

GEORGIA HIV BEHAVIORAL SURVEILLANCE (GHBS)

Data Summary: Survey of People Who Inject Drugs (PWID) in Metro Atlanta, 2015

What is GHBS?

Each year throughout the United States, 22 health departments serving the cities with the highest HIV prevalence collaborate with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to implement the National HIV Behavioral Surveillance System (NHBS). NHBS assesses and monitors HIV-related risk behavior, testing behavior, and use of prevention programs among three populations at heightened risk for HIV infection: men who have sex with men (MSM), people who inject drugs (PWID), and heterosexual men and women living in areas of high poverty (HET). In 2015, the Georgia Department of Public Health implemented the NHBS survey with a focus on PWID in the Atlanta area. Between August and December of 2015, participants were recruited into the study using a peer-driven, chain-referral method known as response-driven sampling (RDS). Special efforts were made to include younger PWID (≤ 35 years) as this group has been underrepresented in previous NHBS cycles. Eligible men and women who consented to participate completed a standardized questionnaire. Surveys were conducted by trained interviewers with handheld computers. All participants were offered anonymous HIV testing and counseling. HIV testing was conducted using the Insti® HIV-1/2 Rapid Antibody Test. Reactive rapid tests were confirmed via Western blot assay.

Background: HIV among PWID

According to the most recently available CDC HIV Surveillance Report, in 2015, Georgia ranked 5th in the nation for new HIV diagnoses among adults and adolescents (2,381). Georgia also ranked 5th nationally for the total number of adults and adolescents living with HIV (46,870). Similarly, in 2015, the Atlanta MSA ranked 5th in the nation for new HIV diagnoses ⁽¹⁾. In Georgia, PWID represented 2% of all new HIV diagnoses among males and 7% of all new HIV diagnoses among females in 2015 ⁽²⁾.

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *HIV Surveillance Report, 2015*; vol. 27. <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/library/reports/hiv-surveillance.html>, Published November 2016. [Accessed: December 1, 2016].

2. Georgia Department of Public Health, HIV/AIDS Epidemiology Section. *HIV Surveillance Summary, Georgia 2015*. <https://dph.georgia.gov/adult-core-hivaids-surveillance>, Published March 2016. [Accessed: December 1, 2016].

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics, PWID in Metro Atlanta, 2015 (n=427)[†]

	n	%
Age		
18-29	88	21%
30-39	73	17%
40-49	92	22%
50+	174	41%
Gender		
Male	315	74%
Female	112	26%
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	375	88%
Bisexual	40	9%
Homosexual	11	3%
Unknown	1	<1%
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	222	52%
White	154	36%
Other/multiracial	26	6%
Hispanic	25	6%
County of residence		
Fulton	341	80%
Cobb	26	6%
DeKalb	22	5%
Gwinnett	8	2%
Other	30	7%
Education		
Less than high school	98	23%
High school diploma/GED	173	41%
More than high school	156	37%
Annual Income		
Less than \$19,999	307	72%
\$20,000-\$39,999	77	18%
\$40,000 or more	43	10%
Homeless at any time in past 12 months	263	62%
Health insurance at time of interview	146	34%
Detained or arrested in past 12 months	189	44%
Began injecting drugs 10 years ago or less-at time of interview	163	38%

[†]Inclusion criteria: At least 18 years of age, identified as male or female, consented to survey and HIV testing, completed the survey, and provided valid responses.



Survey of PWID in Metro Atlanta, 2015

A total of 427 participants met the eligibility criteria, consented to and completed the survey and HIV testing, and provided valid responses (Table 1).

Among the 427 participants, most were male (74%). Participants described themselves as “heterosexual or straight” (88%), “bisexual” (9%), and “homosexual or gay” (3%). Approximately 21% of participants were aged 18 to 29 years, 17% were aged 30-39 years, 22% were aged 40-49 years, and 41% were aged 50 years or older. With respect to race/ethnicity, 52% of participants were Black, followed by 36% White, 6% Latino, and 6% other/multiracial.

Most of the participants reported living in Fulton County (80%), followed by Cobb (6%), DeKalb (5%), Gwinnett (2%), Clayton (2%) and Other (5%) Counties.

Educational attainment was diverse among participants. Forty-one percent of participants had attained a high school diploma or a General Equivalency Degree (GED) while 36% had attained at least some college or more. Nearly one out of four (23%) participants attained less than a high school diploma or GED.

Most participants reported earning less than \$20,000 annually (72%). Approximately 18% reported earning \$20,000 to \$39,999 annually and only 10% of participants reported annual earnings greater than \$40,000. Additionally, 62% of participants reported being homeless in the past 12 months. Of those, 68% were currently homeless.

Only 34% of participants reported health insurance coverage at the time of interview. Among those, 78% said their health care expenses were paid for by a publicly funded program such as Medicaid or Medicare and only 19% reported private health insurance coverage.

