

# Psychological distress in people who inject drugs

People who inject drugs experience high levels of psychological distress and recent assault, intentional overdose and employment status have been identified as predictors of change in psychological distress.

## THE ISSUE

People who inject drugs (PWID) report higher rates of psychological distress than the general population in cross-sectional studies<sup>1</sup>, but it is unclear how psychological distress among PWID changes over time in response to environmental and social stressors.

## WHAT OUR WORK FOUND

We used a statistical model to identify predictors of changes in psychological distress among individual members of a cohort of 757 PWID in Melbourne, Australia known as the Melbourne Injecting Drug User Cohort Study (MIX). Psychological distress was measured at each interview wave using a validated survey known as the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10)<sup>2</sup>.

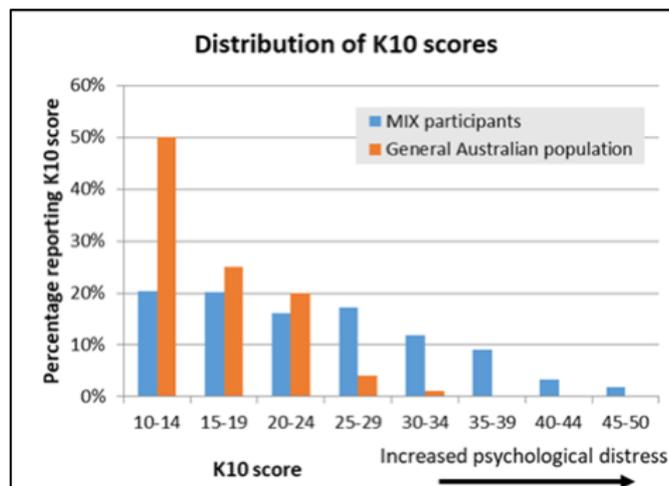
- ▶ At each interview wave, participants reported significantly higher levels of psychological distress than the general population, with average levels that were consistent over time; however, variation within individuals was common, highlighting the importance of temporal factors.
- ▶ Being a victim of an assault in the past 6 months or intentionally overdosing were important predictors of increased psychological distress.
- ▶ Women had higher levels of psychological distress than men, but temporal factors (e.g. higher rates of assault) accounted for these differences, indicating that women are more vulnerable in the broader environment in which injecting drug use takes place.
- ▶ In men, a change in employment status was associated with a change in psychological distress.

## CONCLUSION

People who inject drugs experience levels of psychological distress higher than those of the general population and temporal factors are important predictors of change.

### References:

1. Stafford and Burns. 2014. Australian Drug Trend Series No. 109, UNSW
2. Kessler et al. 2002. *Psych Med* 32, 959-976
3. Slade et al. 2011. *Aust. NZ J Psychiatry* 45, 308-316.



Level of psychological distress (average K10 score) in study participants compared to the general Australian population<sup>3</sup>.

## Policy Implications

- ▶ Addressing social determinants of health, such as employment and community safety, is likely to improve mental wellbeing among PWID.
- ▶ Interventions to address significant psychological stressors such as assault and/or intentional overdose should be explored.
- ▶ More research is needed to determine how to identify distressed individuals for mental health interventions, and to further examine the role of assault in psychological distress.

For complete details, contact **Dr Nick Scott** ([nick.scott@burnet.edu.au](mailto:nick.scott@burnet.edu.au)).

Full publication: Scott N, Carrotte E, Higgs P, Cogger S, Stoové M, Aitken C, Dietze P. 2016. Longitudinal changes in psychological distress in a cohort of people who inject drugs in Melbourne, Australia. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 168: 140 – 46.