Injecting equipment access and use in a sample of Australians who regularly inject drugs, 2022

Seraina Agramunt and Simon Lenton

This report was prepared by the National Drug Research Institute and enAble Institute, Curtin University

For further information: seraina.agramunt@curtin.edu.au

Introduction

People who inject drugs (PWID) have an increased risk of contracting blood-borne viruses (BBV) and injection-related health problems (1). Needle and equipment sharing is still a common occurrence among PWID in Australia, despite high coverage of interventions (2). The stigma associated with drug use might prevent PWID from seeking treatment and engaging with healthcare services which might increase their vulnerability to unsafe injecting behaviours and overdoses (3). Other groups of people (e.g., women, younger people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people new to injecting) might face greater barriers in accessing needle and syringes programs (NSP) (4). Acquiring sterile injecting equipment from personal sources is a common occurrence in Australia, even though its practice is being regulated differently across each jurisdiction (4). The aim of this bulletin is to describe injecting equipment access and use among a sample of PWID in Australia.

Methods

Data were collected for the Illicit Drugs Reporting System (IDRS) via annual interviews with people residing in Australian capital cities aged ≥18 who reported regularly injecting illicit drugs (5). Participants reported if they had engaged in select behaviours on their last occasion of injecting drug use (see Appendix 1-3 for jurisdictional results). A total of 879 participants took part in 2022.

Results

Needle access and main reasons for having trouble getting new sterile needles and syringes in the last month, nationally:

Needle access: NSP (85%)

Needle access: Vending machines (22%)

Needle access: Chemist (14%)

Needle access: Friend (12%)

Had trouble getting new sterile needles and syringes (11%)

NSP was closed (7%)

Vending machine was out of stock (2%)

Discussion

The majority of the sample obtained their needles and syringes from a NSP, followed by a vending machine. However, vending machines are not available in all Australian capital cities despite their convenience (6). Peer distribution of needles was nearly as common as collecting needles from the chemist, despite not being legal in all jurisdictions (4). These findings suggest that the peer distribution should be legal in all jurisdictions, to encourage the distribution of sterile injecting equipment across the community to prevent BBV and infections. Potential impact of expanding vending machine access should also be considered.

References

1. Larney S, Peacock A, Mathers BM, Hickman M, Degenhardt L. A systematic review of injecting-related injury and disease among people who inject drugs. Drug and alcohol dependence. 2017 Feb 1;171:39-49. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2016.11.029

2. Degenhardt L, Webb P, Colledge-Frisby S, Ireland J, Wheeler A, Ottaviano S, et al. Epidemiology of injecting drug use, prevalence of injecting-related harm, and exposure to behavioural and environmental risks among people who inject drugs: a systematic review. The Lancet Global Health. 2023 Mar 27.

3. Biancarelli DL, Biello KB, Childs E, Drainoni M, Salhaney P, Edeza A, et al. Strategies used by people who inject drugs to avoid stigma in healthcare settings. Drug and alcohol dependence. 2019 May 1;198:80-6. Available from: 10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2019.01.037

4. Australian Injecting & Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL). Policy statement on legislative barriers to peer distribution of sterile injecting equipment. 2017.

5. Sutherland R, Uporova J, King C, Jones F, Karlsson A, Gibbs D, et al. Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) Interviews 2022: Background and Methods. Sydney, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney; 2022.

6. Needle and syringe programs in WA. Department of Health. Available from: https://www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/N_R/Needle-and-syringe-programs-in-WA

Recommended citation:

Agramunt, S. & Lenton, S. Injecting equipment access and use in a sample of Australians who regularly inject drugs, 2022. Drug Trends Bulletin Series. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney; 2023. DOI: 10.26190/2x1d-sk26

Funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care under the Drug and Alcohol Program

Appendix 1. Type of injecting equipment used in the last month, by capital cities and nationally, 2022.

Type of injecting equipment used in the last month	Sydney N=152	Canberra N=101	Melbourne N=151	Hobart N=102	Adelaide N=103	Perth N=100	Darwin N=70	Brisbane N=100	National N=879
% Needle and syringe (0.5 ml, 1 ml)	97 (n=148)	96 (n=96)	93 (n=140)	81 (n=82)	96 (n=99)	99 (n=99)	71 (n=49)	91 (n=91)	**92 (n=804)**
% Syringe or barrel (3ml, 5ml, 10ml, 20ml, 50ml)	24 (n=37)	34 (n=34)	13 (n=19)	45 (n=45)	35 (n=36)	22 (n=22)	45 (n=31)	37 (n=37)	**30 (n=261)**
% Detachable needle (tip)	18 (n=28)	23 (n=23)	7 (n=10)	16 (n=16)	18 (n=18)	15 (n=15)	23 (n=16)	37 (n=37)	**19 (n=163)**
% Winged vein infusion set (butterfly)	16 (n=24)	22 (n=22)	-	29 (n=29)	13 (n=13)	14 (n=14)	-	25 (n=25)	**15 (n=134)**
% Spoons or mixing containers	93 (n=142)	94 (n=95)	91 (n=137)	47 (n=47)	34 (n=35)	62 (n=62)	34 (n=24)	69 (n=69)	**70 (n=611)**
% Tourniquets	68 (n=103)	70 (n=71)	57 (n=86)	42 (n=42)	41 (n=42)	53 (n=53)	40 (n=28)	63 (n=63)	**56 (n=488)**
% Water	98 (n=149)	98 (n=99)	93 (n=140)	85 (n=86)	91 (n=93)	92 (n=92)	97 (n=68)	94 (n=94)	**94 (n=821)**
% Swabs	92 (n=140)	93 (n=94)	90 (n=136)	70 (n=71)	80 (n=82)	92 (n=92)	89 (n=62)	95 (n=95)	**88 (n=772)**
% Wheel filters	-	25 (n=25)	4 (n=6)	16 (n=16)	7 (n=7)	18 (n=18)	11 (n=8)	17 (n=17)	**12 (n=102)**
% Commercial cotton filters (Sterifilt®)	61 (n=93)	71 (n=72)	46 (n=69)	9 (n=9)	20 (n=20)	34 (n=34)	9 (n=6)	32 (n=32)	**38 (n=335)**
% Other filters (e.g. cigarette filters)	25 (n=38)	17 (n=17)	42 (n=63)	28 (n=28)	19 (n=19)	41 (n=41)	34 (n=24)	39 (n=39)	**31 (n=269)**

