

¹Gibbs, D., ¹Swanton, R., ¹Price, O., ¹Uporova, J., ¹Karlsson, A., ¹Chan, R., ²Dietze, P., ³Bruno, R., ⁴Salom, C., ⁵Lenton, S., ¹ Peacock, A

¹ National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney, ²Burnet Institute, ³University of Tasmania, ⁴ Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland, ⁵ National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University

The Difference is Research

Background

New and sterile injecting equipment can be obtained from multiple sites in Australia, primarily needle and syringe programs (NSPs), pharmacies, and vending machines.

In 2020 jurisdictional and federal government restrictions limited peoples' movement in an attempt to reduce risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Restrictions affected staffing capacity for harm reduction services, as well as means of accessing these services for people who inject drugs (PWID)¹.

Aims

1. Determine the proportion of PWID who reported difficulty accessing injecting equipment as a result of COVID-19 related restrictions;
2. Identify barriers to access and subsequent behavioural changes this group reported; and
3. Identify demographic, drug use, and related characteristics were associated with experiencing barriers to accessing these services.

Methods

A sentinel sample of 884 people who had injected drugs at least monthly in the previous six months were recruited from each Australian capital city from June to September 2020. Participants were interviewed about access to sterile injecting equipment, drug use, and related behaviour, and how COVID-19 restrictions had impacted them.

12% PWID reported difficulty accessing sterile injecting equipment since March

Barriers included:



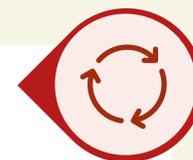
- NSP closed or not taking clients (42%; n=43);
- Vending machine out of stock (27%; n=27);
- NSP hours changed (23%; n=23).



Who had issues accessing equipment

- In univariate analyses those who identify as women, reported receptive or distributive needle sharing in the last month, reported injecting daily or more frequently in the last month were all significantly more likely to report difficulty accessing new and sterile equipment since March.
- Those who identified as female were significantly more likely to report having issues accessing new and sterile injecting equipment in multivariable analysis.

Increased needle reuse



- Half of those who had issues accessing injecting equipment reported that this led to increased reuse of their own needles;
- 31% of those who had difficulty accessing equipment reused their needles 1-2 times in the last month; and
- 34% reused their needles 3+ times in the last month.

Implications

Women who inject drugs may have been more significantly affected by COVID-19 related restrictions.

Reuse of one's own needles is associated with more severe injecting related injuries and diseases (IRID) presentations².

Women who inject drugs may benefit from targeted IRID screening as well as assertive follow up for treatment as COVID-19 related restrictions ease.

References

1. Dunlop, Adrian, et al. "Challenges in maintaining treatment services for people who use drugs during the COVID-19 pandemic." Harm Reduction Journal 17 (2020): 1-7.
2. Colledge, S., Larney, S., Bruno, R., Gibbs, D., Degenhardt, L., Yuen, W.S., Dietze, P., Peacock, A., 2020. Profile and correlates of injecting-related injuries and diseases among people who inject drugs in Australia. Drug and Alcohol Dependence.. doi:10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2020.108267