

RURAL RISK ENVIRONMENT FOR HEPATITIS C AMONG YOUNG ADULTS WHO USE OPIOIDS IN APPALACHIAN KENTUCKY

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Background: Hepatitis C (HCV) is surging in communities across rural Kentucky among people who inject drugs (PWID). The Risk Environment Framework has been used widely to study and address socio-ecological determinants of infectious disease among PWID. Yet, most studies have focused on urban environments. The dearth of research on features of risk environments in rural Appalachia is a significant gap in understanding the epidemiology of the opioid epidemic and tailoring harm reduction interventions to these communities.

Methods: From March to August 2017, we conducted nineteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with young adults (age 18-34) who use prescription opioids and/or heroin and reside in Appalachian Kentucky. Participants were asked to discuss places where they use or inject drugs; their ability to or perceptions of access to clean injection equipment; and features of their environment that increase or decrease risk of HCV. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a grounded-theory approach.

Results: Participants reported a range of environmental risk factors for HCV among young adults who use/inject opioids. These included: geographic isolation from healthcare services and syringe exchange programs; rushing to inject in public bathrooms, car washes, graveyards, abandoned trailers, and other spaces without running water or access to sterile equipment; reliance on diabetic patients for syringes; familial opioid-use in close-knit residential communities; a sense of hopelessness due to dwindling employment opportunities; stigma as a barrier to HCV testing and treatment; normalization of HCV infection among PWID; and fear of police as contributing to risky injection practices.

Conclusion: This exploratory study provides important contextual information about the features of rural risk environments that may contribute to HCV. Findings will help to better understand the epidemiology of HCV in rural Appalachia and inform interventions to abate a mounting epidemic in Kentucky.

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