

Healthcare, drug treatment and harm reduction service access for people who use and inject drugs during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction: In Australia, COVID-19 public health measures in 2020/2021 produced unintended health/social consequences, especially for populations that are typically marginalised. Changes to how healthcare, drug treatment and harm reduction services were provided (including needle/syringe programs and opioid agonist therapy [OAT]), and 'lockdowns' that involved curfews, physical density limits and restrictions on travel, impacted people who use/inject drugs; our study aimed to examine these impacts on their lived experience.

Method: We recruited 75 participants (August 2021– April 2022) from two cohort studies of people who inject drugs and/or use methamphetamine, in Victoria, Australia, using ethno-epidemiological random-stratified sampling. In-depth interviews focussed on experiences of drug use/treatment and health/wellbeing outcomes since March 2020. Data was thematically analysed using Iterative Categorisation.

Key Findings: Many participants experienced adverse physical/social health consequences related to the reduced capacity of healthcare, harm reduction/drug treatment services, and other COVID-19 public health measures. For many, access to sterile injecting equipment/drug treatment services was reduced, as were social connection opportunities via health services. Contrastingly, many also described positive outcomes via initiatives such as increasing access to unsupervised/take-away OAT dosing and telehealth services, which saved time on travel (especially in regional areas), and increased trust in service providers.

Discussions and Conclusions: Findings provide important understandings of the impacts of COVID-19 public health measures (including some that are ongoing) on healthcare, harm reduction and drug treatment service provision and the lives of people who use/inject drugs. Results can inform solutions for improving health service uptake/engagement for people who use/inject drugs in non-pandemic times.

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