

SYRINGE STOCKPILING BY PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS: AN EVALUATION OF CURRENT MEASURES FOR NEEDLE AND SYRINGE PROGRAM COVERAGE

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Introduction and Aims: Needle and syringe program (NSP) coverage is commonly used to assess NSP effectiveness and policy. However, existing measures fail to capture whether people who inject drugs (PWID) stockpile syringes, an important and novel aspect to NSP coverage. In this study we determine the extent of stockpiling in a sample of Australian PWID and assess whether including stockpiling enhances NSP coverage measures.

Design and Methods: In a cross-sectional survey, PWID reported syringes procured, given away, and total injections in the last month, plus syringes currently stockpiled. We calculated NSP coverage with and without stockpiling included to determine the change in the proportion of participants with adequate NSP coverage. We also conducted an ROC-curve analysis to determine whether including syringe stockpiling in the measure improved sensitivity in discriminating cases and non-cases of risky injecting behaviours.

Results: Three-quarters of the sample reported syringe stockpiling. Syringe stockpiling was positively associated with non-indigenous (Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander) background, stable accommodation, no prison history, longer injecting careers and more frequent injecting. Compared to previous measures, our proposed measure was significantly better at discriminating cases of receptive syringe sharing, syringe reuse, and other equipment sharing.

Discussion and Conclusions: We found a high prevalence of syringe stockpiling among Australian PWID, and demonstrated how including this behavior improves estimates of NSP coverage. Our results could inform NSP policy, to loosen restricted-exchange practice and allow PWID greater flexibility in syringe procurement practices, promoting greater NSP coverage and reducing engagement in risky injecting behavior.

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