

Have COVID-19 restrictions affected needle and syringe program transactions in Tasmania?

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Key findings:

- There has been a sustained 20-25% reduction in the number of occasions of service for sterile injecting equipment since the onset of restrictions in March 2020. This is most apparent in the South and the North of the state. This has not yet returned to pre-COVID levels three months later despite an easing of restrictions.
- The greatest change in transactions has been among younger participants (<30).
- These findings demonstrate the utility of being able to rapidly review routine service operational data in order to understand changes in drug-related behaviours.

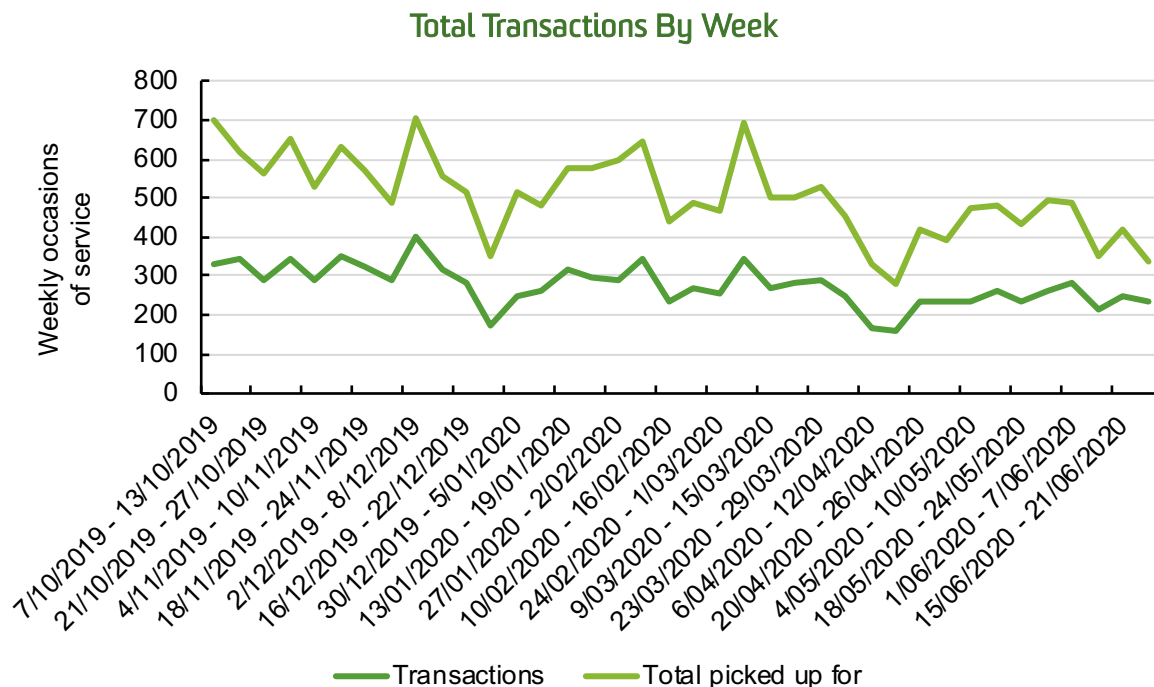
Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant impacts on how people interact and travel. Given that much of the drugs consumed in Tasmania are imported from mainland states or overseas, it is likely the case that there have been disruptions in the supply of drugs in the state.

As one indicator of drug use across Tasmania, whenever people access sterile injecting equipment from primary Needle and Syringe Program outlets, they are asked a small number of questions about themselves and the substances they use.

In this report we have compiled data from all 7 primary Needle and Syringe program outlets across Tasmania (1 in the North; 2 in the North West; 3 in the South plus one secondary outlet in the South) to examine potential changes in service access between October 2019 (the start of electronic data collection) and June 2020.

Has there been any change in the total number of transactions at Tasmanian needle and syringe outlets?



