TRENDS IN INJECTING BEHAVIORS AND HEPATITIS C AMONG PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS IN THE SAN DIEGO BORDER REGION AS A RESULT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Authors: Lara K Marquez[1], Natasha K Martin[1], Steffanie A Strathdee[1], Britt Skaathun[1]

Affiliation: [1]Division of Infectious Diseases and Global Public Health, University of California San Diego, San Diego, CA, USA

INHSU 2021

UC San Diego

Funding Disclosures

None

Background

- Travel restrictions aimed to mitigate SARS-CoV-2 transmission decreased mobility and reduced physical contacts
- San Diego Border Region (San Diego, USA – Tijuana, Mexico) located along a major drug trafficking route, where PWID crossed frequently to inject drugs in the pre-pandemic era
- US-Mexico border closed ‘to non-essential travel’ since March 21, 2020
- The impact of these pandemic restrictions on injecting trends and their potential impact on hepatitis C (HCV) transmission among people who inject drugs (PWID) are unclear in the San Diego Border Region

Aim

- To evaluate injecting behaviors in the COVID-19 pandemic era and HCV characteristics among PWID in the San Diego Border Region (SDBR)

Methods - *La Frontera* Baseline

- Longitudinal NIH-NIDA funded *La Frontera* study (PI: Strathdee)
- Collects behavioral and biological data among PWID in the San Diego Border Region
- Evaluated baseline survey data: November 2020 to April 2021

