

Adapting Recruitment Strategies in Substance Use Research during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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BACKGROUND

To understand the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the well-being of people who use drugs (PWUD) in the downtown Montreal area, hearing their stories is important. **"Nothing about Us, Without Us"** is put forward by advocacy groups.

As part of the [Canadian Research Institute in Substance Misuse \(CRISM\)](#)'s rapid response to the pandemic, a **Rapid assessment of the impacts of COVID-19 on people who use drugs via questionnaires** (referred to as **HEPCOVID**) was carried out between May-June 2020 and September-December 2020, with the goal of interviewing a total of 250 people in Montreal. Adapting recruitment strategies during the COVID pandemic was necessary to meet project objectives. The first 100 interviews were successfully completed between May and June through virtual and phone interviews. However, the last 150 proved challenging. Evidence shows the value of involving people with lived experience (PWLE) in substance use research, especially in a novel context such as a pandemic.

OBJECTIVE

Interview 150 people who inject drugs and people who use psychoactive drugs, in downtown Montreal, in 15 weeks, amidst restrictive public health measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

RECRUITMENT STRATEGY & INTEGRATION OF RESEARCH ASSISTANT WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE (RAWLE)

- Strategy 1 (without RAWLE)** : Access list of 405 PWUD (past or active participants of the [Montreal HEPCO Cohort](#)). Contact them by phone, e-mail and post. Completed Interviews compensated via online transfers.

When this failed to yield recruitment objectives, a research assistant with lived experience (RAWLE) was mandated to intervene which led to:

- Strategy 2:** Optimizing and tailoring recruitment products. Community resources progressively added for passive recruitment, based on RAWLE'S first-hand knowledge and experience.
- Strategy 3:** Facilitating access to phone interviews by having RAWLE on site with a research-issued cell phone. With ethics approving in-person recruitment and telephone interviews, compensation reverted to cash.
- Strategy 4:** Prioritizing in-person interviews with trained RAWLE in community resources, in the downtown Montreal area, with the space and capacity to follow public health physical distancing measures.

Integration of RAWLE

Trained RAWLE to conduct in-person interviews at community resource sites. Additional to being able to interview, RAWLE facilitated recruitment and outreach of more PWUD, especially those with no method of contact or permanent address. Ethics approval obtained for in-person data collection, executing IPE protocols, knowledge-sharing, training (data collection, informed consent, CAPI) and logistics (ex. Hardware: laptop, wifi stick, cell phone) in the midst of a pandemic. In-person and in community interviewing increased weekly recruitment considerably.



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We would like to single out the contribution of [St. Michael's Mission \(Red Roof\)](#) and [The Benedict Labre House](#). We respectfully acknowledge that the land on which the interviews and this project were carried out is the traditional and unceded territory of the Kanien'keha:ka (Mohawk) and the Abenaki and Wabanaki confederation.

RESULTS

Figure 1: Interviews completed per week over time

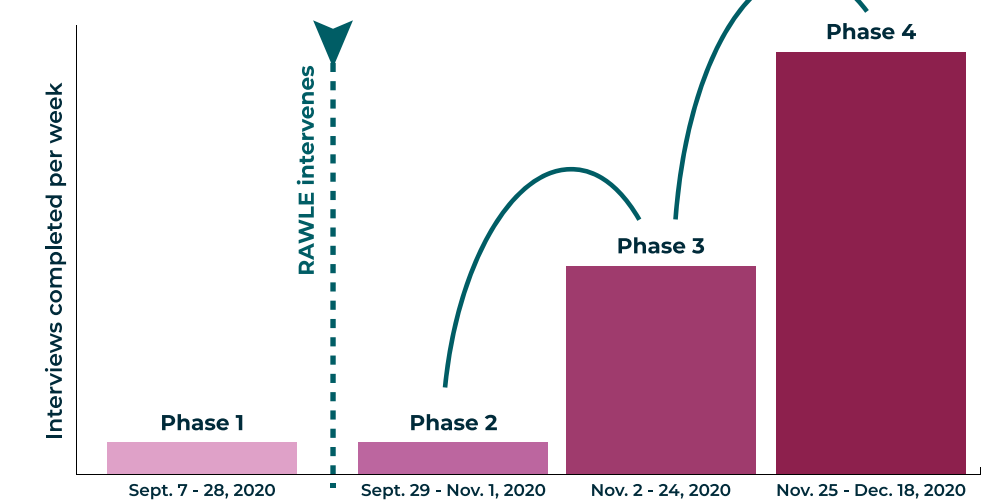


Figure 1. Demonstrates the effectiveness of each phase over 15.13 weeks. Each phase progressively combines recruitment strategies.

Table 1: Phases of adaptive recruitment strategies and number of interviews completed

	Strategy Combination	N# Interviews Completed	Phase Length in weeks	N# Interviews per week
Phase 1	1	6	3	2
Phase 2	1 + 2	6	5.71	1
Phase 3	1 + 2 + 3	38	3.14	12
Phase 4	2 + 3 + 4	77	3.28	24
Total	-	127	15.13	-

Completed interviews = 127; Targeted N: 150.

DISCUSSION

Research should be more inclusive of PWLE and collaborate closely with community partners that are first-line observers of the studied populations. By working together, trained research staff with lived experience and community resources that service PWUD can facilitate in-person interviews, review protocols, diversify the participant pool and contribute to knowledge-sharing, in the midst of a global pandemic that is amplifying challenges faced by PWUD.

CONCLUSION

The RAWLE's involvement in recruitment strategies for PWUD during the COVID-19 pandemic was key to surpassing recruitment challenges from September-December 2020 in Montreal. Virtual interviewing is limiting, thus in-person interviews with physical distancing and PPE at community resource sites was preferable. Implementing all strategies suggested by RAWLE resulted in completing **11.73 times more interviews** (Phase 4 vs. Phase 1 without RAWLE), further contributing to the arguments for the implication of PWLE in substance use research with PWUD.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Hire and train research staff with lived experience
- Prioritize front line data collection. Be mindful of diversity and limitations on virtual data collection.
- Be creative and flexible, while respecting Public Health sanitary measures
- Adapt recruitment strategies and data collection methods to the realities of people who inject drugs and people who use psychoactive drugs, not the other way around
- Build partnerships with community resources – Consult community groups
- Conduct research activities through your collaborators' sites, when possible

