

# TRENDS IN SOCIAL INJECTING BEHAVIORS AND HEPATITIS C AMONG PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS IN THE SAN DIEGO BORDER REGION AS A RESULT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

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## Background:

Travel restrictions to mitigate SARS-CoV-2 transmission decreased mobility and reduced physical contacts, yet social injecting trends and its potential impact on hepatitis C (HCV) transmission among people who inject drugs (PWID) are unclear. This analysis evaluated social injecting behaviors and self-reported HCV status among PWID in the San Diego Border Region.

## Methods:

We evaluated baseline data between November 2020-April 2021 from the longitudinal *La Frontera* study, which recruited 3 groups of PWID: (1) PWID who cross the US-Mexico border for drug use in Tijuana, (2) non-border crossing PWID who live in San Diego and (3) live in Tijuana. We describe social injecting and HCV characteristics and compare the mean drug-related partners in the 14-day period before and during the pandemic using a paired sample t-test.

## Results:

Among US PWID who reported ever injecting drugs in Mexico (40%); 91% traveled to Mexico to inject drugs since the border closure. While PWID reported more close injecting contacts pre-pandemic versus during the pandemic (mean: 6 vs <1;  $p=0.001$ ), 46% of border crossers were less likely to inject drugs alone. Nearly half had ever been tested for HCV, but only 9% who received HCV tests were non-border crossers living in Tijuana and 28% were non-border crossers living in San Diego. Among 31% of PWID who reported a positive HCV test, 89% lived in the US and 49% injected drugs in Mexico. Finally, 26% of PWID injecting drugs in Mexico in the past 6 months reported receptive syringe sharing and 40% reported sharing their own syringe after use.

## Conclusions:

Despite border closures, most PWID continued cross-border travel to inject drugs during the pandemic. Cross-border transmission of HCV remains a concern and HCV testing is needed as syringe sharing is >25% and HCV testing rates are low among PWID living and injecting drugs in Mexico.

## Disclosure of Interest Statement:

LK Marquez has no disclosures to declare.