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Authors

Taylor, Arcadea

Aqnoli, Alicia

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Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 on People Who Use Drugs in Sacramento County



Arcadea Taylor, MD Candidate, UC Davis School of Medicine, roctaylor@ucdavis.edu
Alicia Aqnoli, MD, MPH, MHS, UC Davis Department of Family & Community Medicine, aaqnoli@ucdavis.edu

INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 outbreak, there was a surge in overdose-related deaths with the CDC estimating a 38.4% increase in opioid-related deaths and a 26.5% increase in cocaine-related deaths during June 2019-May 2020, when compared to the 12 months prior¹. With subsequent surveillance data confirming this trend, it is evident that COVID-19 had a unique impact on people who use drugs (PWUD). However, the psychosocial, socioeconomic, and biopolitical effects of the pandemic on PWUD are poorly understood.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in disruptions to illicit drug supplies in Canada, leading to increased use of contaminated and variably potent substances². With social distancing guidelines in place, syringe service programs were deemed non-essential in many areas, effectively cutting off the supply of safe injection materials while contaminated drugs circulated.

Given this background, it is necessary to better understand the ways COVID-19 has impacted the health and behaviors of PWUD. By engaging directly with PWUD in Sacramento County, this mixed-methods project aims to go to the source and address this important gap in knowledge.

OBJECTIVES

- Identify individual health risk factors associated with changes in drug use and health behavior as well as changes during the pandemic
- Explore themes surrounding drug use and the impact of COVID-19 through qualitative interviews

METHODS

This was a mixed methods study consisting of surveys (n=22) and scripted interviews (n=21). Participants were recruited at Harm Reduction Services, a syringe exchange program located in Sacramento County, between October 2021 and February 2022. Inclusion criteria included: residing in Sacramento County during the COVID pandemic as well as current or past history of drug use. Exclusion criteria included: people who do not use drugs, people who solely use marijuana and/or alcohol, and ages ≤ 18 or ≥ 89.

RESULTS

Age	
25-34	13.6%
35-44	40.9%
45-54	27.3%
55-64	18.2%
Ethnicity	
Hispanic/Latinx	27.3%
Black/African American	27.3%
White	50.0%
Native American/American Indian	4.50%

