

## **Epidemiology and experiences of gender-based violence among women who inject drugs: a prospective linked data cohort study**

Samantha Colledge-Frisby<sup>1,2,3</sup>, Shelley Walker<sup>1,2</sup>, Bek Petrovic<sup>2</sup>, Amanda Roxburgh<sup>2</sup>, Daisy Gibbs<sup>2</sup>, Gail Gilchrist<sup>4</sup>, Lisa Maher<sup>5</sup>, Marika Burgess<sup>2</sup>, Sophia Schroeder<sup>2</sup>, Paul Dietze<sup>1,2</sup>, Ashleigh Stewart<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, Perth, Australia, <sup>2</sup>Burnet Institute, Melbourne, Australia, <sup>3</sup>National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia, <sup>4</sup>Kings College, London, United Kingdom, <sup>5</sup>Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia

Presenter's email: [s.colledge@curtin.edu.au](mailto:s.colledge@curtin.edu.au)

**Introduction:** Nearly one in three women have experienced assault from intimate partners and women disproportionately experience gender-based violence (GBV). Women who inject drugs are at increased risk of experiencing violence, but this is poorly understood in Australia. This study aims to understand GBV among women who inject drugs.

**Methods:** Using a mixed methods approach, we estimated the prevalence of GBV among women in a longitudinal cohort of people who inject drugs in Melbourne, Australia. We examined characteristics of violence, accessing medical care, and experiences with violence-specific services. Data come from annual self-report survey (2008–2024), linked hospital, emergency, and ambulance records (2008–2019), and qualitative interviews conducted with 11 women in the cohort (2023).

**Results:** Of 471 women in the cohort, most experienced violence (83.2%; 95%CI=79.5–86.5%), 181 of whom experienced sexual assault (38.4%; 95%CI=34.0–43.0%). There were 117 hospital admissions (n=81 women), 131 emergency department presentations (n=98 women), and 108 ambulance callouts (n=72 women) indicating assault. Majority of women self-reporting assault identified their current partner as the person who perpetrated violence (55.1%). Less than half (41.4%) of women reported accessing medical care after any assault. Compared to not accessing medical care, access was associated with reporting sexual assault (coefficient=1.2; 95%CI=0.2–2.1;  $p=0.015$ ). In qualitative interviews, women lacked familiarity or trust with healthcare professionals or services that may have assisted after experiencing violence and were reluctant to tell/retell their story and/or disclose their drug use. Some women feared child removal if they accessed help or reported abuse to the police.

**Conclusions:** GBV among women who inject drugs is endemic. We highlight need for accessible and inclusive violence services for women who inject drugs.

**Implications:** The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–32 should identify women who inject drugs as a priority group for resourcing.

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