

# "I wasn't aware that using went through the breast milk" Exploring the pre- and post-natal care experiences of women who inject drugs in Victoria

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BEK PETROVIC, TEAM LEAD - FIELDWORK

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**Burnet**  
reach for the many





AT BURNET INSTITUTE WE  
PROUDLY ACKNOWLEDGE THE  
BOON WURRUNG PEOPLE OF  
THE KULIN NATIONS AS THE  
TRADITIONAL OWNERS OF THE  
LAND ON WHICH OUR OFFICE  
IS LOCATED. WE PAY OUR  
RESPECTS TO ELDERS PAST,  
PRESENT, AND EXTEND THAT  
RESPECT TO ALL FIRST  
NATIONS PEOPLE





# What we know about women who inject drugs

- 2.8 million women globally who inject drugs
- Women more commonly report childhood trauma and gender-based violence
- More likely than men to live with and care for children
- More likely to report exchanging sex for money/drugs
- There is evidence of women who use drugs experiencing
  - unintended pregnancies and terminations<sup>2</sup>
  - poor pregnancy outcomes<sup>3,4</sup>





Services don't meet the specific gendered needs of women



Limited research examining the sexual and reproductive health needs of women who inject drugs



Not identified as a priority population in the current Victorian women's sexual and reproductive health plan 2022–30

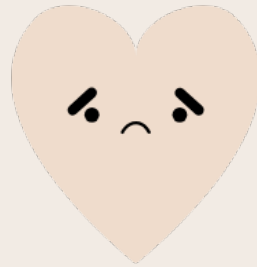


# Study Aim

The study aimed to understand the sexual and reproductive health needs of women who use drugs and the topics of investigation included:



**Reproductive health**



**Barriers  
accessing and  
using  
healthcare  
services**



**Importance of  
non-  
judgemental  
healthcare  
responses**



**Sexual  
activity**



**Pregnancy and  
post-natal  
care**



## Research methods

- Study conducted by Women's Health Special Interest Group at Burnet Institute
- Qualitative research design involving in-depth interviews
- Interviews were all conducted by women
- Data collection Oct – Nov 2023
- Eligibility for the study included:
  - Recruited from SuperMIX and VMAX
  - reported use of any drugs within the past 12 months
  - residing in Melbourne or regional/rural Victoria at the time of interview

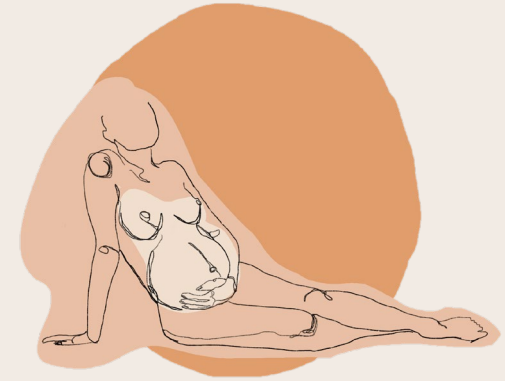




9 of 10 women were  
mothers



Most became  
mothers in their  
late teens




Most breastfed at  
least one of their  
babies



## Challenges and Stigma

- Significant challenges with healthcare system during pregnancy, birth and the postnatal period
- Multiple layers of stigma impacting experiences



*“ I wasn’t aware that using [heroin] went through the breastmilk ... Luckily, nothing ever happened, but I wasn’t given any information, and it’s not like I was saying, ‘Hey, I use’.”*

**Sarah**





## Barriers to seeking support

- Untrusting of health providers for fear of child removal

“ *We need somebody that doesn't go straight to Child Protection, that you can work with the person because if I had that, if I had somebody that I could talk to and work with, I believe I would've opened up and I could have got help that way, but I was too scared.* ”

*Emily,*





## A mothers love...

- Reflections of joy
- Connectedness to their baby through feeding

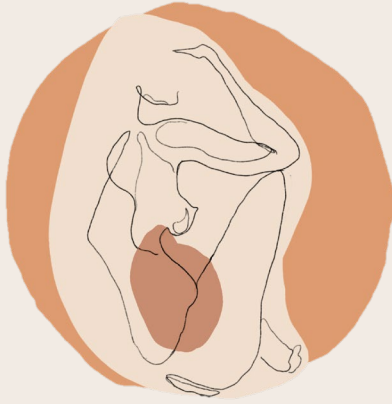


*“ I loved looking after them.  
That’s what kept me going  
every day. That’s what gave  
me something to do.*

*Penny, ”*



## Key messages



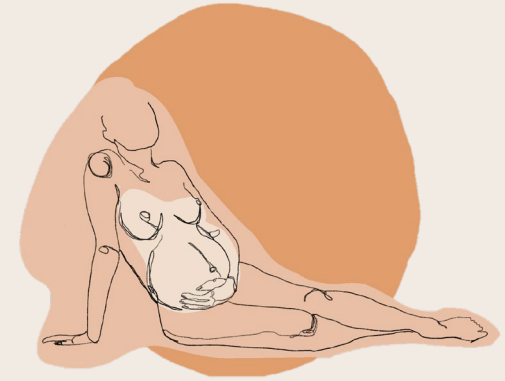
### Continuity of Care

Building trusting  
relationships



### Support Groups

It takes a village,  
but where is it?



### We need to know more

More research is  
needed





time for  
reflection

# Acknowledgments



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- AOD Fieldwork Team
- The women involved in the study



# Thank you

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