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Background

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to reduce its impact are expected to affect disproportionately vulnerable populations, such as people who inject drugs (PWID). Aim of this study is to assess the impact of social distancing measures during the first lockdown (March-April 2020) in a sample of community-recruited PWID in Thessaloniki (the second largest city in Greece)

Methods

PWID were recruited to a community-based intervention for HCV infection using Respondent-Driven Sampling (ALEXANDROS program). After obtaining informed consent, a subsample of 279 consecutive participants were interviewed on the impact of the pandemic on drug use and access to harm reduction programs and were tested for SARS-CoV-2 IgG/IgM.

Results

The mean (SD) age of the participants was 40.6 (8.7) years, 88.2% were male, 88.8% were of Greek nationality and 55.1% were active users (injecting in the past 30 days). Almost all respondents (96.4%) reported that their quality of life was affected during the pandemic; 76.6% felt isolated, 31.6% felt that no attention was paid to their drug use problem at that time, 7.4% reported reduced access to health facilities and 7.1% experienced difficulty in finding food and shelter. The main difficulties that they faced during the lockdown were travel restrictions (21.9%), access to drugs (10.8%) and access to syringes (7.9%). Only one person reported a previous test for SARS-CoV-2 (0.4%). Of those who were on opioid substitution programs at that time (30/279), 30% (9/30) reported that the lockdown affected the services of the program and their participation in it. The prevalence of IgG and IGM antibodies was 2.5% (6/237) and 0.8% (2/237), respectively.

During the period of the 1st lockdown (March – April 2020), were you on an opioid substitution program?		N=285	
No	255	89.5%	
Yes	30	10.5%	
Don't Know/Don't Answer	0	0.0%	
If so, did the 1st lockdown affect your services/participation substitution program?			
No	21	70.0%	
Yes	9	30.0%	
Don't Know/Don't Answer	0	0.0%	

Were there any changes in your drug use during the 1st lockdown?			
Already had stopped use before the Pandemic	No	246	86.3%
	Yes	27	9.5%
	Don't Know/Don't Answer	10	3.5%
	Don't Know/Don't Answer	2	0.7%
Frequency of drug use			
	Increased	16	5.6%
	Decreased	16	5.6%
	Same	243	85.3%
Kind of drug use			
	Same	32	100.0%
	Other	0	0.0%
Way of drug use			
	Increase un Injection Use	7	21.9%
	Decrease in Injection Use	12	37.5%
	Same	13	40.6%

What were your difficulties during the 1st lockdown?				N=285	
Travel restrictions	No	223	78.2%		
	Yes	61	21.4%		
	Don't Know/Don't Answer	1	0.4%		
Access to Health Facilities	No	268	94.0%		
	Yes	17	6.0%		
	Don't Know/Don't Answer	0	0.0%		
Access to Addiction Programs	No	264	92.6%		
	Yes	21	7.4%		
	Don't Know/Don't Answer	0	0.0%		
Access to Drugs	No	254	89.1%		
	Yes	30	10.5%		
	Don't Know/Don't Answer	1	0.4%		
Access to syringes	No	263	92.3%		
	Yes	22	7.7%		
	Don't Know/Don't Answer	0	0.0%		

Has your quality of life been affected during the pandemic?			
No	No	10	3.5%
	Yes	271	95.1%
	Don't Know/Don't Answer	4	1.4%
If yes, how?			
	Felt Isolated	211	229.3%
	Felt that no attention was paid to their drug use problem at that time	90	97.8%
	Difficulty in finding food and shelter	20	21.7%
	Reduction of access to Health Facilities	22	23.9%
	Other	27	29.3%

Conclusions

In the first lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, PWID were affected with the vast majority feeling isolated. Drug use appears to have been unaffected during the lockdown and difficulties in accessing substitution programs were reported.