



Project Title: Environmental Factors in HIV Transmission among Suburban IDUs

Grant Number: 3R01DA023408-03S109

Agency: National Institute on Drug Abuse

Corresponding Institution(s): Yale University, Center for Interdisciplinary Study of AIDS (CIRA), School of Public Health, & University of South Florida, College of Behavioral & Community Sciences, Department of Criminology

Dr. Robert Heimer, Professor of Epidemiology & Public Health and Director of CIRA's Interdisciplinary Research Methods Core, and Dr. Wilson R. Palacios, Associate Professor in the Department of Criminology at the University of South Florida has been awarded a diversity research supplement from the National Institute on Drug Abuse. The research seeks to explore and understand the influence of environment on HIV risk and transmission among suburban injection drug users (IDUs) residing in Connecticut. Injection drug use in many of the nation's suburbs is increasing; reliable data from state and local agencies indicate that this trend is clearly evident in Connecticut. These injectors tend to be younger and better integrated into their communities than their urban counterparts. The need to maintain stable home and job existence is a significant source of alienation from programs that have assisted urban injectors in Connecticut in reducing their HIV risk and incidence. This alienation also makes this population refractory to systematic study. In fact, very few studies of well-integrated, non-urban injectors have been conducted since the mid 1970's, before the link between injection drug use and HIV became apparent.

The current study focuses on the notion that suburban injectors have different experiences based on how connected they are to urban injectors, their environment, and their level of risk of and exposure to HIV. The current study is guided by the following hypotheses: that suburban residents who inject predominantly in the suburbs will have (1) higher incomes, more job stability, lower incarceration rates, and more stable housing; (2) lower levels of HIV and hepatitis knowledge; (3) higher levels of injection risk behaviors; and (4), counter-intuitively, the former will have lower prevalence of HIV and hepatitis, despite less knowledge and more risk. The study will follow a cohort of 600 suburban IDUs who reside outside the seven large cities of southwestern Connecticut, collecting quantitative sociodemographic, behavioral, and medical data in a longitudinal manner. The cohort will be followed prospectively to determine if the behavior patterns are durable, identifying factors associated with changes in where suburban residents inject and that modulate the risk exposure to or actual infection with HIV or other syringe-borne viruses.

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In addition to working with the study's project team in achieving the specific aims of the study, the research supplement will support Dr. Palacios's primary research objective; the collection and analysis of Life History (LH) interviews on Hispanic drug users' experiences with the criminal justice system. Life history interviews will be used to investigate the extent, nature, and consequences of injection drug use among suburban Hispanics specifically focusing on arrest and incarceration, and to assess the use of, access to, and barriers to services including drug treatment, mental health, HIV counseling and testing, and harm reduction such as syringe exchange and hepatitis vaccination. The supplement will support Dr. Palacios's efforts in broadening his focus by taking a more comprehensive epidemiological approach to the interplay of drug abuse, infectious diseases, and the criminal justice system.

The expertise and resources of both The Yale University School of Public Health and the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on AIDS (CIRA) and College of Behavioral and Community Sciences and the Department of Criminology at the University of South Florida will provide a synergistic environment which will allow for a highly effective interdisciplinary approach that integrates biological, quantitative, and qualitative research thereby expanding his skill set and understanding in each of these areas.

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