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VULNERABILITY ASSOCIATED WITH HIV TRANSMISSION AMONG DRUG USERS IN THREE COUNTRIES OF SOUTH AMERICA: Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay (1998-2004)

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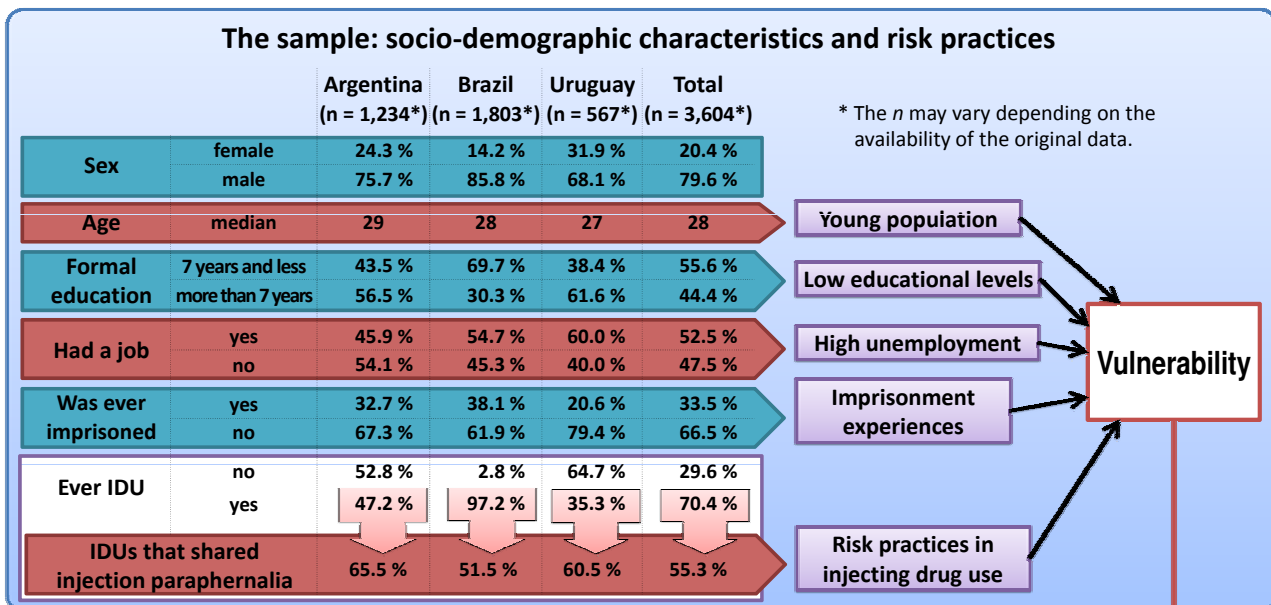
PROJECT: Profiles and trends of risk behaviors for HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis B and C among Drug Users, in the context of national public health policies – Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay (MCT/CNPq 014/2006 – PROSUL).

BACKGROUND: Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay are the Latin American countries with the most HIV cases among the injecting drug user (IDU) population. High HIV seroprevalence was also found among non-injecting drug users (NIDUs). Vulnerability of these populations is related to epidemiological, cultural, political, and legal factors.

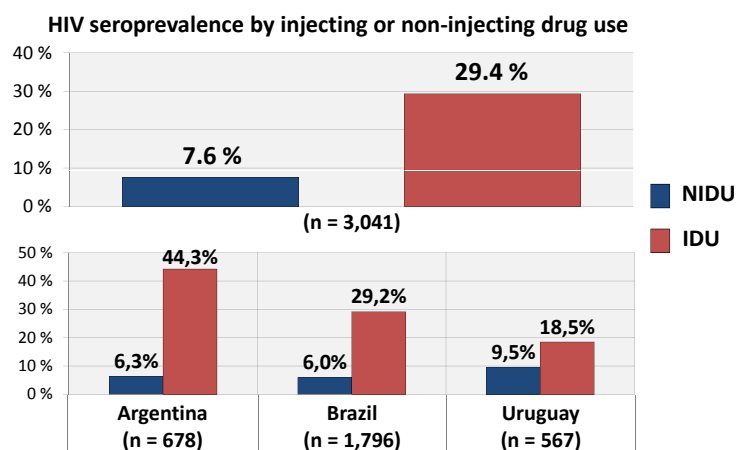
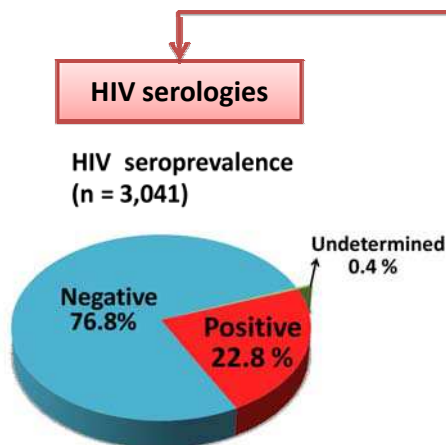
OBJECTIVE: To analyze data from thirteen cross-sectional studies with IDUs, ex-IDUs and NIDUs, collected between 1998 and 2004 in the cities of Buenos Aires (Argentina); Florianópolis, Gravataí, Itajaí, Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, São José do Rio Preto, São Paulo and Sorocaba (Brazil); and Montevideo (Uruguay).

METHODOLOGY: Data on HIV seroprevalence, socio-demographic and risk practices available in each of the original studies was restructured and merged. A comprehensive database with 3,604 records was created using all available data belonging to IDUs, ex-IDUs, and NIDUs from these three countries. 3,041 HIV serologies (ELISA) were carried out in seven of the thirteen original studies.

RESULTS: The sample was 79.6% male and the median age was 28 years old. 55.6% had 7 years or less of formal education; only 52.5% had some kind of job; and 33.5% had been imprisoned some time in their lives. 70.4% were IDUs or ex-IDUs. The vast majority of interviewees (95.4%) were users of inhaled, smoked and / or injected cocaine. 55.3% of IDUs had shared injection materials before.



3,041 HIV serologies were carried out, resulting in a seroprevalence of 22.8%. The mean age of those who were positives (31.5 years old) was significantly older than those who were negatives (28.7 years, $p < 0.001$). There was no statistically significant difference between seroprevalence among men (22.8%) and women (22.6%, $p > 0.050$). The seroprevalence among IDUs was 29.4%, in contrast to 7.6% among NIDUs ($p < 0.001$).



CONCLUSIONS: A high HIV seroprevalence among drug users (especially among IDUs, but in some extent among NIDUs) was found. The socio-demographic variables and risk practices denote a population whose situation —when compared and contrasted with the average urban standards of the three contexts under analysis— can be classified as highly vulnerable in terms of HIV transmission. This analysis shows similar situations of vulnerability for DU population in the three countries. It is necessary to maintain and increase programs aiming to diminishing associated drug-related harms and to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS among IDUs and NIDUs.