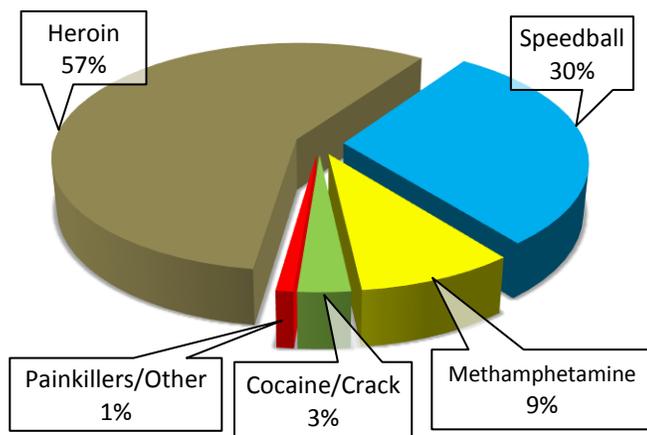
Drug and Alcohol Use Among Those PWID Surveyed

Among the 427 eligible participants, the median age at first injection was 22 years of age and 38% began injecting drugs less than 10 years prior to the interview.

Approximately 70% of participants reported injecting more than once a day and 92% reported injecting more than once a week. The most commonly injected drugs were heroin (57%) and speedball (30%), a combination of heroin and cocaine. Methamphetamine was reported by 9%, cocaine/crack by 3%, and painkillers/other by less than 1% (Figure 1).

Four of five participants indicated they had used non-injection drugs other than those prescribed to them in the past 12 months. The most commonly reported non-injection drugs used were cocaine/crack (77%), marijuana (68%), smoked or snorted heroin (61%), and painkillers such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, or morphine (50%). Additionally, one of every three men (31%) and women (33%) reported binge drinking at least once in the past 12 months.

Figure 1. Drugs Injected Most Often by PWID, Metro Atlanta, 2015*



*Data Source: GHBS Survey, 2015

HIV Status and Testing History

Among the 427 participants who consented to HIV testing as part of the survey, 36 (8%) had a confirmed HIV-positive test result. Of the 36 participants who tested HIV-positive, 30 (83%) reported being HIV positive during the interview. Most of the participants with HIV-positive test results were aged 36 years or older (92%).

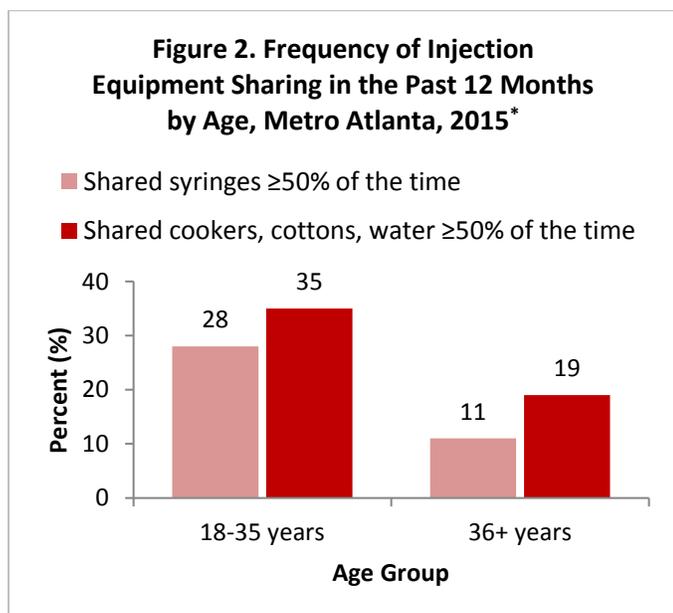
Nine of every ten participants (92%) had been tested for HIV at least once. Among the 394 participants who reported they were HIV-negative or did not know their status during the interview, 237 (60%) said they had been tested for HIV in the past 12 months.

Of the 155 participants not tested for HIV in the past 12 months, the most common reason was “no particular reason” (51%), followed by “thought to be at low risk for HIV infection” (15%), “afraid of learning they were infected with HIV” (14%), “didn't have time” (10%), and some other reason (10%).

In terms of risk perception, the majority of participants believed they were at low risk of HIV infection at the time of the interview (72%).

Drug-related Risk Behaviors

Among the 394 participants who reported they were HIV-negative or did not know their status during the interview, only 28% reported always using a sterile needle to inject with in the past 12 months. Twenty-eight percent of younger participants (≤ 35 years) reported sharing syringes at least half of the time in the past 12 months compared to only 11% of older participants (Figure 2).



*Data Source: GHBS Survey, 2015

Similarly, 35% of younger participants (≤ 35 years) reported sharing cookers, cottons, or water at least half of the time in the past 12 months compared to only 19% of older participants. Among those participants who reported sharing any injection equipment in the past 12 months, only 45% and 37% knew their last injecting partner's HIV and HCV status, respectively.

