

EFFECTS OF INTIMACY AND RELATIONSHIPS ON INJECTION BEHAVIORS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS (PWID)

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Background: Injection drug use among young adults is increasing, and interpersonal context has been shown to impact behavior in injecting partnerships, which can impact risk assessment.

Methods: Twenty-three qualitative interviews were conducted with a purposive subsample of 21 participants within a larger RCT evaluating a harm reduction-based intervention for young PWID (N=169). Participants were interviewed ~3-9 months post-intervention about their experiences in the intervention and its effects on their behavior. Two participants completed supplementary interviews because they seroconverted to HCV antibody positive status during the 12-month follow up period. Interviews were 30-60 minutes. All participants completed a structured baseline interview at enrollment.

Results: The sample had an average age of 24.5, with 11 male participants, 9 female, and 1 nonbinary. Twelve participants were Hispanic/Latino, 13 were White, 5 identified as more than one race, and 2 were another race. Twelve participants reported a romantic relationship with a PWID at the time of their interview. Romantic relationships led participants to exhibit riskier sharing behavior, due to the level of comfort and trust (e.g., participants are more likely to share with their partners because they trust them not to share outside the relationship, and to be honest about their HCV status), as well as participants' impressions of comparable sexual and injection risk. Friendships can also exhibit some of these characteristics and behaviors related to elevated feelings of trust. Participants also report protective behaviors in intimate relationships, such as using in the presence of partners vs. alone in case of overdose.

Discussion: Young PWID exhibit different behaviors within intimate relationships than with others. These behaviors can be positive (protective) or negative (risk behavior). Education aimed specifically at these types of relationships with risk behaviors in mind would be beneficial to this population and reducing HCV among young people who use opioids.

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