



## Differential experiences of Mexican policing by people who inject drugs residing in Tijuana and San Diego



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Research among people who inject drugs (PWIDs) in the USA and Mexico has identified a range of adverse health impacts associated with policing of PWIDs. We employed a mixed methods design to investigate how PWIDs from San Diego and Mexico experienced policing in Tijuana, and how these interactions affect PWIDs behavior, stratifying by country of origin.

**Methods:** In 2012–2014, 575 PWIDs in San Diego, 102 of whom had used drugs in Mexico in the past six months, were enrolled in the STAHR-II study, with qualitative interviews conducted with a subsample of 20 who had recently injected drugs in Mexico. During this period, 735 PWIDs in Tijuana were also enrolled in the El Cuete-IV study, with qualitative interviews conducted with a subsample of 20 recently stopped by police. We calculated descriptive statistics for quantitative variables and conducted thematic analysis of qualitative transcripts. Integration of these data involved comparing frequencies across cohorts and using qualitative themes to explain and explore findings.

**Results:** Sixty-one percent of San Diego-based participants had been recently stopped by law enforcement officers (LEOs) in Mexico; 53% reported it was *somewhat or very likely* that they would be arrested while in Mexico because they look like a drug user. Ninety percent of Tijuana-based participants had been recently stopped by LEOs; 84% reported it was *somewhat or very likely* they could get arrested because they look like a drug user. Participants in both cohorts described bribery and targeting by LEOs in Mexico. However, most San Diego-based participants described compliance with bribery as a safeguard against arrest and detention, with mistreatment being rare. Tijuana-based participants described being routinely targeted by LEOs, were frequently detained, and reported instances of sexual and physical violence. Tijuana-based participants described modifying how, where, and with whom they injected drugs in response; and experienced feelings of stress, anxiety, and powerlessness. This was less common among San Diego-based participants, who mostly attempted to avoid contact with LEOs in Mexico while engaging in risky injection behavior.

**Conclusion:** Experiences of discrimination and stigma were reported by a larger proportion of PWIDs living in Mexico, suggesting that they may be subject to greater health harms related to policing practices compared with those residing in the USA. Our findings reinforce the importance of efforts to curb abuse and align policing practices with public health goals in both the US and Mexico.

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### Introduction

Tijuana is a city in the Mexican state of Baja California across the border from San Diego, California. Both cities are located on a major

international drug trafficking route that runs from the Andean region in South America to the United States, making drugs such as heroin, methamphetamine, and cocaine abundant in both cities (Bucardo et al., 2005). Approximately 10,000 people who inject drugs (PWIDs) reside in Tijuana, with many more crossing the border from San Diego, reportedly to use and buy illicit drugs because of lower prices, easier access, and to avoid facing legal

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penalties in the United States (Morales, Lozada, Magis, & Saaverda, 2004; Volkmann et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2012).

In 2010 Mexico decriminalized possession of small amounts of illegal drugs (e.g., heroin, cocaine, methamphetamines) for personal use (Moreno, Licea, & Rodriguez-Ajenjo, 2010). Carrying syringes is also permitted in Mexico; however, past research has shown that in Mexico “laws on the books” are not always applied by law enforcement officers on the streets, resulting in arbitrary policing (Beletsky, Lozada et al., 2013; Beletsky, Thomas et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2009). Additionally, evidence of widespread police corruption in some cities in Mexico, including instances of PWIDs being targeted and experiencing physical and sexual abuse from the police, has been recorded (Beletsky, Lozada et al., 2013; Beletsky, Wagner et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2009; Werb et al., 2015).

The risk environment framework posits that health outcomes are not only a result of individual-level behaviors and characteristics but also are influenced by the larger structure and environment within which individuals reside (Rhodes, 2002). Law enforcement practices, both official laws and enforcement of those laws, are one of the structural aspects that shape PWIDs' risk environment (Burris et al., 2004; Rhodes, 2002), including individuals' ability to access sterile needle/syringes and their capacity to avoid risky injection behaviors (Bluthenthal, Kral, Erringer, & Edlin, 1999; Bluthenthal, Lorrwick, Kral, Erringer, & Kahn, 1999; Miller et al., 2009; Strathdee, Beletsky, & Kerr, 2015). Research among PWIDs in the Tijuana–San Diego border region has shown that individuals frequently travel between these two cities and have social relationships that transcend the international border (Volkmann et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2010, 2012; Zúñiga et al., 2006). Given the connectedness of these two communities and the recent legal change in Mexico that has the potential to impact drug use risk environments in San Diego and Tijuana, we sought to investigate how policing practices in Tijuana may affect Mexican and American PWIDs differentially, in order to inform public health intervention and policies to reduce health and social risks associated with injection drug use.