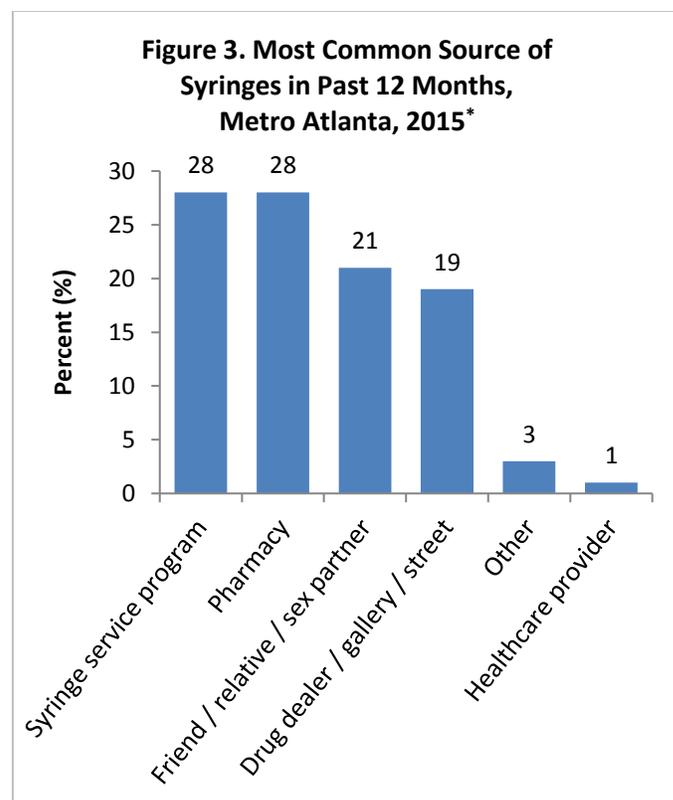
Sexual Risk Behaviors

Among the 394 participants who reported they were HIV-negative or did not know their status during the interview, 86% of men and 89% of women reported having at least one sexual partner in the past 12 months. Twenty-eight percent of men and 24% of women reported four or more sexual partners in the past 12 months.

Seventy-two percent of men and 78% of women reported unprotected vaginal or anal sex with an opposite sex partner in past 12 months. Among those who reported unprotected vaginal or anal sex with an opposite sex partner in the past 12 months, 51% of men and 43% of women also reported having unprotected sex with a partner of unknown HIV status in the past 12 months.

Utilization of Prevention Services

Among the 394 participants who reported they were HIV-negative or didn't know their status during the interview, the most commonly cited sources for their syringes in the past 12 months included a syringe service program (28%), a pharmacy (28%), friend/relative/sex partner (21%), or drug dealer/shooting gallery/street (19%) (Figure 3). When asked about the disposal of used syringes, less than half (38%) reported using a syringe service program.



*Data Source: GHBS Survey, 2015

Of the 394 participants, 37% participated in a program to treat drug use in the past 12 months. Approximately one in four participants tried to get into a program to treat drug use but were unable to do so.

Fifty-three percent of participants received free condoms. The three most commonly reported sources of free condoms included a syringe service program (50%), doctor's office/clinic/health center (27%), and community-based organizations (22%).

Additionally, 27% of participants engaged in a counseling session to discuss ways to prevent HIV infection and only 6% heard of pre-exposure prophylaxis, the medication HIV-negative people take to prevent infection.

Summary

- ❖ Eight percent of the 427 PWID surveyed in Metro Atlanta had a confirmed HIV-positive test result, of whom 17% were unaware of their infection. Most participants who tested positive were aged 36 years or older.
- ❖ Almost half (40%) of the participants had not been tested for HIV in the past 12 months.
- ❖ Most (72%) of the participants believed they were at low risk of infection despite over half (64%) reporting that they shared syringes or injection equipment in the past 12 months.
- ❖ Sharing of syringes and other injection equipment was more common among younger participants than among older participants.
- ❖ Almost half (43%) of participants reported commonly obtaining their syringes from potentially unsterile sources such as friends, relatives, sex partners, drug dealers, or shooting galleries.
- ❖ Most (74%) of the participants reported having unprotected vaginal or anal sex with an opposite sex partner in the past 12 months. Of those, 49% reported having unprotected sex with a partner of unknown HIV status in the past 12 months.

Implications

PWID, especially younger age cohorts and recently initiated drug injectors, are particularly vulnerable to HIV due to risky injection behaviors and unprotected sex. Increasing access to existing HIV prevention services and developing new interventions that are tailored to the needs of the local PWID are critical to reducing transmission of HIV among this population. The CDC recommends that a comprehensive, multicomponent, prevention program is the most effective approach for preventing the acquisition of HIV and other blood-borne infections among PWID.

Limitations

The data presented in this summary are unweighted and findings may not be representative of the entire population of PWID living in Metro Atlanta. Additionally, behavioral questionnaires that rely on self-report are prone to several response biases that might affect data quality.

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For resources related to HIV, syphilis and other infections including screening, treatment and supportive services please call the Georgia AIDS/STD InfoLine at 1-800-551-2728.