

The Impact of COVID-19 on Supervised Injecting Facilities in Australia

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Introduction: Supervised injecting facilities (SIFs) internationally have faced challenges during COVID-19. Both Australian SIFs (Uniting Medically Supervised Injecting Centre – MSIC- Sydney and the North Richmond Community Health Medically Supervised Injecting Room – MSIR- Melbourne) implemented strategies to continue operating safely. During this time there was also evidence of disruptions to illicit drug supply.

Method: Synthesis of changes implemented; Interrupted time series analysis assessing impact of lockdowns (Sydney lockdown 1- 31 March 2020; lockdown 2 - 28th June 2021) on visits and onsite overdoses.

Results: There was an immediate and significant decline in MSIC client injecting visits following lockdown 1 in Sydney, and a further decline following lockdown 2. Visits significantly increased when lockdown 2 ended. Reductions after lockdown 1 were largely driven by heroin injecting visits, and reductions after lockdown 2 by methamphetamine. When lockdown 2 ended, increases occurred in both heroin and methamphetamine visits. Methamphetamine injecting superseded heroin injecting in January 2021, and the inverse occurred in September 2021. The rate of opioid overdoses also declined significantly after lockdown 1. The Sydney MSIC recorded no fentanyl overdoses during this time.

Discussion: Changes in visits, drugs used, and overdose were observed, potentially reflecting disruptions to local drug markets in Australia and peoples' ability to attend harm reduction services.

Implications for Practice: Declines in service use has implications for injecting practices, particularly if it means more unsupervised injecting episodes occurred during this time. This also has implications for unsupervised overdose. Finally, declines have resulted in fewer opportunistic health and social services for clients.

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