Trends and correlates of arrest among people who inject drugs in Melbourne, Australia: A preliminary analysis.

Michael Curtis[1,2], Jocelyn Chan[2], Ashleigh C Stewart[2,3], Rebecca J Winter[2,3,4], Samantha Colledge-Frisby[1,2,5], Mark Stoové[2,3,6], Peter Higgs[2], Shelley Walker[1,2,3], Lisa Maher[2,7], Jack Stone[8], Matthew Hickmann[8], Paul A Agius[2,3,9], Paul Dietze[1,2].

[1]National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, Melbourne, Australia, [2]Disease Elimination, Burnet Institute, Melbourne, Australia, [3]School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, [4]Department of Gastroenterology, St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne, Australia, [5]National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, [6]School of Psychology and Public Health, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, [7]Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia, [8]Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK, [9]Faculty of Health, Deakin University, Burwood, Australia.

Presenter's email: *michael.curtis@curtin.edu.au*

Introduction: Although people who inject drugs are overrepresented among arrestees, there are limited reports of prevalence and factors related to arrest in this population. In this study we determined the annual prevalence of arrest and explored factors associated with arrest in a prospective study of people who inject drugs.

Method: Data were from the SuperMIX prospective cohort study of people who injected drugs at least monthly at study recruitment in Melbourne, Australia (2008-2023). Participants self-reported arrest (no/yes), and reason(s) for arrest, since their last annual follow-up interview. The proportion of participants reporting arrest was calculated overall and annually. We used generalised estimating equations to estimate associations between arrest and time-invariant demographics and time-varying factors including insecure housing, injecting frequency, self-reported crime, and opioid agonist treatment (OAT). All time-varying factors were lagged one interview.

Results: Among 974 participants who completed at least one follow-up interview (interviews: median=3, range=1–14), 684 (71%) reported being arrested at least once during the observation period (total=1835, median=1, range=0-10). Property- (47%), violent- (22%), and drug use/possession-charges (21%) were the most common reasons for arrest. The proportion of participants arrested decreased annually. In multivariable analysis, older age at baseline and at least year 10 education were associated with reduced odds of arrest. Being male, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, born overseas, unemployed, insecurely housed, injecting more than weekly, and self-reported criminal activity were associated with increased odds of arrest. OAT was associated with reduced odds of arrest in sub-analysis (restricted to participants injecting heroin daily).

Discussion: We found arrests were common, and primarily drug related in the SuperMIX cohort and linked to a range of demographic and behavioural factors.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Drug decriminalisation and interventions which improve access to employment, housing, education, and OAT may reduce prevalence of arrest among people who inject drugs.

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