Fig 1: Demographics

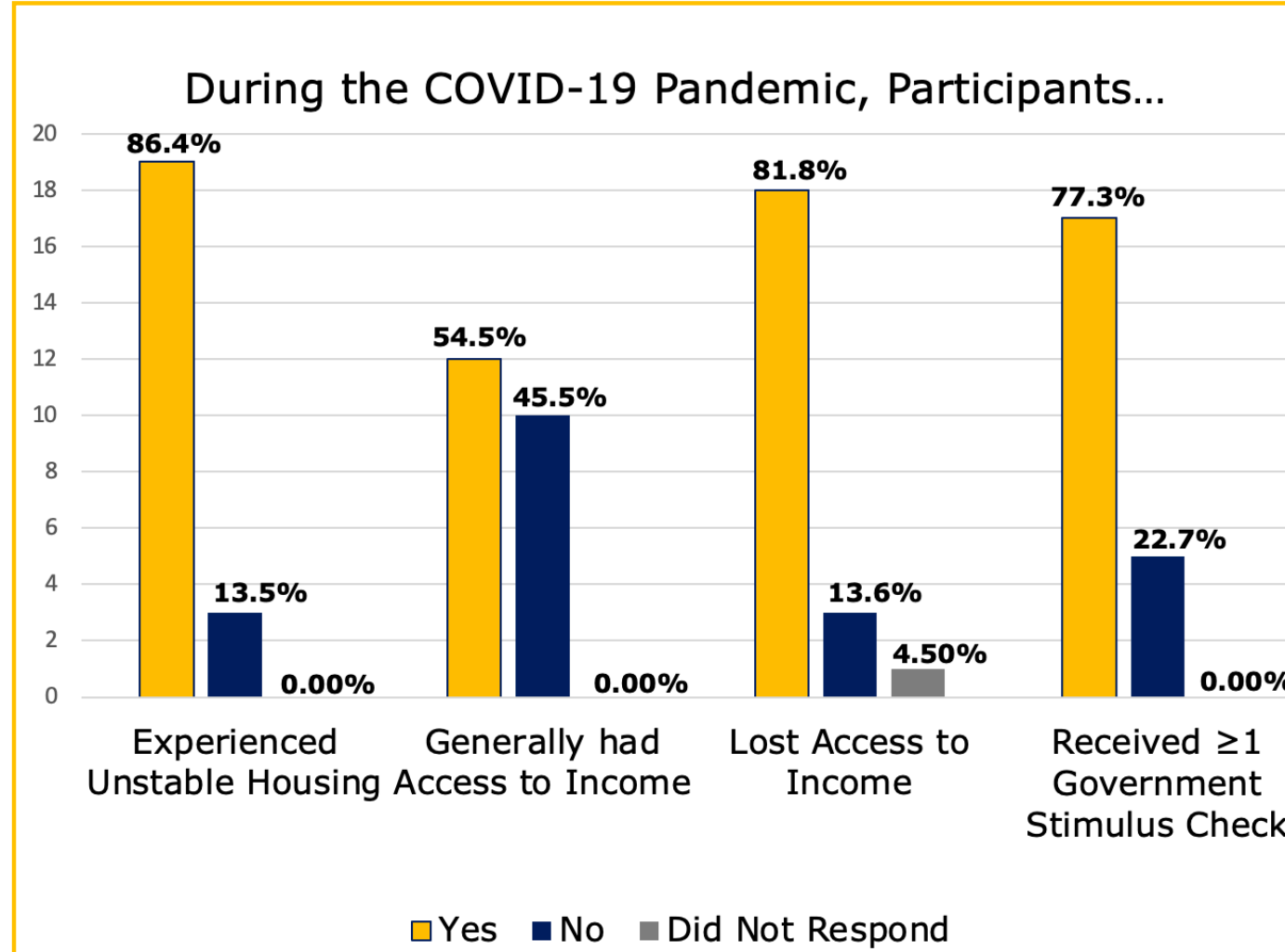


Fig 2: From the surveys gathered, most participants during the COVID-19 Pandemic: experienced unstable housing, generally had access to income, lost access to income sometime during the pandemic, and received at least one of the government stimulus checks (of "yes" answers, 36.4% received 3 checks, 31.8% received 2 checks, and 9.1% received 1 check). Preliminary qualitative data indicates that shut-down of recycling centers was one source of loss of income. Also indicated was that most participants spent the stimulus checks on bills, transportation, housing, and food.

Fig 3: Most participants stated that the price of drugs increased during the pandemic with an associated decrease in the supply of drugs.

