and water. It is us that mask up at protests, and it is us that build solidarity between communities of sex workers, people who inject drugs, and activists.

Through out this zine, you will find essays, case studies, images, and reprints about drugs, sex, and activism, with many of the contributions containing resources for more information. Please take your time, dive in, and share with your community.

Let us hold each other, and put naloxone in our pockets, place clean works and needles in our backpacks, for these tabooed offerings, like food, can mean the difference between nourishment and death. Judge not for the rock you throw, is ultimately that belonging to the system, and that system wants us dead.

## SOURCES AND RESOURCES

### BOOKS

*Drug Use for Grown-Ups: Chasing liberty in the land of fear*,  
Dr. Karl L. Hart, Penguin Books, 2021

*Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy*  
LaShawn Harris, University of Illinois Press, 2016

*Crack: Rock Cocaine, Street Capitalism, and the Decade of Greed*  
David Farber, Cambridge University Press, 2019

### ARTICLES

[Coronavirus, like past pandemics, shows how black bodies are political](#),  
by Abdul-Aliy Muhammad

[Drug Overdose Data](#), Centers for Disease Control

[Opiate Overdoses Spike in Black Philadelphians, But Drop in White Residents Since COVID-19](#), Penn Medicine News

[Progress Against the Opioid Epidemic Is Not Reaching Black Americans](#),  
Caitlin White

[Drug overdose mortality among stateside Puerto Ricans: Evidence of a health disparity](#), Manuel Cano, Camila Gelpí-Acosta

[Drug User Union, Next Distro](#)

[Resources, Next Distro](#)

### ZINES

[STRIDE ZINE](#) from St. James Infirmary

[Three Harm Reduction Zines](#) from People Who Use Drugs in Denver

[BLOCKED: A sex worker's guide to stalking and harassment](#), from SWARM

[SEX WORKER ZINE PROJECT](#)

[Harm Reduction: How to prevent and respond to an opioid overdose](#),  
from Parkdale Women's Leadership Group

["The Young Injectables,"](#) from Van Asher and U.A. Morrison

### BIO

Abdul-Aliy is a poz troublemaker, writer and organizer who is rooted in Philadelphia, the unceded land of the Lenni Lenape people, Lenapehoking. A cofounder of the Black and Brown Workers Co-op. In their work, they often problematize medical surveillance, discuss the importance of bodily autonomy, and center Blackness. They identify as queer and nonbinary and grew up in a working class Black family. Find them on Twitter at @mxabdulaliy.



## CREDITS

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Visual AIDS utilizes art to fight AIDS by provoking dialogue, supporting HIV positive artists, and preserving a legacy, because AIDS is not over.  
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This document was collected and edited by people living on Lenape land, with contributions from people across Turtle Island.