Note. - No data labels provided with small cell size (i.e., n≤5 but not 0).

Appendix 2. Needle access in the last month, by capital cities and nationally, 2022.

Needle access in the last month	Sydney N=152	Canberra N=101	Melbourne N=151	Hobart N=102	Adelaide N=103	Perth N=100	Darwin N=70	Brisbane N=100	National N=879
% A Needle and syringe program (NSP)	68 (n=103)	90 (n=89)	79 (n=118)	89 (n=90)	91 (n=93)	90 (n=89)	96 (n=66)	95 (n=94)	**85 (n=742)**
% Vending machine	40 (n=60)	7 (n=7)	28 (n=42)	29 (n=29)	15 (n=15)	-+	19 (n=13)	23 (n=23)	**22 (n=191)**
% Chemist	9 (n=14)	20 (n=20)	6 (n=9)	26 (n=26)	11 (n=11)	18 (n=18)	-	19 (n=19)	**14 (n=118)**
% Partner	-	-	-	-	-	6 (n=6)	0 (n=0)	-	**2 (n=17)**
% Friend	11 (n=16)	18 (n=18)	15 (n=23)	8 (n=8)	16 (n=16)	8 (n=8)	-	10 (n=10)	**12 (n=104)**
% Dealer	-	10 (n=10)	4 (n=6)	-	12 (n=12)	-	-	-	**5 (n=45)**
% Hospital	9 (n=13)	-	-	0 (n=0)	-	-	0 (n=0)	0 (n=0)	**2 (n=20)**
% Outreach/peer worker	4 (n=6)	-	10 (n=15)	0 (n=0)	-	-	-	0 (n=0)	**4 (n=31)**
% Medically supervised injecting centre (MSIC)	20 (n=30)	NA	20 (n=30)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	**7 (n=63)**
% Trouble getting new sterile needles and syringes in the last month	6 (n=9)	11 (n=11)	14 (n=21)	17 (n=16)	8 (n=8)	17 (n=17)	-	9 (n=9)	**11 (n=96)**

Note. - No data labels provided with small cell size (i.e., n≤5 but not 0); (NA) not available in these states. (*) 2 people from Canberra and 1 person from Brisbane reported having accessed needles from a MSIC, even though they are not available in these states. (+) In Western Australia, needle and syringe vending machines are available in Karratha, Carnarvon, Geraldton, Kalgoorlie, Esperance, and Busselton hospitals, but not in the Perth metropolitan area (6).

Appendix 3. Reasons for having trouble getting new sterile needles and syringes in the last month, by capital cities and nationally, 2022.

Reasons for having trouble getting new sterile needles and syringes in the last month	Sydney N=152	Canberra N=101	Melbourne N=151	Hobart N=102	Adelaide N=103	Perth N=100	Darwin N=70	Brisbane N=100	National N=879
% Needle and syringe program (NSP) was closed	-	7 (n=7)	9 (n=14)	10 (n=10)	-	14 (n=14)	-	-	**7 (n=58)**
% Needle and syringe vending machine was broken	-	-	-	-	-	0+ (n=0)	0 (n=0)	0 (n=0)	**1 (n=12)**
% Chemist was closed	-	-	0 (n=0)	-	0 (n=0)	-	-	-	**1 (n=11)**
% Vending machine was out of stock	-	-	4 (n=6)	-	-	0+ (n=0)	-	-	**2 (n=21)**
% Chemist was out of stock	0 (n=0)	0 (n=0)	0 (n=0)	-	0 (n=0)	0 (n=0)	0 (n=0)	-	**-**
% Didn't have money for vending machine	0 (n=0)	0 (n=0)	0 (n=0)	-	-	0 (n=0)	0 (n=0)	0 (0=0)	**-**
% Didn't want to wait	0 (n=0)	0 (n=0)	-	0 (n=0)	0 (n=0)	0 (n=0)	-	0 (n=0)	**-**
% Too far	0 (n=0)	0 (n=0)	-	-	-	-	-	-	**1 (n=12)**
% Other	-	-	-	-	-	-	0 (n=0)	0 (n=0)	**1 (n=13)**

Note. - No data labels provided with small cell size (i.e., n≤5 but not 0); (+) In Western Australia, needle and syringe vending machines are available in Karratha, Carnarvon, Geraldton, Kalgoorlie, Esperance, and Busselton hospitals, but not in the Perth metropolitan area (6).