Harm Reduction in Colombian Prisons

An Experience that Challenges, A Policy that Urgently Needs Change

A Reality That Can No Longer Be Denied

Despite prohibition, the use of psychoactive substances in prisons is a real and ongoing issue.

The National Study on Psychoactive Substance Use Among Incarcerated People (2015) estimates that:

📌 45.8% have used an illicit substance at least once in their lives
📌 31.9% reported using in the past 12 months
📌 20.8% used marijuana in the past month
📌 19.4% committed their offense under the influence of a substance

These figures reveal a system that turns its back rather than offers support, where incarceration drives substance use as a means of coping.

➡ People living with HIV, those with mental health conditions, or problematic substance use face multiple forms of exclusion and significant barriers to accessing care.

Deliberar's Experiencear

Since 2022, we have conducted harm reduction workshops in Bogotá's prisons, bringing to the forefront issues that are often difficult to address in this context:

📌 Destigmatization of drug use
📌 Mental health and STI prevention
📌 Human rights and LGBTIQ+ inclusion
📌 Dialogue with prison staff

The experience revealed openness, shifts in narrative, and urgent calls for change.

What Practice Has Taught Us:

🚨 Substance use serves functions of survival and adaptatinon
🚨 Forced abstinence without alternatives violates rights
🚨 Prohibition doesn't protect—it only leads to more violence and disease
🚨 Harm reduction improves coexistence and health

What Do We Propose?

A paradigm shift: from punishment to care, from sanction to rights

📌 Recognize the right to harm reduction in prison
📌 Differentiated protocols and voluntary treatment
📌 Health and human rights training for prison staff
📌 Budget allocation and inter-institutional coordination

A CALL TO ACTION 📣

Will we keep denying a need that screams behind walls?
Or seek alternatives to guarantee health and dignity, even where no one is looking?

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