

# PEER-LED RECRUITMENT FOR EQUITABLE ENGAGEMENT OF PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS (PWID): EVIDENCE FROM THE HEPKO COHORT IN MONTREAL, CANADA

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## Background:

Peer-led approaches may facilitate equitable engagement of PWID in research, but few studies inform on their logistics, efficiency, and outcomes. To address this gap, a Partnerships Lead with Lived Experience (PLLE, lead author) devised, implemented, and evaluated three recruitment strategies for the HEPKO cohort of PWID in Montreal, Canada. Objectives were to: 1) Assess the efficiency of PLLE-led strategies at enrolling new participants; 2) Assess contributions to enrolment relative to traditional methods (e.g., advertising, word-of-mouth); 3) Compare participants enrolled via PLLE-led vs. traditional methods.

## Methods:

PLLE-led recruitment events included: 1) pop-up research clinics (n=109 events); 2) recruitment kiosks in community sites (n=26); and 3) street outreach in a local drug scene (n=29). Staff notes detailing PLLE-led field interactions and enrolment outcomes were transcribed and coded in a standardized spreadsheet within 24 hours. Traditional recruitment sources were recorded at enrolment. We computed proportions progressing through PLLE-led recruitment steps (interaction, study promotion, screening, etc.); PLLE-led strategy efficiency (new enrolments per event); and participant characteristics by recruitment method (PLLE-led vs. traditional).

## Results:

Between Feb. 2021–Dec. 2023, 164 PLLE-led events generated 2006 interactions and 144 new enrolments, for an efficiency of 0.88 (Figure A). During this period, 454 PWID were enrolled including 312 new and 142 returning/re-engaged participants. PLLE-led strategies thus contributed 46% of all new participants. Compared with traditional methods, participants enrolled via PLLE-led strategies were more likely to be new to the cohort and tended to be younger, more diverse PWID with higher levels of substance use and HCV prevalence.

## Conclusion:

With sustained commitment to implementation, peer-led recruitment approaches can be operationally effective and address barriers to participation while diversifying research samples. Further research should assess how people with lived and living experience can advance equitable public health research goals.

## Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The conference collaborators recognize the considerable contribution that industry partners make to professional and research activities. We also recognize the need for transparency of disclosure of potential conflicts of interest by acknowledging these relationships in publications and presentations. Salaries are supported by funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). No competing interests to declare.

## Figure A. Recruitment pipeline for PLLE-led strategies

