

# EXPERIENCES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AMONG PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA WHO INJECT DRUGS: THREE YEARS OF CROSS-SECTIONAL SURVEY DATA

Price O<sup>1</sup>, Dietze P.<sup>2,3,4</sup>, Maher L<sup>5</sup>, Dore GJ<sup>5</sup>, Crawford S<sup>6</sup>, Sutherland R<sup>1</sup>, Salom C<sup>1,7</sup>, Bruno R<sup>1,8</sup>, Lenton S<sup>1,9</sup>, Degenhardt L<sup>1</sup>, Peacock A<sup>1,8</sup>

<sup>1</sup>National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia, <sup>2</sup>Behaviour and Health Risks, Burnet Institute, Melbourne, Australia, <sup>3</sup>National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, Melbourne, Australia, <sup>4</sup>School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, <sup>5</sup>Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia, <sup>6</sup>Harm Reduction Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, <sup>7</sup>Institute for Social Science Research, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia, <sup>8</sup>School of Psychological Sciences, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Australia, <sup>9</sup>National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, Perth, Australia

**Background:** People who inject drugs are vulnerable to severe health outcomes associated with COVID-19 but may face barriers to testing and vaccination. This study aimed to monitor COVID-19 testing, infection and vaccine uptake over time among this population in Australia.

**Methods:** Three years (2020-2022) of Illicit Drug Reporting System survey data with people who regularly inject drugs recruited from Australian capital cities were used. Each year, 900 participants reported the number of COVID-19 tests taken in the preceding 12 months, whether they had tested positive, and any barriers to testing. In 2021 and 2022, participants reported the number of vaccine doses received and depending on vaccination status, the main motivator or barrier to vaccination.

**Results:** Data collection for 2022 is ongoing and will be completed in June. Half the sample (46%) reported past 12-month COVID-19 testing in 2021, an increase from 2020 (20%), although no-one reported a COVID-19 diagnosis in either year. In 2021, 10% of participants had received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose, while 44% were hesitant to receive the vaccine. In 2021, the main barriers to vaccination were safety concerns. Preliminary analyses suggest barriers have shifted in 2022 to low perceived risk of COVID-19. To date, the main barriers to rapid antigen testing were affordability and availability.

**Conclusion:** Vaccine uptake among this sample is lower than the general population. Our data suggest convenient access coupled with brief education to build trust in vaccine safety and utility may improve uptake. Provision of free rapid antigen tests at locations this population regularly intersect with, like needle-syringe programs, could facilitate equitable access to testing.

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