

# Comparison of Risk Behaviors Among Drug Injector Women: Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico; Puerto Ricans and Non-Hispanic Whites in the U.S.

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## Introduction

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) has become a leading medical problem among women in Puerto Rico. As of May 1992, 18% of the total number of AIDS cases in Puerto Rico were reported among women. The US reported a much lower rate (10%) (Centers for Disease Control, 1992). Since 1989 heterosexual transmission of HIV has had a significant increase and by 1990 women have been more likely to get infected by heterosexual relations than by drug injection (Figure 1). The majority of women infected through heterosexual contact have reported having a drug user sex partner. Furthermore 3% of the reported AIDS cases in Puerto Rico were among children. In the United States the rates of AIDS among children were lower (1.7%). In both Puerto Rico and the United States perinatal transmission accounts for the majority of the cases - Puerto Rico 95%, US 85% (Centers for Disease Control, 1992). In Puerto Rico the empirical data available is limited to the more general epidemiological indicators of the disease as reported by the Centers for Disease Control and the Puerto Rico Health Department. Specific knowledge of risk factors is needed to be able to develop intervention programs directly targeted at specific behaviors. Therefore, the objectives of this study were to document needle use and sex behaviors that place drug injector women at risk of getting infected with AIDS by comparing risk behaviors between Puerto Rican women living in Puerto Rico with Puerto Rican and white women living in the Northeast region of the US.

## Methods

A total of 996 drug injector women participated in the study: 351 women living in Puerto Rico (Islanders), 287 Puerto Rican and 358 white women residing in the northeast of the US. All women were recruited by the National AIDS Demonstration Research (NADR) Projects funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). Recruitment strategies of participants were similar in the different project sites. Outreachers recruited participants from shooting galleries, pool houses, bars, street corners, emergency rooms, police stations, and drug markets (copping areas). Data was gathered by the same interview guide designed by NIDA, which was translated into Spanish and adapted to the Puerto Rican drug injectors. Information was collected on:

- a) sociodemographic characteristics;
- b) drug use and treatment;
- c) sexual behavior;
- d) drug injection behavior; and
- e) health status.

This data is by ethnicity and site of recruitment of study participants and will be summarized in the following sections:

- a) demographic characteristics;
- b) drug use;
- c) drug injection behaviors; and
- d) sexual behavior.

## Results

Table 1 shows that women residing in Puerto Rico (Islanders) were the youngest of the three groups. Whites have completed more years of education; islanders were more likely to live on welfare. However, US Puerto Ricans got their main source of income from illegal behaviors. The majority of US Puerto Ricans and non Hispanic whites were unemployed. Non Hispanic whites were more likely to live with sex partners. However, both US groups were more likely to be homeless than islanders. Islanders were more likely to live with children.

Figure 2 shows that Non-Hispanic whites were more likely to use non-injected drugs. More than half of the non-Hispanic whites and US Puerto Ricans reported crack use.

Whites and US Puerto Ricans were very similar in methadone use than islanders. Patterns of drug injection were shown in Figure 3. The data shows that the majority of the three groups injected heroin and speedball; whites were much more likely to inject other opiates, amphetamines and barbiturates (Figure 4). Puerto Rican women were more likely to inject more than 4 times a day and to use shooting galleries to shoot drugs. Non Hispanic whites were more likely to shoot drugs with sex partners than US Puerto Ricans and islanders. As expected, more islanders used new needles and were less likely to share needles.

Many more non-Hispanic whites were likely to have a drug user sex partner. Reported condom use was low for every one of the groups of women. US Puerto Ricans reported higher use than Non-Hispanic whites and islanders.