## Methods

### Setting

This mixed methods analysis used data from two cohorts of PWIDs from Tijuana and San Diego. Between 2012 and 2014, data were collected from two independent mixed methods cohort studies among PWIDs, which were both designed to study the impact of the 2010 law through which Mexico decriminalized possession of small amounts of certain drugs (e.g., heroin) for personal use (Moreno et al., 2010). The El Cuete-IV study recruited 735 PWIDs in Tijuana, while the STAHR-II study recruited 575 PWIDs in San Diego. A detailed description of the methods is provided elsewhere (Robertson et al., 2014). Recruitment for both studies was done using targeted sampling and street-based outreach in areas frequented by PWIDs. The study protocols were approved by the Human Subjects Protection Program of the University of California, San Diego (STAHR-II and El Cuete-IV) and the Ethics Board of the Colegio de la Frontera Norte (el cuete-IV). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

### Quantitative measures

Quantitative data were collected via semi-annual visits in which participants were interviewed using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) software. The one-on-one interviews were conducted in English or Spanish by trained bilingual interviewers, and included questions about demographics, and

law enforcement interactions such as arrest/stop history, bribery, and what happened during the stop. To the extent possible, the quantitative questions were aligned between the STAHR-II and El Cuete-IV surveys to allow comparisons across cohorts; however, some questions were unique to each cohort.

### Qualitative interviews

Subsamples of participants from each cohort were purposively sampled based on their responses in the surveys and were invited to undergo in-depth qualitative interviews. San Diego-based participants were sampled if they used drugs in Mexico in the previous six months. Tijuana-based participants were sampled if they had been stopped or arrested by law enforcement officers in Tijuana in the past six months. Trained bilingual interviewers used cohort-specific interview guides to conduct the qualitative interviews. The interviews with San Diego-based participants focused on their experiences and rationale for buying and using drugs in Tijuana, and contained a series of questions assessing their interactions with and concerns about interacting with law enforcement officers while in Tijuana. The interviews with Tijuana-based participants focused on their history of interactions with law enforcement officers in Tijuana.

The number of qualitative interviews was determined based on the principle of conceptual saturation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). During qualitative data collection, regular meetings were held in which investigators could evaluate saturation. New participants were interviewed when new themes were identified and warranted further exploration, and the investigators identified a priori an upper limit of 20 participants per study site (i.e., San Diego and Tijuana), for a total of 40 qualitative interviews.

### Mixed methods analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed for all quantitative variables of interest. Data for both cohorts are displayed in a single table to facilitate comparisons, though statistical comparisons were not calculated due to differences in the quantitative measures used in the two surveys. Qualitative interviews were transcribed and interviews conducted in Spanish were translated into English for analysis. We analyzed a subset of the qualitative interviews, selected to ensure a diverse sample based on gender, race/ethnicity, and experiences with law enforcement in Mexico. The analytic team (authors 1 and 8) met regularly to discuss the findings and determine when conceptual saturation was achieved. Our final qualitative data set consisted of nine of the twenty interviews with San Diego-based participants (5 males, 4 females) and ten of the twenty interviews with Tijuana-based participants (6 males, 4 females). Our qualitative analysis strategy was designed to elucidate and provide context for observations made from the quantitative comparisons. First, transcripts were coded for themes that were derived from the quantitative data (e.g., experiences of bribery, reason for being stopped). Themes that emerged from the interviews were added to the codebook (e.g., corruption, behaviors resulting from interactions with the police, feelings about being targeted by the police) and transcripts were re-coded to incorporate these emerging themes. ATLAS.ti (Scientific Software Development, Berlin, Germany) was used to manage coding and analysis.

## Results

From 2012 to 2014, 575 San Diego-based participants provided data on the quantitative survey, 102 of whom (79.4% male) had used drugs in Mexico in the past six months. The majority of participants were White (58.8%) with a mean age of 40.1 years

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