Injection Drug Use Disproportionately Drives HIV in Puerto Ricans

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Puerto Ricans are disproportionately affected by HIV in the United States when compared with the overall Latino population, with injection drug use a major driver. Publishing their findings in the American Journal of Public Health, researchers analyzed available data on the nature of the HIV epidemic among Puerto Rican injection drug users (IDUs), both in Puerto Rico and in the Northeastern United States. They also looked at the available syringe exchange and drug treatment programs in areas with a high concentration of Puerto Ricans.

In 2010, the Northeast had the highest rate of new AIDS diagnoses when compared with other U.S. regions. At that time, Latinos made up 27 percent of Northeastern AIDS diagnoses, and 48.7 percent of HIV-positive Latino-Americans were living in the Northeast. In the Northeast, 15.8 percent of new HIV diagnoses were a result of injection drug use, compared with 8.8 percent in other U.S. regions. By comparison, in 2010 in Puerto Rico, 20.4 percent of new diagnoses were attributed to injection drug use.

While Puerto Ricans make up just 9 percent of the U.S. Latino population, nearly 23 percent of Latino HIV cases are among people born in Puerto Rico. In Puerto Rico itself, heterosexual transmission accounts for 40.7 percent of new cases of the virus, while injection drug use accounts for 20.4 percent.

Evidence suggests that syringe exchange and drug treatment programs are much less available in Puerto Rico than in the United States. In a 2011 survey of syringe exchange programs in the Northeast and Puerto Rico, the investigators found that the average budget for these programs was over $400,000, while in Puerto Rico the average budget was just $80,000.

“Controlling heterosexual transmission of HIV will require controlling HIV infection among people who inject drugs, as those who inject drugs and are sexually active will serve as a continuing reservoir for future heterosexual transmission if injecting-related HIV transmission is not brought under control,” Sherry Deren, PhD, senior research scientist at New York University College of Nursing, and director of NYU’s Center for Drug Use and HIV Research, said in a release.

To read the study abstract, click here.

To read the press release, click here.

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