

THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN HOMELESSNESS AND HEPATITIS C EXPOSURE AMONG 11,101 PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS IN ENGLAND, WALES AND NORTHERN IRELAND: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

Authors: Sultan B^{1,2}, Lewer D¹, Surey J³, Heinsbroek E⁴

1. Collaborative Centre for Inclusion Health, Institute of Epidemiology and Health Care, University College London
2. Centre for Clinical Research in Infection and Sexual Health, Institute for Global Health, University College London
3. Institute for Global Health, University College London
4. Public Health England

Background: Among people who inject drugs (PWID), there is evidence that homelessness is associated with increased risk of hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection. We used a large cross-sectional survey of PWID in the UK, to test whether homelessness is associated with increased risk of hepatitis C exposure and if this difference could be explained by injecting practices, contact with harm reduction services, and incarceration.

Methods: We used secondary anonymised data from the Unlinked Anonymous Monitoring Survey of HIV and Viral Hepatitis (UAMS) from 2012 to 2017. We excluded participants who did not inject in the past year and those aged under 16 or over 64, resulting in a dataset of 11,101 individuals.

We conducted a logistic regression analysis, with HCV exposure (measured as antibody positive in a dried blood spot test) as the dependent variable and lifetime experience of homelessness as the independent variable, subsequently adding potential mediators.

Results:

78% reported ever experiencing homelessness, with 52% having HCV antibodies, compared to 38% of the never homeless PWIDs. The odds of HCV exposure among participants who were ever-homeless was 2.2 (95% CI 2.0-2.4), adjusted for age and sex. Participants with lifetime experience of homelessness were more likely to inject both opiates and stimulants, inject every day, inject in a risky site such as the neck or groin, and were more likely to have been incarcerated. After adjusting for these factors, the odds ratio was 1.56 (95% CI 1.41-1.73), suggesting that the mediators included explain 41% of the difference in HCV exposure.

Conclusion

This study is one of the largest exploring homelessness and HCV exposure. The majority of PWID in this study experienced homelessness, with higher risk of HCV exposure. The mediation results provide evidence that prisons may be an important location for health promotion interventions that address the higher risk of HCV among homeless PWID.

Disclosure of Interests Statement

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