

COVID-19 impact on harm reduction programs (testing and counselling) in low threshold drug services in Germany

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Context and aim of survey

- Lockdown in spring 2020 led to (temporary) closure of low threshold harm reduction services (HRS) in Germany.
- The aim of this survey was to assess the impact on HRS, such as needle exchange programs, HIV and hepatitis testing, and counselling.



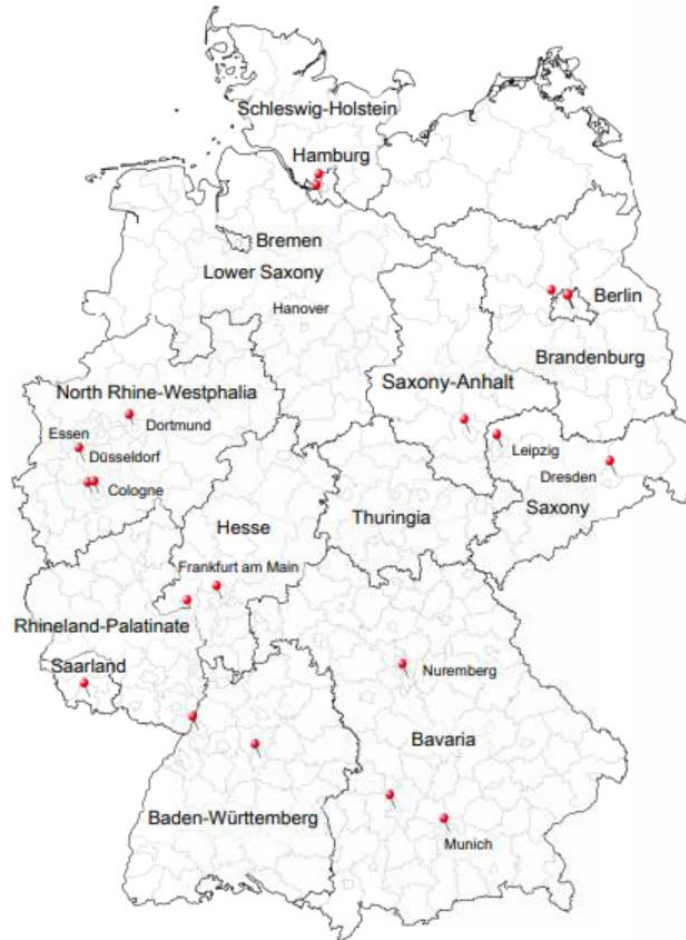
Methods

- Short survey via Email sent to 41 HRS across Germany
- Six questions addressing the following areas:
 - 1) Major problems reported by clients
 - 2) Major problems experienced by HRS
 - 3) Change in number and characteristics of clients
 - 4) Impact on prevention services
 - 5) Behaviour changes affecting infection risk for HIV/hepatitis/STIs
 - 6) Measures taken by HRS
- Analysis based on qualitative content analysis guidelines by Mayring
- Published in Epid Bull 2020;42:3–9 | DOI 10.25646/7155



Results

- 23/41 HRS responded





Results – Major problems reported by clients

- Financial problems
- Shortage and increased prices of substances
 - Reduced consumption
 - Uncertainty
 - Aggressiveness
 - Consumption of alternative drugs
- Fines due to violations of social distancing
- Lack of a refuge and daily structure
- Loss of personal contacts/ isolation

„Procurement of money became problematic, because only few people visited public spaces and donated. Money that was normally stolen from shops became unavailable during the lockdown.“



Results – Major problems reported by HRS

- Complete or partial closure of services
 - Food “to go” and needle exchange through the front door/window continued
- Drop-in centres and cafés in parts still closed
- Reduction of seats in consumption rooms
- Limited number of clients/shortened stay within the facilities
- Strong decrease in counselling

„Allocation of needles is increased with week’s supply through the window or *Safer Use* vending machines. All scaled up and free of charge.“



Results – Change of clients

- Decrease in number of clients in facilities
- Increase of clients seen for street work activities
- Change in characteristics of clients
 - Homeless people
 - Sex workers

„The number of clients in our drop-in centres changed through Covid in a way that stay in our facility is not possible anymore. Through this many of our regular clients avoid contact.”

„Through street work we were able to stay in touch with the local community (alcohol and illegal drugs). It was obvious that through the restrictions more clients could be met on the streets who would normally visit the services.



Results – Impact on preventive services

- Increased demand of needle exchange at front door
- *Safer Use* counselling challenging but high demand
- Medical care for uninsured clients became problematic
- Referral for OST:
 - Increased number of units available vs. stop of patient admission
- Discontinuation of testing for HIV/Hepatitis/STIs
- Few facilities report less demand for condoms

„We had some people who wished to be referred for OST, because financing their heroin consumption was not possible anymore.”



Results – Behaviour changes affecting infection risk

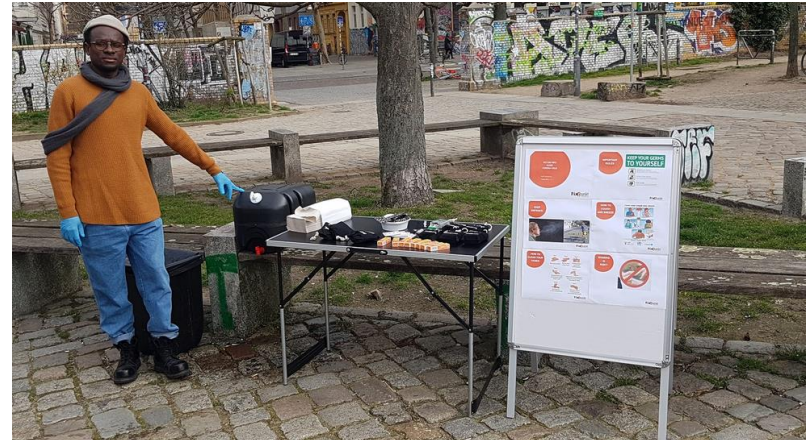
- Increased risk-entailing consumption in public
 - Closure of facilities
 - Increased prices for substances
 - Lack of money
- Increased sensitization for hand hygiene

„Through the closure of facilities, where clients can usually stay during the day, they were now more in public spaces.

This means more consumption in public spaces under unhygienic circumstances.”

Results – Examples of measures taken by HRS

- Establishing a hygiene concept challenging
- Quick adaptation to new situation
 - altered room usage
 - setting up of barrier shields
- Mobile hand washing station in parks
- “Community phones”
- Sewing masks
- Ginger tea



Source: terre des hommes, Fixpunkt Berlin



Conclusion

- Serious limitations for HRS due to COVID-crisis.
 - Limited number of clients and shortened duration of stay in facilities lead to less/reduced contact with clients.
 - Consumption in public spaces lead to increased risk for infection.
 - Testing services and counselling were discontinued.
- The results may be used for better preparation in case of a new (regional) lockdown.

Thank you for your attention!