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Editorial

From the Editors

This issue contains a collection of studies reflecting a unique moment in history when most of formal society closed to contain the spread of the virulent SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) virus. These studies report on data collected when much of the health and social services infrastructure that supports people with HIV (PWH) and people who use drugs (PWUD) were either closed, transitioned to remote services, and/or were seconded to COVID-19 care and support. While supply chain issues and transmission risks reduced access to regular household items, social activities like restaurants, gyms, schools, and offices for working and middle class people in most of the world, the supply of illegal drugs and cannabis was unaffected. Drugs continued to flow while the social context in which they were used and abused changed, resulting in more overdoses, problematic use and relapse for those struggling on the margins of society.

The papers in this issue reflect the disruptions in care and treatment that affected PWUD and PWH, but also their resilience as many maintained their HIV medication and found ways to stay in drug treatment. The COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to its knees, but for those already marginalized these papers show strength and resilience as these participants living with multiple conditions mitigated multiple health threats despite mental and physical health burdens while sustaining their engagement in care while using substances. Both small protective and many negative effects of being outside of the mainstream experience of COVID-19 demonstrated the unique position of PWUD and how these vary by the substances they use, reemphasizing why these populations merit particular consideration in research and in how we design programs to deliver care to them. These findings provide an evidence-base that can be used to guide outreach and prevention approaches uniquely benefitting similar individuals when the next infectious disease threat is moving in the general population. These comprehensive and broad data describing what and how PWH who also have multiple challenges linked to substance use, mental illness and barriers to access to social and structural determinants health show responses to the COVID-19 threat and corresponding public health actions. That is a significant contribution to the future public health of similar individuals and a place to start in designing future prevention strategies for these groups.

The pandemic also brought the scientific community together, as seen through the remarkably responsive and productive collaboration of the consortium of NIDA funded cohorts the Collaborating Consortium of Cohorts Producing NIDA Opportunities (C3PNO). This consortium rapidly created and launched a survey module on COVID-19 specific to PWUD and PWH that was administered in a sub-sample of each cohort – with 9 papers in this issue analyzing the data from its first two rounds and two more rounds completed since these papers were finished and that represent the second year of the pandemic. Almost every cohort led at least one manuscript, some leading more than one, and most led by junior investigators on their research teams. This represented a new collaborative effort for this consortium in just its third year when the pandemic hit. From this experience the consortium developed not only a new common dataset shared by all cohorts, but also a new form of working together in a crisis ensued, as investigators pivoted from their normal research activities by sharing new approaches to reach cohort participants who are always a challenge to find, given their existence on the margins of society without regular phones and housing. As a scientific community and as part of broader society we are forever changed by lessons learned from the COVID-19, with one of the most profound being that we must be better prepared in the future for new epidemics and develop new ways to maintain care and services for all in the face of a public health crisis. We are proud and grateful of this work and the contribution it has made to that future challenge.

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