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## **Exploring the perceived risks and benefits of heroin use among young people (18-24) and service providers in Mauritius: A Qualitative Study**

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### **Introduction**

Despite an existing tradition of harm reduction policies backed by routine data and surveys, existing tools do not capture the perspectives of young users themselves on the risks which they face when using heroin and harm reduction (HR) services. How such risks are perceived, assessed and acted upon by clients can impact on both individual drug use and the effectiveness of current harm reduction strategies.

From the traditional economic perspective, the behaviour of individuals is compounded by decisions resulting from the careful weighing of costs and benefits. Ideally, this individual process is informed by existing preferences, leading to optimal decisions which are shaped by rational choice. This approach, however, struggles to explain illicit drug use which is deemed as “risky behaviour” or “irrational” from a traditional economic perspective. The inductive qualitative approach used in this study addresses some weaknesses in the traditional applications of economic theory when confronted with heroin use and assesses how individuals frame their decision to use in terms of perceived losses and gains.

### **Methods**

The sample for this study consisted of 22 individuals, aged 18-24, who were either using or had recently used heroin and 5 service providers. Data collection methods included a systematic literature review and in-depth interviews. The coding framework was revised as themes emerged and participants were recruited accordingly. Cross-case analysis was used until saturation of themes occurred.

### **Findings**

The analysis gradually unveiled how participants assessed risk while managing their individual drug use over time. Polydrug use emerged as a recurrent coping mechanism resulting from changing dynamics within the heroin market. Several variations were noted within the initiation into long-term injecting drug use which further highlighted the changing nature of the risks and benefits perceived by young users at a very early stage. The study also highlighted significant gaps in information among users which encouraged the existence of power relationships characterised by information asymmetry.

### **Recommendations**

The changing nature of the risks incurred by young heroin users implies the need to develop second-generation HR strategies specific to Mauritius which stratify and reduce risks incurred by individuals (including pregnant women), couples and communities. Qualitative research which also explores contextual rationality and uncertainty can thus complement programmatic studies with in-depth behavioural-economic insights, provided they are client-driven.