

First Nations people who inject drugs HIV and hepatitis C positivity and condom use in the Australian Needle and Syringe Program Survey, 1995–2024

Authors:

Graham S^{1,2}, Clancy K^{1,3}, Doyle M³, Heard S⁴, Maher L⁴, Kalucy D¹, Garton L⁵, Mathers B⁴

¹ Poche Centre for Indigenous Health, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia, ² Centre for Collaborative Action on Indigenous Health Governance, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada, ³ Edith Collins Centre University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia, ⁴ Kirby Institute for Infection and Immunity, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia, ⁵ Department of Sexual Health Medicine, Sydney Local Health District, Sydney, Australia

Background:

Needle and syringe programs (NSPs) have prevented thousands of HIV and hepatitis C virus (HCV) transmissions among people who inject drugs. However, long-term trends in sexual behaviours and HIV prevention among people who inject drugs and especially First Nations people who inject drugs are less understood. We examined changes in injecting and sexual behaviours and HIV and HCV prevalence among First Nations participants in the Australian Needle and Syringe Program Survey (ANSPS) from 1995–2024.

Methods:

The ANSPS is an annual cross-sectional survey at ~50 NSP sites nationwide. Participants complete a questionnaire and provide a finger-stick dried blood spot for HIV and HCV antibody testing (HCV RNA since 2015). The analyses assessed trends in demographics, injecting and sexual practices, and HIV and HCV testing and prevalence over time among First Nations participants. We calculated p-trends with significance at $p < 0.05$.

Results:

The proportion of First Nations participants increased from 5% in 1995 to 26% in 2024 ($p < 0.001$). The median age increased from 26 years in 1995 to 42 years in 2024 ($p < 0.001$). Receptive syringe sharing declined, while daily injecting increased. HIV prevalence remained low (4.3% in 1995; 2.4% in 2024). HCV antibody prevalence decreased from 65% in 1995 to 44% in 2024 ($p < 0.001$). HCV RNA prevalence decreased from 52% in 2015 to 9% in 2024 ($p < 0.001$). Being paid for sex increased from 10% in 1995 to 19% in 2024 ($p = 0.086$). Condom use with casual partners decreased from 36% in 2005 to 14% in 2024 ($p < 0.001$). Condom use at last paid sex decreased from 80% in 1995 to 57% in 2024 ($p = 0.005$).

Conclusion:

Decreasing rates of HCV antibody and HCV RNA positivity and sustained low HIV prevalence are positive achievements. However, decreasing condom use with sexual partners and when paid for sex is a concern for HIV and STI prevention.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The Australasian Society for HIV, Viral Hepatitis & Sexual Health Medicine recognises the considerable contribution that industry partners make to professional and research activities. We also recognise the need for transparency of disclosure of potential conflicts of interest by acknowledging these relationships in publications and presentations.

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