

Published in final edited form as:

*Am J Public Health*. 2015 January ; 105(1): e3. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2014.302387.

## HIV/AIDS IN PUERTO RICAN PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS: POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

**Luz M. López, PhD, MPH, MSW,**

Boston University School of Social Work, Boston, MA

**Lisa de Saxe Zerden, PhD, MSW,**

School of Social Work, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill

**Philippe Bourgois, PhD, MA,**

Department of Family and Community Medicine and Anthropology, School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

**Helena Hansen, MD, PhD,**

Departments of Psychiatry and Anthropology and the Nathan Kline Institute for Psychiatric Research, New York University, New York, NY

**Roberto Abadie, PhD,**

Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

**Kirk Dombrowski, PhD, and**

Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

**Ric Curtis, PhD**

Department of Anthropology, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, The City University of New York, New York, NY

---

We commend the important work of Deren et al.<sup>1</sup> that underscores the high rates of HIV among Puerto Rican people who inject drugs (PRPWID) and highlights the health, social, and service disparities between Puerto Rico and the Northeast US region. As articulated in their article, HIV/AIDS risk and substance use are not individual problems with individual consequences—the epidemic impacts community and culture, across borders and boundaries. In addition to service disparities, various socio-economic contextual factors are associated with and may exacerbate the spread of HIV/AIDS in PRPWID, including limited educational and employment opportunities, poverty, and political disenfranchisement. Efforts to reduce the incidence of HIV/AIDS and associated health risks and complications, including other infections, drug overdose, and social stigma, necessitate structural policy intervention in addition to programmatic improvements. Moreover, policy implementation that attends to contextual factors such as incarceration and impediments to culturally appropriate services is needed. We identify two contexts that represent opportunities for

---

Correspondence should be sent to Luz M López, Clinical Associate Professor, Boston University School of Social Work, 264 Bay State Road, Boston, MA 02215 (luzlopez@bu.edu). Reprints can be ordered at <http://www.ajph.org> by clicking the “Reprints” link.

### Contributors

All authors contributed equally to this letter

improvements in policy implementation that may curb the HIV/AIDS epidemic among PRPWID.

First, the federal ban on funding for syringe exchange programming undermines the public health mission of limiting the spread of bloodborne pathogens. Although President Obama signed a law to lift this ban in 2009, Congress restored it in 2012. Reallocating federal funding to syringe exchange programming may be an effective way to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS in PRPWID.

Second, the United States has the highest documented incarceration rate in the world, with more than 1.5 million people imprisoned on nonviolent drug charges in 2013.<sup>2</sup> The federal budget for drug prevention has decreased steadily since 2004, whereas funding for law enforcement and incarceration has increased.<sup>3</sup> Although White House Principles of Modern Drug Policy mandate that drug-involved individuals in the criminal justice system be supervised with respect for their basic human rights and provided with substance use treatment, access to these services is limited. The criminal justice system has the potential to play a vital role in breaking the cycle of drug use, crime, incarceration, and rearrest by providing more treatment in correctional facilities and alternatives to incarceration (e.g., drug courts). Resources allocated to drug prevention during reentry may be a viable solution to reducing drug relapse and containing the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Equitable availability and effective implementation of these federal policies, in both Puerto Rico and the US mainland, may contribute to reduce the disproportionate amount of PRPWID with HIV/AIDS and bring much needed services to this population.

## References

1. Deren S, Gelpi-Acosta C, Albizu-Garcia CE, Gonzalez A, Des Jarlais DC, Santiago-Negron S. Addressing the HIV/AIDS epidemic among Puerto Rican people who inject drugs: the need for a multiregion approach. *Am J Public Health*. 2014; 104(11):2030–2036. [PubMed: 25211722]
2. Alliance, DP. Drug War Statistics. 2014. Available at: <http://www.drugpolicy.org/drug-war-statistics>. Accessed September 16, 2014
3. Executive Office of the President of the United States. FY 2015 Funding Highlights *National Drug Control Budget*. 2014 Mar.:2–15.