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Title: Beyond Risk: Caseworkers' Perspectives on Youth Harm Reduction and Mental Health in Wales

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Objectives: This study investigated how harm reduction is interpreted and enacted by caseworkers supporting young people (aged 16–25) with substance use challenges. Despite growing policy interest in harm reduction, there is limited understanding of how such approaches are experienced and applied in practice, particularly in relation to psychological wellbeing, developmental needs, and implications for youth support services.

Design: A qualitative study was conducted to explore caseworkers' professional experiences and meaning-making. The research was informed by developmental psychology and harm reduction theory, drawing on person-centred approaches relevant to youth development.

Methods: Sixteen caseworkers from a South West Wales substance use service participated in focus group discussions. Conversations centred on the psychosocial contexts of substance use, mental health needs, and the practical realities of service delivery, particularly in relation to supporting young people in and around education, training, or employment. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results: Three interrelated themes were identified. First, participants described harm reduction as a relational, trauma-informed approach rather than only risk minimisation. Second, they emphasised the need for a developmental mindset, advocating for interventions that support holistic wellbeing to help young people stay meaningfully engaged in education or training. Third, they highlighted how public misconceptions and institutional constraints often undermine harm reduction, requiring frontline practitioners to improvise support where policy is lacking.

Conclusions: The study challenges narrow interpretations of harm reduction and proposes a developmentally responsive, psychologically informed framework. Findings support more integrated, youth-centred practice across mental health, social care, and educational services.