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Navigating health and social services: Using concepts of capital acquisition and transformation to understand marginalised young drug user's service experiences

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This paper considers how marginalised young drug users make choices about and navigate social and health services. It explores how services act as a means to acquire social capital, and how that acquired capital can be transformed and/or produce loss. The study used interview data collected from 26 young drug users recruited from emergency shelters, drug and alcohol treatment centres, street outreach, and drop-in centres. Participants talked about how they acquired social capital from services by gaining relationships with those who could help with finding a home and/or getting off drugs; and how they were presented with opportunities to transform this capital into other valuable resources, for example by securing employment or training. But these acquired resources carried risk when relationships formed at services with violent and drug using peers created opportunities for resuming drug use or criminal activity, or interactions with staff contributed further to their views of themselves as unworthy. The analysis suggests that participants acquired and built capital in their transactions with services, but this often tended to reproduce their marginalised circumstances. Yet, it also suggests that marginalised young people are not without agency to mobilise the resources gained from services to produce more positive trajectories.