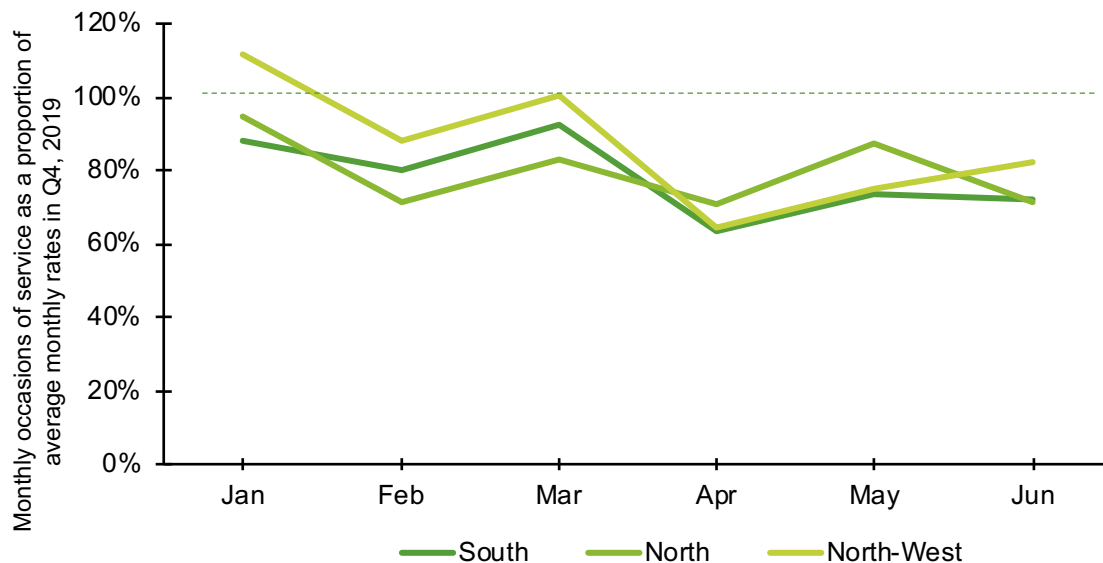
There has been a significant and sustained decrease in the total number of transactions (occasions of service) by approximately 25% between the last quarter of 2019 and second quarter of 2020 (with COVID-19 restrictions commencing in March). Weekly transactions had declined from an average of more than 300 per week in Q4 2019 to 230 per week in Q2 2020: $t(24)=4.10$, $p<0.001$. During transactions, consumers are asked how many people they are picking up equipment for. This has similarly reduced by around 25% in this period: from over 550 persons per week to around 410 per week: $t(24)=4.88$, $p<0.001$.

Are there regional differences in needle and syringe program transactions?

To make it easier to visualise changes, the following figures present the number of transactions in each region over the first six months of 2020, as a proportion of the average monthly number of transactions during the fourth quarter of 2019.

There was a marked decline between the number of transactions in March and April, particularly in the South and North-West sites, with the number of monthly transactions falling to almost 60% of the average of the last three months of 2019.

