

Qualitative Approaches in the Public Health Surveillance of Drug Use and Risk



- "If anything has been learned from the history of drug use in America it is that 'drug problems' are ever-shifting and changing phenomena. There are fads and fashions, rages and crazes, and alternative trends in drugs of choice and patterns of use."

-Inciardi, Lockwood and Pottieger (1993:1)





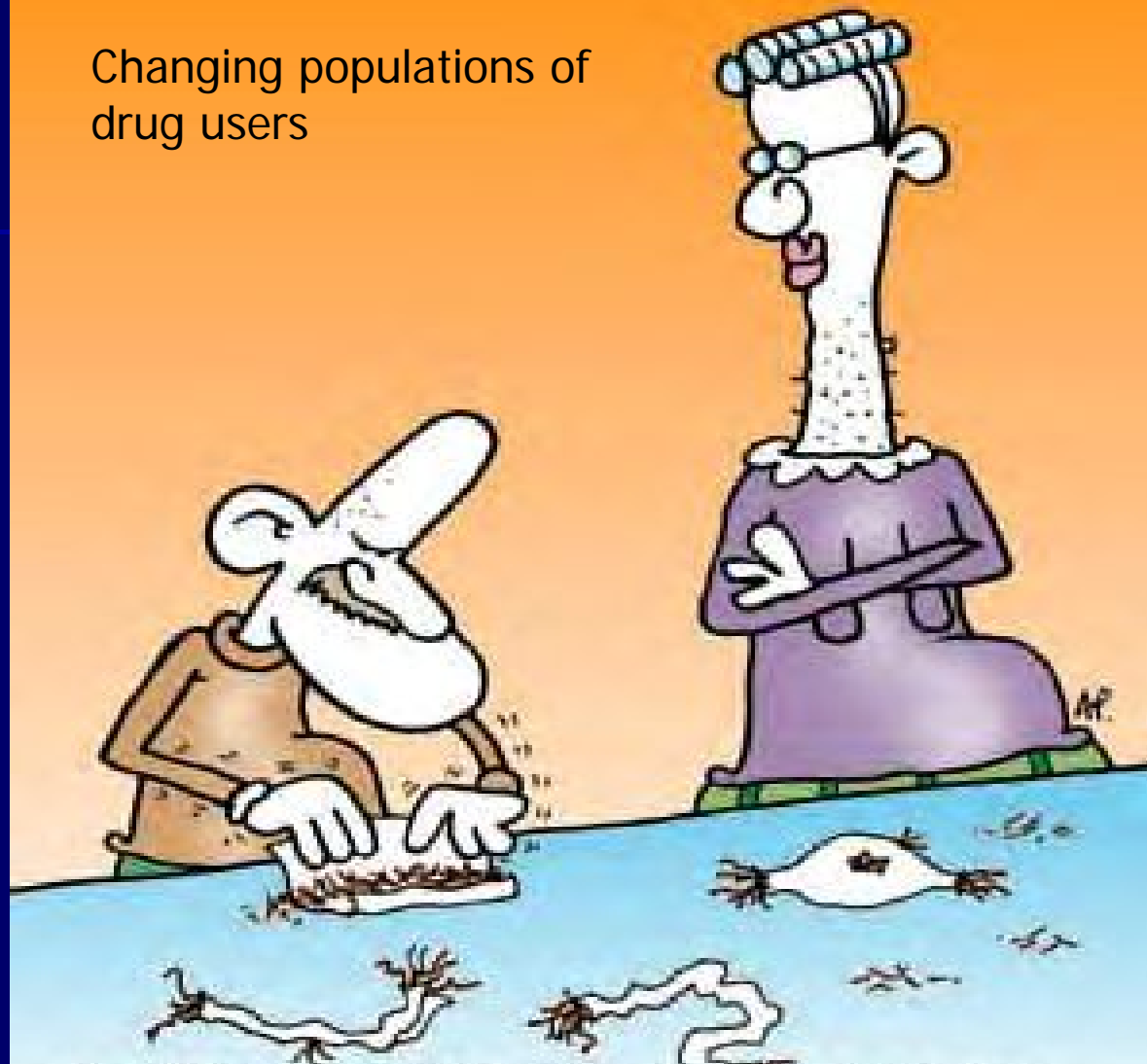
The Whirling Wheel of Change

- ✦ Growing recognition that illicit drug use is a continually changing behavior.
- ✦ As illustrated by the HIV and hepatitis epidemics, emergent drug use patterns and the changing social and biological environments of drug use can have significant public health consequences.
- ✦ Often public health (and drug treatment) response to emergent drug-related epidemics is slow and fragmented.
- ✦ Changes in drug use behaviors/contexts often only become apparent after health consequences are widespread in a community.

Changing Patterns of Drug Use

- ✦ Significantly, changes occur at the local, regional, national, and global levels; with some but not all changes beginning locally and diffusing social networks to wider geographic areas.
- ✦ Some notable changes include:
 - the introduction and spread of new drugs and drug combinations
 - the marketing of new forms of older drugs
 - appearance of new drug use equipment
 - discovery of new ways to use existing drugs
 - emergence of new drug use settings & users

Changing populations of drug users



As Alf grew older he began to have trouble with his joints

Responding to Change

- ✦ In light of the tendency of drug use patterns to change the capacity of these changes to diffuse regionally and across social groups,
- ✦ and the potential for some changes to have significant public health consequences, there has been growing recognition of the value of ongoing public health tracking of emergent and changing drug use patterns.



Premises of Qualitative Drug Monitoring

- ★ Drug policy is often “a step (or more) behind” the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of drug consumption practices on the street
