

COVID-19 pandemic experiences of people in Australia who inject drugs: Analysis of Illicit Drug Reporting System interview data 2020-2022

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Introduction and Aims: People who inject drugs may be vulnerable to severe health outcomes associated with COVID-19. This study aimed to monitor COVID-19 testing, infection and vaccine uptake over time among this population in Australia.

Design and Methods: Three years (2020-2022) of Illicit Drug Reporting System survey data with people who inject drugs were used. Each year, participants reported the number of COVID-19 tests taken in the preceding 12 months and whether they had tested positive. In 2022, they reported whether there were barriers to rapid antigen 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 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.

Discussions and Conclusions: These 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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