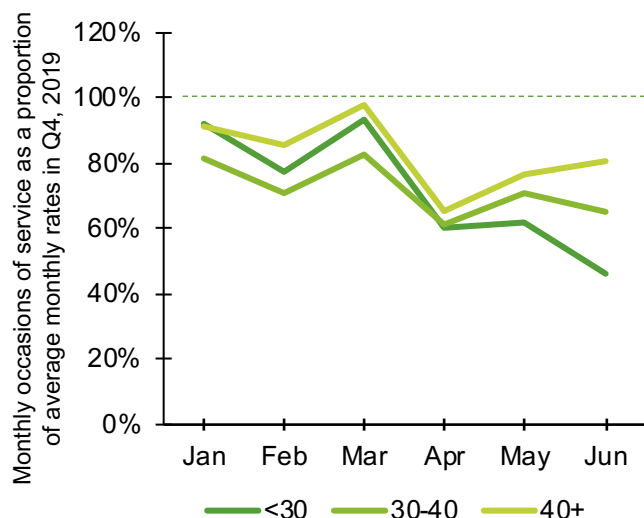
Regional Trends in Transactions



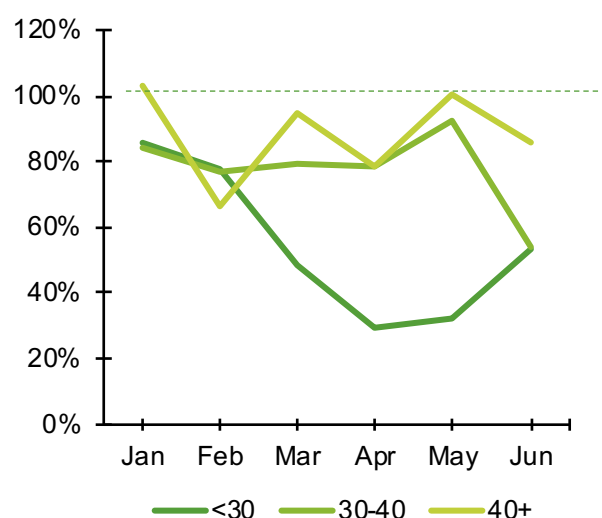
There were different degrees of impact across the state. There was a 25% decline seen in weekly transactions in the South, falling from an average of 200 per week in Q4 2019 to 150 per week in Q2 2020: $t(24)=4.00$, $p<0.001$. Similar declines were seen in the North-West (23%: $t(24)=2.4$, $p=0.026$). Trends in the outlet in the North have been highly variable over the past six months.

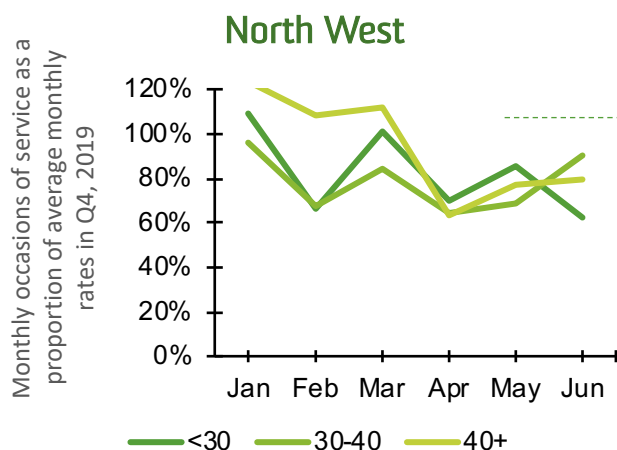
In the North-West, the decline in transactions in Q2 2020 was similar across all age groups. In the South and the North-West, the decline has been particularly seen among younger individuals (under 30).

South



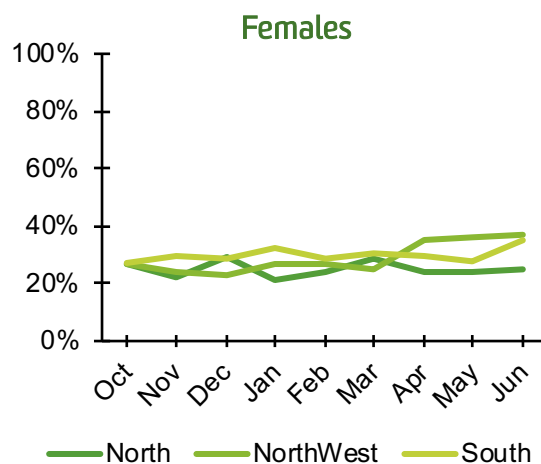
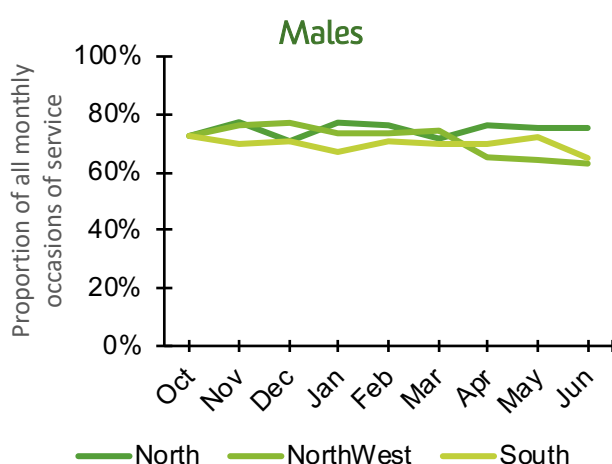
North



