Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) among People Who Inject Drugs (PWID) and People Who Use Drugs (PWUD) along the Afghanistan-Tajikistan Border

Alissa Davis^{1,2}, Anindita Dasgupta², Tara McCrimmon², Phil Marotta², Angela Bazzi³, Mahbat Bahromov⁴, Jonbek Jonbekov⁴, Nabila El-Bassel²

¹HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies, New York State Psychiatric Institute and Columbia University; ²Social Intervention Group, Columbia University School of Social Work; ³School of Public Health, Boston University; ⁴PRISMA Research Center

HIV CENTER
for Clinical and
Behavioral Studies

BACKGROUND

- The Badakhshan region of Afghanistan and Tajikistan is located in a remote mountain area with limited access to STI services.
- Cultural norms in Afghanistan inhibit discussion of sex and prevent the provision of sex education.
- Although the atmosphere is more open in Tajikistan, discussion of sex and provision of sex education remains highly limited.
- The Badakhshan region is a large producer of opium and has a high prevalence of drug users.
- Many of these drug users engage in sexual and drug risk behaviors that increase their risk of HIV or STI acquisition.
- There is little research on STIs and access to services among this high-risk population.

RESULTS: Sociodemographic characteristics

- All PWID in Afghanistan were male and all PWUD in Afghanistan were female.
- In Tajikistan, 13 PWID were male and 2 PWID were female.
- All PWID in Tajikistan had at least a high school degree.
- In Afghanistan, 66.7% had completed less than the 9th grade, 26.7% had completed some high school, and 6.7% had completed high school.
- In Tajikistan, 46.7% of PWID were unemployed and in Afghanistan, 53.3% of PWID were unemployed.

RESULTS: Sexual Risk and Service Access

- In Tajikistan, 33.3% of PWID reported two or more sex partners in the past month. In Afghanistan, 46.7% of PWID reported two or more sex partners in the past month.
- No PWUD in Afghanistan reported having sex with anyone other than her husband.
- No PWID or PWUD in Afghanistan reported using condoms.
- One PWID in Tajikistan reported rarely using condoms. All others reported never using condoms.
- No PWID or PWUD in Afghanistan had been previously tested for STIs or accessed STI services.
- In Tajikistan, 60% reported ever receiving an STI test (77.8% of which tested positive for an STI). Only 6.7% had received an STI test in the past year.

RESULTS: Prevalence of STIs

Prevalence of STIs among PWID and PWUD along the Afghan-Tajik border

	PWID in Tajikistan (N=15)	PWID in Afghanistan (N=15)	PWUD in Afghanistan (N=16)
Syphilis	3 (20%)	4 (26.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Chlamydia	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (6.3%)
Gonorrhea	1 (6.7%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)

METHODS

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted among 15 PWID and 16 PWUD in three towns in Badakhshan province, Afghanistan, and 15 PWID in three towns in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region in Tajikistan.
- Interviews were conducted in local languages by PRISMA research staff among PWID in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.
- Interviews were conducted by midwives among PWUD in Afghanistan.
- Participants were asked questions about their access to STI services and previous history of testing.
- Participants received biological testing for syphilis, chlamydia, and gonorrhea.

CONCLUSIONS

- Few participants had ever accessed STI services. Additional research should be conducted to examine ways of increasing access to STI care in this remote area.
- Many participants in this sample were infected with STIs, particularly syphilis, indicating a need for expanded STI service provision. Further research should be conducted to determine the prevalence of STIs among PWID and PWUD in this region.
- Given the remoteness of the region, rapid point-of-care tests administered by community health workers may be a promising strategy for improving STI diagnosis and access to care.

HIV CENTER for Clinical and Behavioral Studies
at the New York State Psychiatric Institute and Columbia University

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dr. Alissa Davis is supported by a NIMH training grant (T32-MH19139 Behavioral Sciences Research in HIV Infection; PI: Theodorus G.M. Sandfort, Ph.D.)