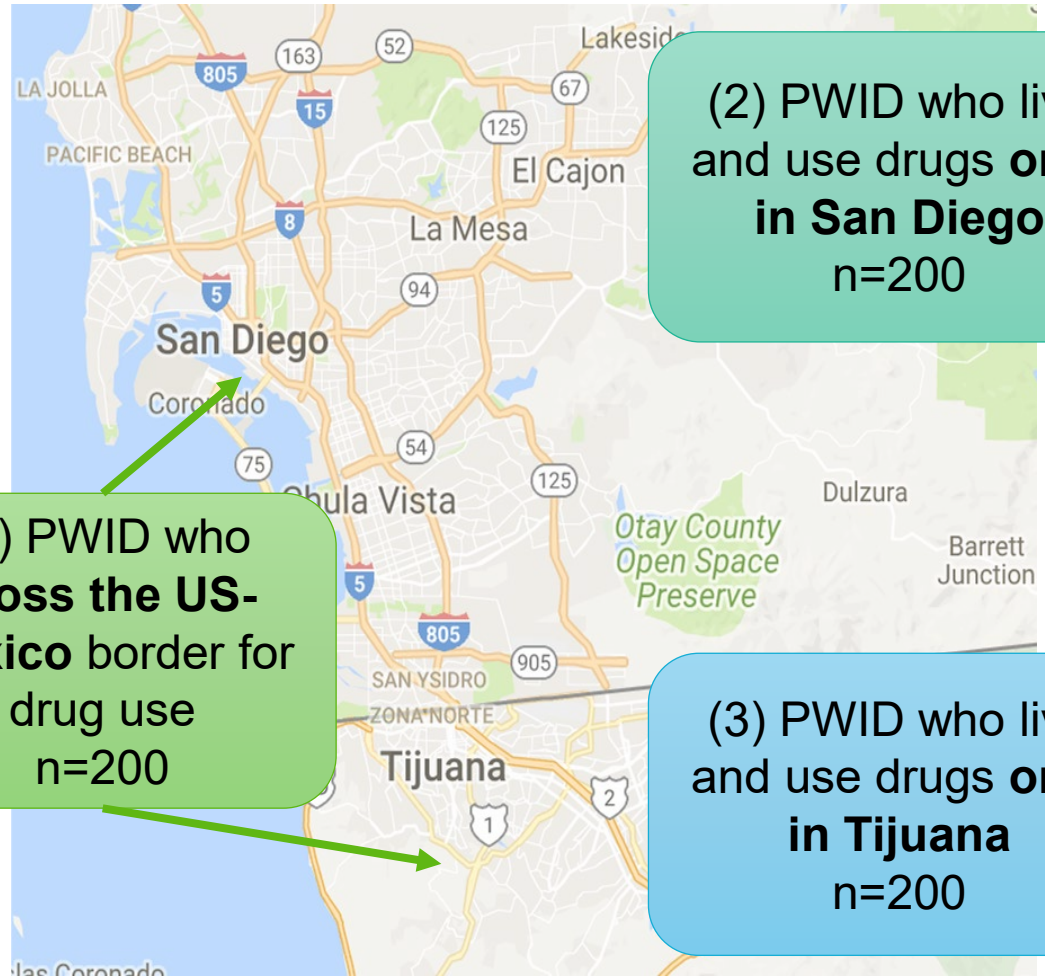


Image credit: maps.google.com

Methods – *Descriptive Analysis*

Injecting characteristics

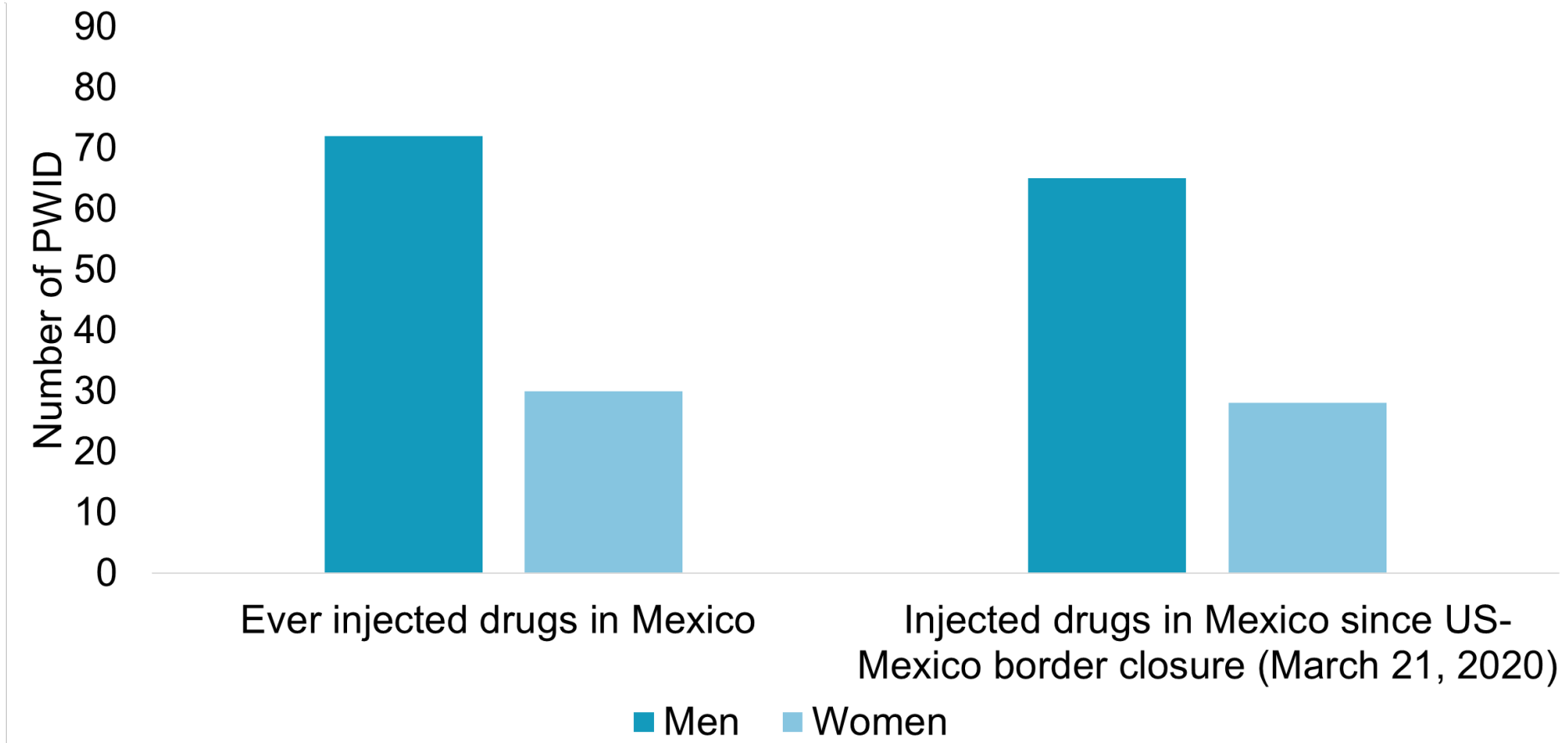
- More/less likely to inject alone during pandemic (More, less, equal)
- Receptive syringe sharing in last 6 months (Yes/No)
- Distributive syringe sharing in last 6 months (Yes/No)
- Number of drug- and alcohol-related partners in 14 days pre/during pandemic