- ★ Formal institution sources of information (e.g. treatment admissions, ER mentions) do not register changes in drug patterns until they come to be experienced by users as a problem, which may be well after a new pattern is widespread

Premises

- ✦ There is a critical need for “on the ground” ethno-epidemiological monitoring of changing drug use & health and social risks to inform policy formation, treatment and prevention efforts, and community awareness
- ✦ Ethnographic methods and anthropological concepts (e.g., culture, social networks, behavior in context) provide a strong core-strategy for early-bird identification and description of new drug use patterns, the assessment of the social significance of changes in drug use, and the use of evidence-based, socially appropriate, and context-sensitive public health measures.

Goals of the approach



- ☀ Use ethnographic and epidemiological methods to identify, describe, and track emergent drug trends;
- ☀ Analyze emergent trends across key sociodemographic attributes, e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, neighborhood
- ☀ Share findings and work with the public health and drug treatment systems to address the public health consequences of changing drug use

Existing Programs

- ✦ The Ohio Substance Abuse Monitoring Network – a statewide system
- ✦ The Hartford Drug Monitoring Project – a citywide system

References

- 1) Harvey Siegal, Robert Carlson, et al (2000) The Ohio Substance Abuse Monitoring Network: Constructing and Operating a Statewide Epidemiologic Intelligence System. American Journal of Public Health. 90(12): 1835-7.
- 2) Merrill Singer, Greg Mirhej, et al. (in press) *Tomorrow is Already Here, Or Is It? Steps in Preventing a Local Methamphetamine Outbreak.* Human Organization (in press).
- 3) Merrill Singer, Greg Mirhej et al. (2005) *When the Drug of Choice is a Drug of Confusion: Embalming Fluid Use in Inner City Hartford, CT.* Journal of Ethnicity and Substance Abuse 4(2):71-96.
- 4) Jim Vivian, Hassan Saleheen et al. (2005) *Under the Counter: The Diffusion of Narcotic Analgesics to the Inner City Street.* Journal of Ethnicity and Substance Abuse 4(2);97-114.

METHAMPHETAMINE MAKEOVER

This Could Be The New You



Crystal Meth does a lot to you and it is all bad



Hispanic Health Council