

Ethnicity & Patterns of Drug Use Behavior:

Findings on Puerto Rican Drug Users in Hartford

Merrill Singer, Gregory Mirhej, Claudia
Santilices, Lucy Rohena, Tania Martinez,
Hassan Saleheen

Hispanic Health Council

Purpose

- Extensive research affirms the critical importance of ethnicity in behavior patterning
- E.g., while Hispanics as group report lower levels of life time use of illicit drugs compared to African Americans and whites, they report somewhat higher levels of substance use and dependence during the last year.
- They also report a comparatively higher level of adolescent involvement with drugs, especially cocaine

- Drug use patterns vary also by Hispanic subgroup, including by country of origin
- The body of literature further suggests the importance of social context of use, although the role of this factor in Hispanic drug use has not been well understood.
- Addressing this gap is the purpose of this paper.

The findings reported in this paper were collected in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention–funded study entitled “Community Responses to Risks of Emergent Drug Use in Hartford, CT”

Merrill Singer – PI

Gregory Mirhej – Project Coordinator

Claudia Santelices – Ethnographer

Lucy Rohena & Tania Martinez - Outreach

Hassan Saleheen – Data analyst

Components of the study

- using ethnographic and epidemiological methods to assess drug-use patterns, identify and track the diffusion of emergent and changing drug-use in 3 waves of data collection, 250 not-in-treatment drug users/wave
- tracking and analysis of emergent drug use and risk trends across key sociodemographic characteristics
- utilizing a researcher/provider–community partnership model to develop and implement a Response Team, composed of researchers, drug treatment providers, health care providers, HIV prevention workers, community members, and public health officials

- Participants were recruited primarily through systematic outreach in neighborhoods that had been identified in previous research as high density areas for drug “copping” (acquisition), drug use (e.g., abandoned buildings, sheltered alleyways, cemeteries), and basic health and social services accessed by drug users (e.g., soup kitchens, shelters, the syringe exchange program).
- Potential participants were approached on the street by experienced outreach workers, engaged in conversation, told about the study, screened for inclusion/exclusion criteria, and, if appropriate, invited to participate.
- This presentation is based on 3rd wave findings

Participants

- Of the participants in the third survey, 114 (48%) were self-identified as Hispanic, 50 (21%) as non-Hispanic white, and 73 (31%) as non-Hispanic African American
- All but four of the Hispanics specifically reported that they were Puerto Rican
- Among Puerto Ricans, the majority (74% were males), compared to 56% among white and 50% among African American participants

Drug Use Patterns

- The mean number of years of illicit drug use among participants was 22.3 years for Puerto Ricans compared to 23.4 years for whites and 23.8 years for African Americans.
- Puerto Ricans were the least likely to use crack but were significantly more likely ($p < 0.05$) to use powder cocaine than African Americans.
- This appears to reflect the greater tendency of Puerto Rican drug street users to be drug injectors who shoot heroin by itself ($p < 0.01$), cocaine by itself ($p < 0.01$), and to mix cocaine with heroin to make a speedball for drug injection ($p < 0.05$).
- Puerto Ricans were also more likely than Whites to sniff heroin. Along with heroin and cocaine, marijuana is among the most commonly consumed illicit street drugs among Puerto Ricans in our sample.

- By contrast, African American participants tended to use crack cocaine and marijuana, with significant numbers sniffing heroin,
- Whites tend to use many different drugs & methods of consumption.
- Forty-six percent of the Puerto Rican participants preferred to use English, 21% preferred Spanish, and 33% had no preference, being bilingual
- Rates of unemployment were highest among African Americans in the sample (67%), followed by Puerto Ricans (64%), and whites (44%)
- Puerto Rican participants were the most likely to report involvement in drug sales as a source of income (11%, compared to 2% for whites and 6% for African Americans)

- Among diverted pharmaceutical drugs, sedatives and painkillers are most commonly used by Puerto Ricans in our sample, while diverted sedatives are much more frequently used by white ($p < 0.01$) street drug users.
- A small number of Puerto Rican street drug users have begun using ecstasy, which has diffused from club use to street use and methamphetamine, which so far is being made locally or brought in in limited quantities.

- Puerto Ricans were the least likely to report having stopped drug use for some period of time.
- In that all of our participants at the time of recruitment were active, not-in-treatment drug users, all of those who had ever stopped using drugs had relapsed.
- When asked what was the first drug they used in the process of relapsing to regular drug consumption, Puerto Ricans participants were the most likely to report heroin (43.6%), while African Americans were the least likely (16.4%) to use heroin as a stepping stone back into drug use.
- Alcohol was the second most important drug in this regard for Puerto Ricans, although not as important as for African American and white relapsers.
- At the same time, marijuana was more likely to be first used among African Americans relapsing into regular street drug user than Puerto Ricans and whites.

- The two most common reasons for relapse according to our Puerto Rican participants were the fact that alluring drugs were ubiquitous in the immediate neighborhood of residence and the pressure from drug using peers to resume drug consumption.
- These were, as well, the two most important reasons for relapse among white and African American participants suggesting that social environmental factors rather than specific ethnic patterns are the primary forces driving relapse to drug use following a period of abstinence.
- Still, there are differences across ethnic groups in the importance of other reasons for relapse.
- Thus Puerto Rican drug users are the most likely to report knowing where to go to get help and not feeling that is hard for them to be away from their community while in detoxification and treatment.

- Comparing Puerto Rican and African American participants in term of the social consequences of drug use, Puerto Rican street drug users are significantly more likely to report that a partner left them because of their drug use and are also more likely to report losing a home because of drugs.
- They are less likely than African Americans in the sample, however, to report risky sexual patterns associated with their drug use.

- Puerto Rican participants were somewhat more likely than African American participants to report anxiety disorder connected to their drug use, and were more likely, as well, to report worsening mental health status tied to drug consumption
- Additionally, Puerto Rican participants are somewhat more likely than their African American counterparts to report experiencing depression
- Notably, Puerto Rican participants were the least likely to report both HIV/AIDS and STD infection, consistent with our prior studies

Discussion

- Our findings confirm the importance of ethnicity in shaping drug use patterns, health consequences, and access to treatment.
- While illicit drug use is high among all ethnic groups living in the impoverished neighborhoods of Hartford, specific “drug of choice” and other behaviors vary by ethnicity.
- These differences may be best explained in terms of two factors: socialization into drug use and local (neighborhood) availability.

- Also, we found that Puerto Rican drug users were significantly more likely to report disruptions of their social lives because of drug use, including having a partner leave them and losing place of residence because of drug-related issues
- Puerto Ricans in the study also had somewhat higher rates of self-reported anxiety disorder, depression, and overall worsening of their mental health status associated with their drug use
- Further, Puerto Rican participants were the most likely to report having a hepatitis diagnosis.

- Most Puerto Rican injection drug users in Hartford have not been vaccinated and over half are already infected (Heimer et al. 2006).
- Importantly, while risk for both HBV and HCV infection is high among drug users in Hartford, knowledge about these diseases among those who are most at risk has been found to quite limited.
- Frequent injectors (those who “shoot up” more than once a day), as tends to be the case among Puerto Rican IDUs, have been found to be at particularly high risk for hepatitis infection

- While all of the participants in our study, whatever their ethnic identity, live in poor neighborhoods, survive on minimal survival incomes, and suffer from a range of significant health problems, we have identified several ethnic differences in the drugs people use, how they use them, and the health and social consequences they suffer as a result of their drug use
- One aspect of developing culturally appropriate prevention and treatment must be a locally grounded assessment of the range of drug-related characteristics examined in our study.