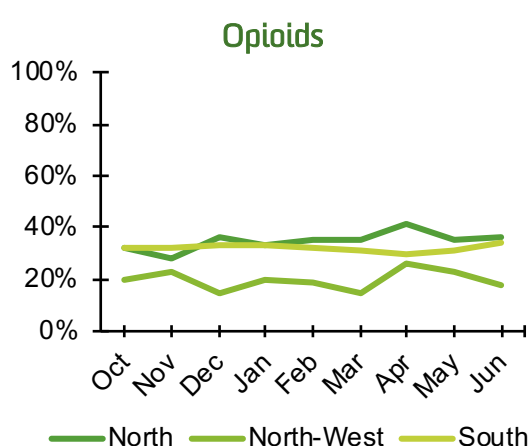
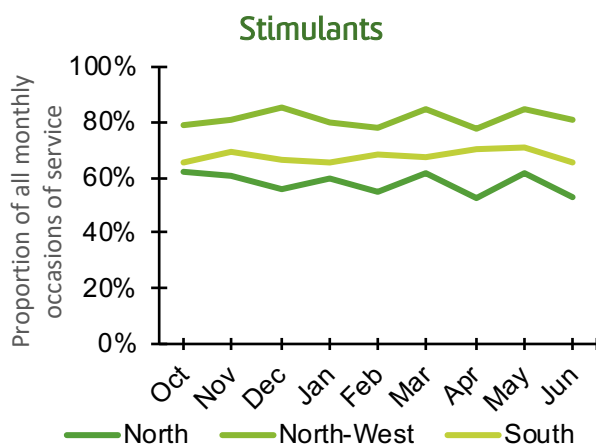


Are there other changes in clients of needle and syringe services?

There is no real evidence for any change in the proportion of males and females accessing needle and syringe programs over time or since COVID-19 restrictions



There is no real evidence for any change in the proportion of people accessing equipment for use of stimulants (predominantly methamphetamine) or opioids over time or since COVID-19 restrictions.



Summary

- It is clear that there has been a significant reduction in the number of transactions for injecting equipment overall, and that this has not returned to pre-COVID levels despite the easing in restrictions in Tasmania.
- Data on transactions for individual consumers is not recorded, so we cannot clearly tell if the reductions in occasions of service suggests that there has been less people accessing the service, or the same numbers of people accessing needle and syringe programs less often. We also cannot tell if people are picking up more equipment in these fewer number of occasions of service.
- The different trends in service use by age, however, may suggest a decline in use among younger (<30) consumers in particular.
- Anecdotal reports suggest that travel and shipping restrictions during the peak of the COVID response may only just be beginning to affect drug markets (Dietze, et al 2020). It is important to monitor these changes, as they may provide opportunities to scale up treatment services or necessitate quick responses to consumers if there are emergences of harms from changed patterns of use.
- While there are clear limitations in how much information can be gleaned from data from needle and syringe program transactions in isolation, the results in this bulletin demonstrate how this can be a useful and timely indication of potential changes in drug markets that may merit further investigation.

References

- Dietze, P., Maher, L., Stoove, M. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 on people who inject drugs in Melbourne: first / preliminary analysis. SuperMIX Bulletin Series. Melbourne: Burnet Institute.

Acknowledgements

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