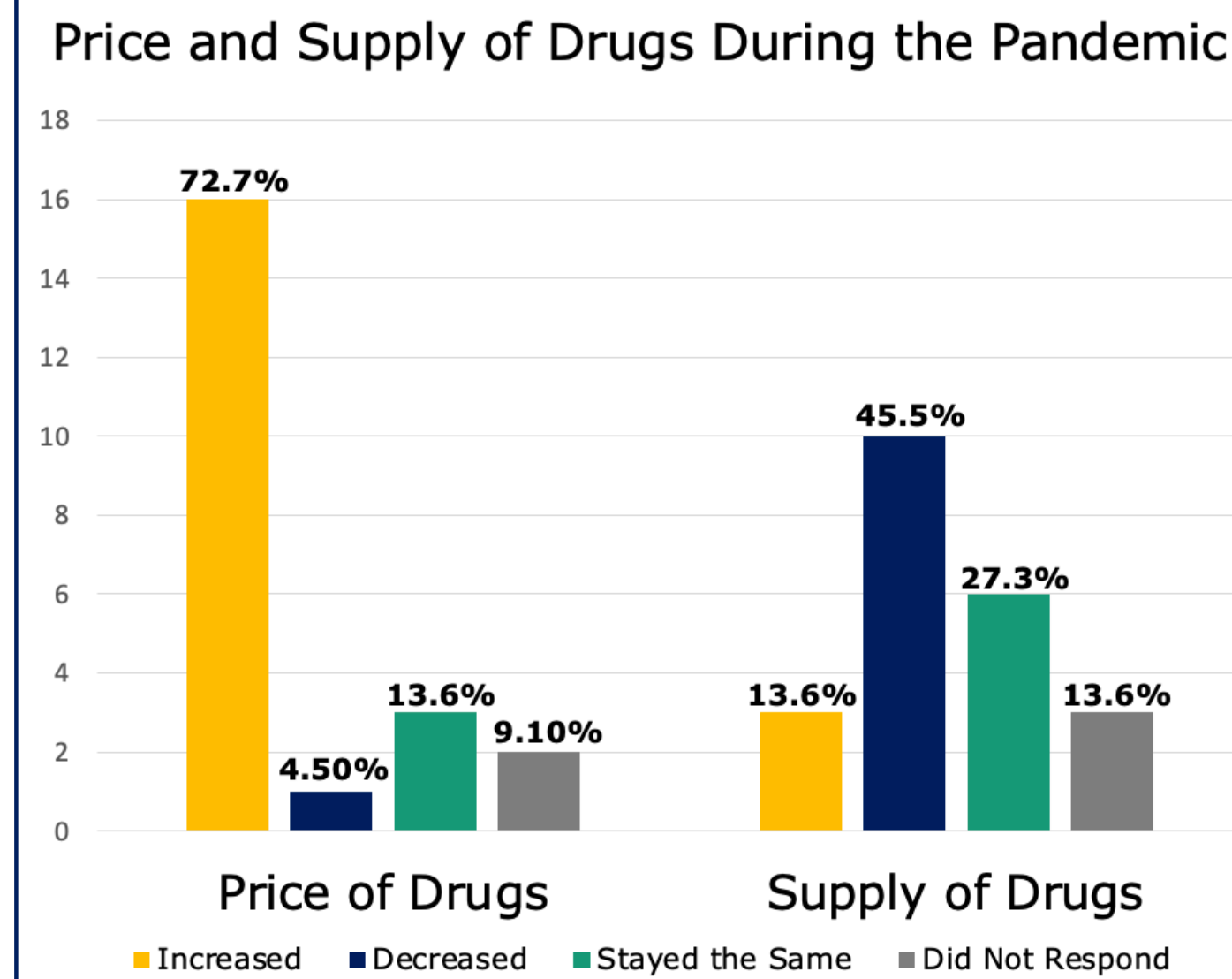
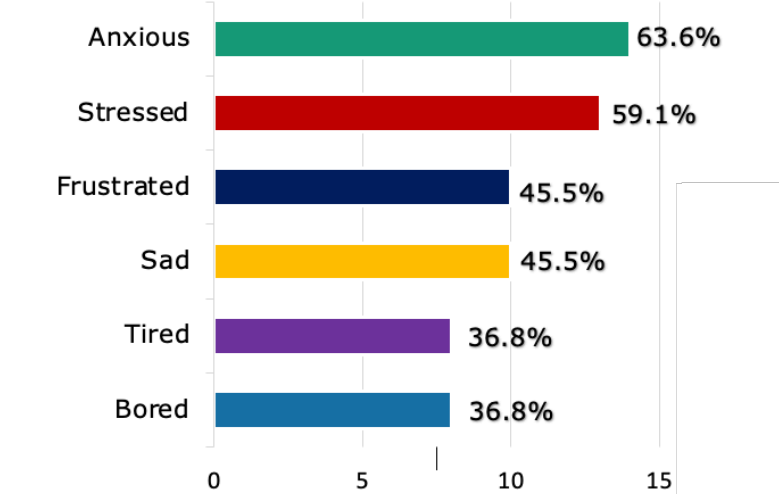
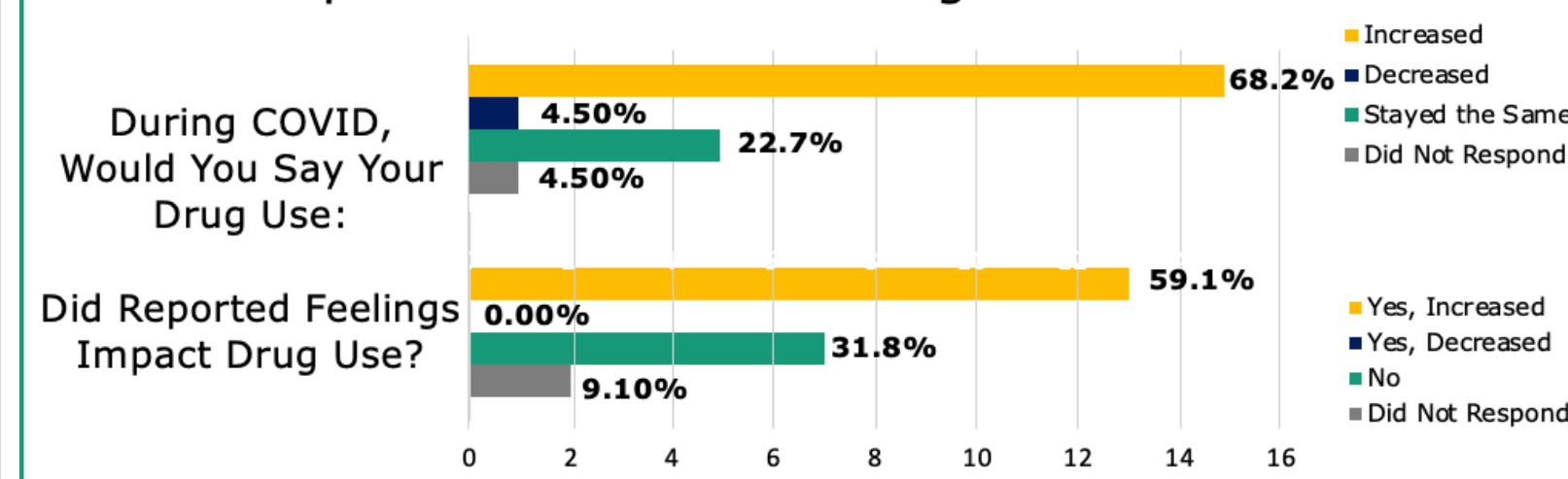


Fig 4 and 5: Most participants stated that their drug use increased during the pandemic with survey reasons including: mental health, emotions, "relapse"/started using drugs, loss of business, staying at home. Most reported emotions included anxiousness, stress, frustration, and sadness. Most participants stated that their emotions during the pandemic increased their drug use and none stated that their emotions decreased their drug use.

During the pandemic, the most often reported emotions with percent of participants reporting those emotions:



Impact of Emotions on Drug Use



CONCLUSIONS

- During the pandemic, most participants noted an **increase in drug use** that was impacted by their negative emotions. Most participants also reported an **increase in the price of drugs** they consume with a correlated decrease/static movement of the supply of drugs. With more demand due to the pandemic and the emotions it created plus decrease in supply secondary to the supply chain disruptions², this can be considered to have led to an increase in the price of drugs.
- Even with the increased price of drugs and difficulties obtaining drugs, along with most participants reporting unstable income, most respondents prioritized the money from the government stimulus checks on essentials like bills and food.

LIMITATIONS

- Small sample size from a specific geographic region; unknown how these findings generalize to other populations of PWUD outside of Sacramento area or who do not seek services at syringe exchange programs.

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