HCV characteristics

- Ever tested for HCV (Self-reported; Yes/No)
- Baseline HCV rapid test results (After two rapid tests)

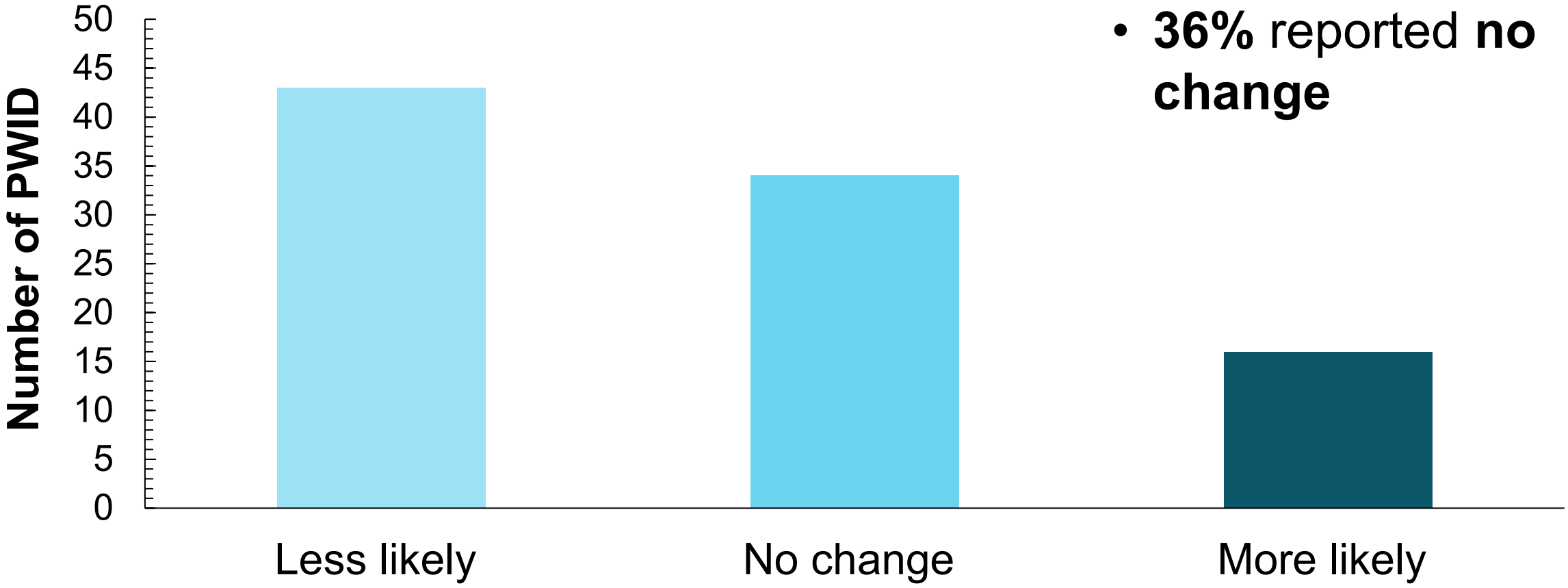
91% of PWID who crossed the border pre-COVID reported traveling to Mexico to inject drugs since the US-Mexico borders closed

Figure 1. US-Mexico cross-border injection behavior among PWID living in the US by gender



46% of PWID who crossed the border to inject drugs during the pandemic were **less likely to inject drugs alone compared to pre-pandemic**

