

EVIDENCE OF LIMITED ACCESS TO HARM REDUCTION SERVICES IN ENGLAND, WALES AND NORTHERN IRELAND IN 2020 AS A RESULT OF COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS

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Background:

People who inject drugs (PWID) are a marginalised group disproportionately affected by infectious diseases and who experience barriers to accessing care. We describe the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic restrictions on the accessibility of harm reduction services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EW&NI).

Methods:

The Unlinked Anonymous Monitoring (UAM) Survey is an annual bio-behavioural survey recruiting people who have ever injected psychoactive drugs through drug and alcohol services across EW&NI. In June 2020, in addition to providing a dried blood spot sample and completing a behavioural questionnaire, participants were asked to complete a brief enhanced COVID-19 questionnaire, with questions on how easy it was to access harm reduction services (equipment to use/inject drugs, opioid substitution therapy (OST), naloxone, HIV/hepatitis testing) in 2020 compared to 2019. We characterise PWID reporting difficulties accessing these services compared to those reporting no difficulties (chi²; p<0.10).

Results:

In 2020, 498 PWID completed the enhanced COVID-19 questionnaire; 71% (n=353) indicated need for harm reduction services, reporting access to these services to be easier, the same or more difficult in 2020 compared to 2019. Overall, 34% (n=120) of PWID reported difficulty accessing either equipment (25%), OST (22%), naloxone (13%) and/or HIV/hepatitis testing (22%). Men (37% vs. women 25%; p=0.039), PWID recruited outside of London (37% vs. London 26%; p=0.058) and those recruited through hostels/hotels (41% vs. drug services 30%; p=0.043) were more likely to report difficulties accessing harm reduction services, as well as people reporting sharing needles/syringes in the last month (53% vs. 32%; p=0.010) and re-using their own equipment in the last month (43% vs. 26%; p=0.030).

Conclusion:

PWID reported difficulty accessing essential prevention services in 2020. Continued monitoring is needed to understand the impact on national HIV and viral hepatitis elimination efforts, and health inequalities experienced by PWID.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

No conflicts of interest to disclose.