



## The prison economy of needles and syringes: what opportunities exist for BBV risk reduction when prices are so high?

Never Stand Still

Arts & Social Sciences

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### Background – the prison context in NSW, Australia

- Prevalent risk factors for HCV transmission
  - Injecting drug use, sharing, tattooing, violence
- Sustained high incidence of HCV infection
- Limitations in harm reduction measures
  - Bleach cleansing of injecting equipment
  - Opioid substitution therapy (OST)
  - No provision of sterile needles / syringes



This project aimed to:

- Determine the \$ cost of needles / syringes
- Determine what other resources maintain the economy?
- Better understand opportunities to minimise BBV risk?





## Hepatitis C Incidence & Transmission Study – prisons (HITS-p)

### Setting:

- Cohort of male and female inmates, 30 NSW prisons
- Lifetime history of injecting drug use
- HCV negative at enrolment
- Structured Interview & blood sampling every 3-6 months

### Methods:

- Qualitative interviews with 30 inmates (20 men, 10 women)
  - Recent infection: n=8
  - Remaining uninfected: n=14
  - Chronic infection: n=8
- Interviews audiotaped, transcribed, thematic analysis



## Results - Costs of the needle / syringe

- Supply and demand
- Inherent value of sterile equipment & safety

*Like I've, I've been to C-classo gaols before and the syringes that are available ... you can buy them in a packet and they're very cheap. And they're not modified. Like they're not cut down or anything like 'cause of how easy they are to smuggle in, you know. So it's a lot safer. I've used a syringe and, you know, then thrown it out because I can go get another new one. (6)*

*I mean I could have sold that for 200 bucks. It's absolutely ridiculous how much you can sell fits in here for. And yet that's the thing: if it's brand new and clean, yeah, you could sell it for 200 bucks. (1)*





## How to get needles / syringes

- Inmate transport (from community; between prisons)

*They get in trouble at C-classo gaols, lose their classification, come back to maxo and they'll smuggle some shit back with 'em, you know. They'll bring back syringes, you know. So like, you know, you, you see stuff make its way in, into the hands of, you know, of blokes in maxo by that means too. (6)*

*I left another gaol where I left my fits... I didn't have access to where they were buried. ... Before I was shipped out, I couldn't get access to 'em and I was moved on a truck out here, and I couldn't get to 'em. ... So now I'm here with no fit. (8)*



## How to get needles / syringes

- Stealing equipment from prison health centre
  - during own consultation
  - inmate working in the clinic
  - used IM and retrieved - not necessarily from someone with BBV

*I met a young bloke and I gave him a couple of smokes of pot, you know. ... This was around the time when the swine flu epidemic came out and I said, "Hey, listen," you know, "there's, they've got thousands of syringes up there." 'Cause they had to vaccinate the [whole] gaol.*

*I said, "Look ... get into the fridge and I'll pay ya." ... And so he did. He was bringin' nearly two back a day for me. ... I was sellin' them for like 60 bucks each, you know. At one stage, it was somethin' like 20, 25 syringes just in our wing alone. (6)*





## How are needles / syringes paid for?

- No access to currency in prison to pay
  - Cash exchanged in community
  - Inmates pay for vendor's 'buy ups' (at prison store)
  - Trading of goods, including drugs ("going halves")
  - Sex (less frequently mentioned)

*Between bank accounts. For example, if you and me are two criminals and I wanna sell you a syringe yet you say, "I wanna buy it off you," obviously \$350 is a lot of money so that cannot be organised. That, can't be accessible inside gaol. So I then arrange for you to put the 350 into an outside account which I have access to, or my people outside have access to. That's how that transaction's done. (9)*



## Resources of the needle / syringe economy

- Visitor prepared to take risks

*She didn't have a choice. ... It was money that we didn't have that I could make. I could sell a fit, you know, a brand new fit for \$200, \$300 on the inside, and then go to the hospital, and get 10 for nothing. You know what I mean? That was good money and I'd tell her, "Do it!" And she would have done it, you know. She was also bringing in pills every weekend. I was making a killing. More money than I make on the outside. (11)*





## Resources of the needle / syringe economy

- Relationships with other inmates
  - To retrieve hidden equipment, steal from clinic
  - Keeping quiet, keeping drug use in “dark”
  - Reputation and connections

*You have a reputation sort of thing, you know, whether it's bad or whether it's selling drugs. You have a reputation in here. So, if you've got the good reputation and you have connections, then that makes it a lot easier for you to get to where you want. ... And to access what you want sort of thing. (1)*

*They might want to borrow it but the bloke who owns it might not lend it to them so they don't end up using it - that happens a lot. They pick and choose who they fucking lend their needle to. (29)*



## Resources of the needle / syringe economy

- Relationships with custodial officers
  - Prisoner code: blue vs green

*Like I try to treat officers with at least a bit of respect unless they just, they've done their dash with me, because I need to do things as well like especially if you're, if you're in the drug scene and that. Normally you've gotta get out of the wing to go and get fits and get drugs, and that, so normally you've gotta keep a good relationship with them. ... So that's my, my end of the bargain is to keep good with them. (19)*



## Resources of the needle / syringe economy

- Threats, violence, standing

*Yeah, he used to just charge half a packet of [tobacco] to [rent] the needle. ... And then you've gotta bring the needle back. That was in maximum security 'cause they're a bit harder to get. Used to maintain it. He'd sharpen it up for 'em and everything, you know. Clean it. And then send out the Rent-a-Hep as he used to call it. ... He was makin' a fuckin' probably 100 bucks a week from it. ... He's a big guy though. To be able to do something like that you've gotta have muscle, you know. You can't be just a, a weakling or an underling to do something like that.*

**Interviewer: Otherwise he just wouldn't get it back.**

*No-way. He wouldn't get it back. It wouldn't be comin' back. They've gotta know that they're gonna have their head jumped on unless it's been returned (18)*

## Resources of the needle / syringe economy

- DIY skills
  - Acquire equipment and manufacture needles/ syringes





## Discussion

- Complex economies of needles / syringes in prison
- BBV risks outweigh opportunities to reduce risk
- Inmates are “already skilled at financing and obtaining illegal substances; managing lieutenants, adversaries and turf; and eluding social control agents” (Lankenau, 2001)
- Formal prison NSP
  - May reduce BBV risk
  - May reduce violence by wiping out economy (ostensibly)
  - Need to interrogate NSP models for unanticipated impacts on prison economies



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