- **36%** reported **no change**

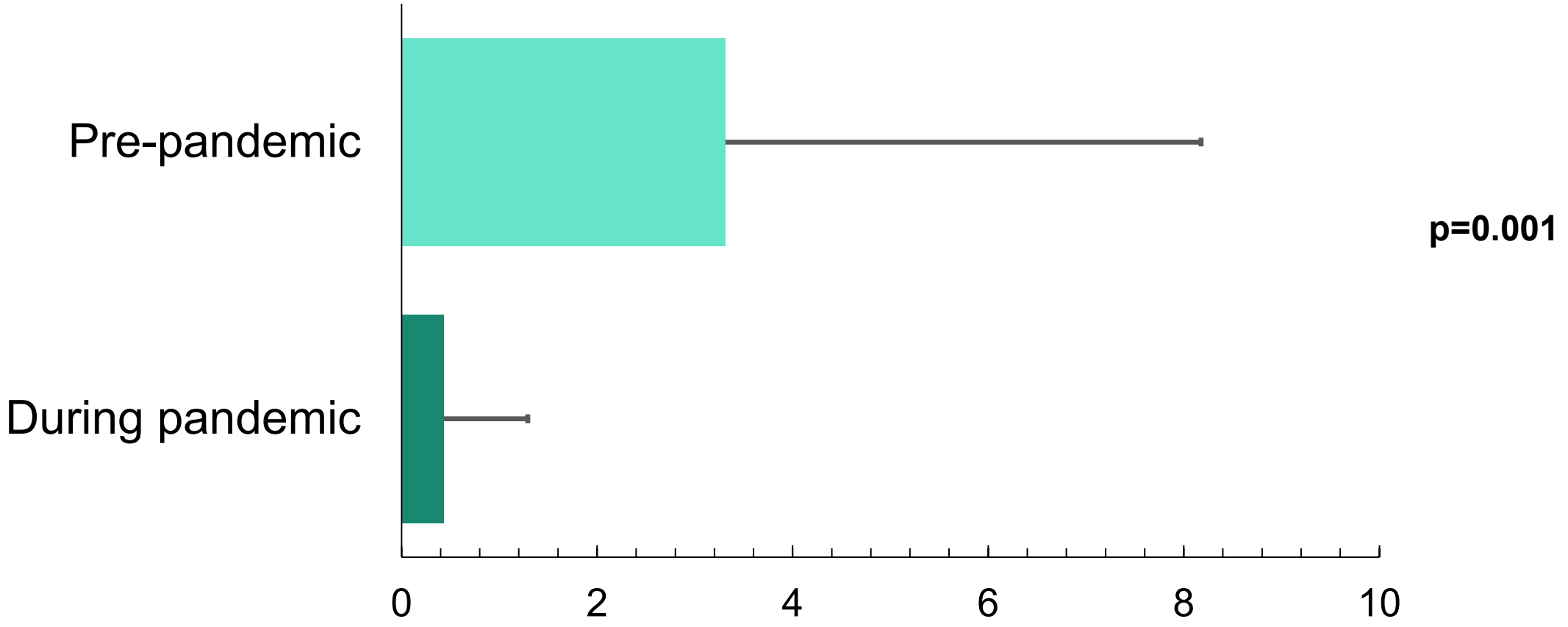


Syringe sharing among PWID who injected drugs in Mexico in the past 6 months

26% of PWID reported that engaged in **receptive syringe sharing**

40% of PWID reported that they engaged in **distributive syringe sharing**

Number of drug and alcohol-related partners with close contact in past 14 days

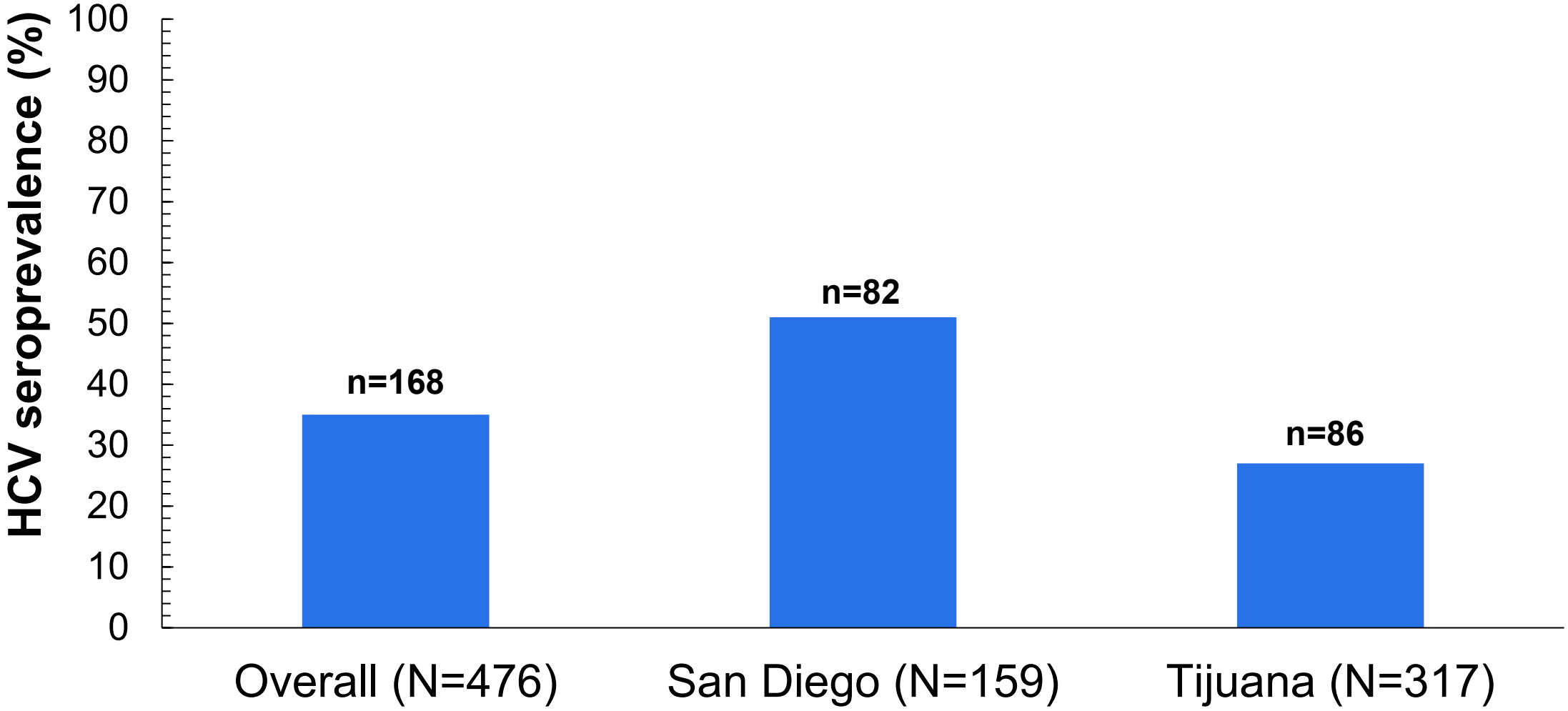


HCV testing history

49% had ever been tested for HCV prior to the study

82% of those ever tested **lived in the US**

HCV seroprevalence among PWID in the SDBR



Conclusion

- Most PWID continued cross-border travel to inject drugs during the pandemic
  - Mean number of drug- and alcohol-related contacts decreased during this time
- Cross-border transmission of HCV remains a concern
- HCV testing is needed as:
  - receptive syringe sharing is **>25%**
  - distributive syringe sharing is **40%**
  - HCV testing rates are low among PWID living and traveling to Mexico to inject drugs

Questions & Comments?

Author contact:

Lara K Marquez
lkusnezo@health.ucsd.edu

Funding Acknowledgements

Martin NK has received honoraria from Gilead, Merck, and Abbvie and was funded by the San Diego Center for AIDS Research (SD CFAR), an National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded program (P30 AI036214) and the National Institutes of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (R01 AI147490).

Marquez LK was supported by the National Institute of Drug Abuse of the National Institutes of Health under T32 DA023356 and Fogarty International Center of the National Institutes of Health under Award Number D43TW009343 and the University of California Global Health Institute.

This work was supported by the National Institutes of Health (NIH)-National Institutes of Drug Abuse (NIDA) R01DA049644. Skaathun B was also funded by an NIH-NIDA K01 (DA049665).