The Reference Group to the UN on HIV and Injecting Drug Use estimates that three million injecting drug users were living with HIV in 2007. Although some countries have managed to contain the spread of HIV infection among injecting drug users by deploying the package of harm reduction interventions jointly recommended by WHO, UNAIDS, and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), many have not.

This represents a major concern particularly given evidence that shows that, where injecting drug users enjoy good access to these services, HIV incidence remains stable and low for years and even decades (Australia, Brazil, France, Germany, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom and several US cities).

With rare exceptions, studies also consistently show that needle and syringe programmes result in marked decreases in HIV transmission—by as much as 33 to 42 per cent in some settings. Indeed, these experiences reveal that public health efforts are effective and that controlling HIV infection in people who use drugs can be accomplished fairly easily and at low cost.

Nevertheless, it appears that the successes experienced by these countries are not enough to trump stigma and bad policy. In 2010, hundreds of thousands of injecting drug users and their intimate partners continue to be infected, particularly in Eastern Europe, in East, Southeast, and Central Asia, and in the southern cone of South America.

Five countries in particular (China, Malaysia, Russia, Ukraine, and Vietnam) are characterized as “mega-epidemics” in terms of people who inject drugs. Taken together, these countries account for an estimated 2 to 4 million cases of HIV infection and constitute the largest concentration of injecting drug users living with HIV worldwide.

In Eastern Europe and Central Asia the situation is particularly worrisome. Injecting drug users account for more than 60 per cent of all HIV infections in Belarus, Georgia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.