

Initiation and/or re-initiation of drug use among people who use drugs in Vancouver, 2021-2022

Category: Poster Presentation (in person)

Abstract Body

Objective: Marginalized populations have been disproportionately affected by the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its widespread societal consequences. In British Columbia, drug overdose deaths rose dramatically in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic's onset as highly potent synthetic opioids and benzodiazepines infiltrated the drug supply. Among people who use drugs (PWUD), the extent to which drug use patterns shifted during this unprecedented era is unclear. We sought to examine patterns of initiating a new drug and/or re-initiating a drug among PWUD in Vancouver, British Columbia from 2021 to 2022.

Methods: Data were obtained from three harmonized prospective cohort studies of PWUD in Vancouver between June 2021 and May 2022. A multivariable generalized linear mixed model was used to examine associations between self-reported recent initiation and/or re-initiation of drug use and participants' sociodemographic characteristics, substance use history, and health service utilization.

Results: Among 1189 participants, the median age was 45 years and 457 (38.4%) participants identified as women. In total, 210 (17.7%) reported initiating and/or re-initiating a drug in the past six months during the study period. The most commonly reported class of drug (re-)initiated was stimulants (49.6%), followed by opioids (33.3%), and psychedelics (17.9%). In the multivariable analysis, (re-)initiation of drug use was significantly associated with younger age (per year, adjusted odds ratio [AOR]: 0.97, 95% confidence interval [CI]: 0.95-0.98), recent injection drug use (AOR: 1.66, 95% CI 1.18-2.33), recent non-fatal drug overdose (AOR: 2.03, 95% CI 1.36-3.01), and inability to access addiction treatment in the past six months (AOR 1.80, 95% CI 1.01-3.21).

Conclusions: In an era impacted by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing overdose crisis, nearly one in five PWUD began using a new drug or restarted using a drug. Those who reported drug (re-)initiation were more likely to be younger, exhibit higher risk substance use behaviours and report difficulty accessing treatment for their substance use. Our findings underscore the need to target

resources towards treatment and harm reduction in this particularly high-risk group and call for additional research to identify the most effective interventions.

Key Words

- Caring in Crisis
- COVID-19
- Prevention/Harm Reduction
- Sociocultural Factors
- Substance Use Disorder (general)

Learning Objective # 1

1. Attendees should understand how drug use patterns shifted in 2021-2022, a period shaped by the intersecting crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and a sharp increase in overdose-related deaths.

Learning Objective # 2

2. Attendees should recognize that there are barriers to accessing addiction treatment among people who use drugs and appreciate the need for targeted interventions and resources to narrow these gaps and reduce harm.

Reference # 1

Murphy, S. M., Yoder, J., Pathak, J., & Avery, J. (2021). Healthcare utilization patterns among persons who use drugs during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of substance abuse treatment*, 121, 108177.

Reference # 2

Ali, F., Russell, C., Nafeh, F., Rehm, J., LeBlanc, S., & Elton-Marshall, T. (2021). Changes in substance supply and use characteristics among people who use drugs (PWUD) during the COVID-19 global pandemic: A national qualitative assessment in Canada. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 93, 103237.

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