## Conclusions

Ethnic differences were evidence within the group of study participants. US Puerto Ricans emerged as the more socially deprived group, were less educated, unemployed and more likely to live on illegal activities. These women were not only drug injectors but were also migrants and members of a minority group with the social structural and psychological deprivations this position entails. Although women residing in Puerto Rico were more likely to live at their own place with children, they report to be more frequent drug injectors and more likely to inject drugs in shooting galleries. These behaviors were similar to that of their male drug injector peers reported in our previous study (Robles, 1992). The sex behavior data indicated that all three groups of women were at increased risk for acquiring HIV infection. They reported unacceptably high levels of unprotected sex. There are many factors that may play a part in women resistance to use of condoms. Poverty, children to take care of, and multiple risks in their hazardous life take precedence in the decision making process over concern for AIDS. Also, their imbalance in power in heterosexual relationships make it difficult for women to play a significant part in deciding what happens within the sexual relationship. Because prevention programs will continue to promote the use of condoms, promotion strategies may be more effective if they were gender/ethnic specific. Additional outreach and intervention efforts in targeting this population are needed. These efforts must be gender and culturally specific, and designed to address multiple social and health problems to be effective.

FIGURE 1: AIDS Incidence Among Women in Puerto Rico

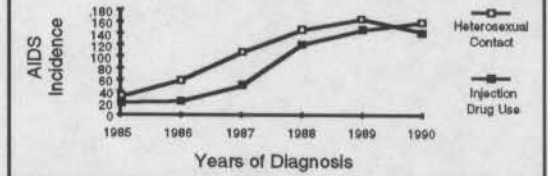


FIGURE 2: Ever Use of Non Injected Drugs Among Three Groups of Female IDUs

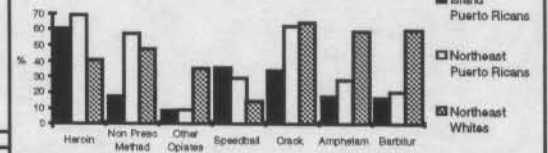


Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Female Injection Drug Users by Ethnic Group

Variable	Ethnic Group		
	PR-Islanders N (%)	PR-Mainland N (%)	Whites N (%)
<b>Sociodemographic</b>			
Overall	351 (35.2)	287 (28.8)	358 (35.9)
<b>Age</b>			
24 or less	78 (22.4)	49 (17.1)	47 (13.2)
25 - 34	193 (55.4)	163 (56.8)	193 (54.1)
35 or more	77 (22.2)	75 (26.1)	117 (32.8)*
<b>Education</b>			
< high school	204 (58.1)	195 (67.9)	147 (41.2)
high school	91 (25.9)	60 (20.9)	152 (42.6)
> high school	56 (16.0)	32 (11.1)	58 (16.2)*
<b>Living Arrangement</b>			
alone	86 (24.6)	65 (23.5)	59 (16.8)
with spouse/sex partner	82 (23.5)	71 (25.6)	142 (40.3)
with parent/other adult	171 (51.8)	141 (51.0)	151 (42.9)
<b>Major Source of Income</b>			
job	32 (9.4)	15 (5.5)	31 (8.9)
welfare benefits	128 (37.6)	95 (34.7)	112 (32.2)
social support	84 (24.7)	47 (17.2)	66 (19.0)
illegal source	96 (28.2)	117 (42.7)	139 (39.9)*
<b>Work Status</b>			
regular work	11 (3.1)	15 (5.2)	47 (13.1)
occasional	19 (5.4)	4 (1.4)	25 (7.0)
unemployed	175 (49.9)	222 (77.4)	236 (65.9)
retired/disabled	3 (0.9)	15 (5.2)	22 (6.1)
homemaker/student	143 (40.7)	31 (10.8)	28 (7.8)*
<b>Children Living With Subject</b>			
no	187 (53.3)	179 (62.6)	231 (64.7)
yes	164 (46.7)	107 (37.4)	126 (35.3)*
<b>Homeless</b>			
no	325 (92.6)	257 (89.5)	322 (90.2)
yes	26 (7.4)	30 (10.5)	35 (9.8)

\*Significant at 0.05

FIGURE 3: Ever Use of Injected Drugs Among Three Groups of Female IDUs

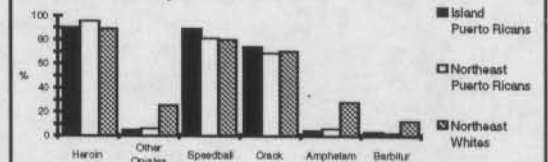


FIGURE 4: Drug Injection Risk Behaviors Among Three Groups of Female IDUs

