

Title: Exploration of a crack use setting and its impact on drug users' risky drug use and sexual behaviors: The case of *piaules* in a Montréal neighborhood.

Running head: Exploration of a crack use setting.

Conflict of interest declaration

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Abstract

From July 2011, a one-year study based on ethnographic methodology was carried out in “crack houses” in the neighborhood of Hochelaga-Maisonneuve in Montréal, Canada. The study aimed to explore the operational style of a specific indoor drug use setting and its impact on users’ risky sexual and drug use behaviors in a context of drug market change. A thematic analysis of observational and interview notes was conducted. This study stresses the importance to examine the role of environmental factors in relation to crack smoking’s health-related risks and to complement individual-based interventions with structural strategies. The study’s limitations are noted.

Keywords: crack, crack house, sex work, ethnography, risk environment, drug use patterns, Montréal

Introduction

For decades, cocaine misuse has played a major role in HIV and hepatitis C virus (HCV) epidemics. Still today, cocaine injection (mostly powder form) is one of the main factors for HIV and HCV transmission among drug users (Nelson et al., 2002; Tyndall et al., 2003; Maher et al., 2006; Bruneau et al., 2012). From a public health perspective, crack smoking is less risky, at least in terms of transmission of infections caused by HIV and HCV. The risk of spreading blood-borne pathogens associated with sharing inhalation equipment is certainly much lower than with sharing injection equipment. Yet, studies have shown that crack smokers are at high risk of acquiring HIV or HCV. Indeed, compared to non-users, more crack users report high-risk substance use behaviors, especially polyconsumption (Des Jarlais et al., 1992; McBride et al., 1992; Carlson et al., 1999) and, among those who also inject drugs, unsafe injection practices (McBride et al. 1992). Crack users also have more risky sexual behaviors—sex work, high numbers of sex partners, and inconsistent condom use (Edlin et al., 1992; Booth et al., 1993; Booth et al., 2000; Ross et al., 2002; Spittal et al., 2003). Although epidemiological studies provide significant data on infection risks associated with crack smoking, they do not allow us to determine the contexts and nature of this connection or to understand what influences crack smokers to take risks (Celentano & Sherman, 2009).

In an effort to better understand the risks and harms associated with drug use, social scientists and epidemiologists have paid particular attention to the social situations and places in which risky behaviors occur. Today, this approach is largely embodied by the concept of risk environment. A risk environment is the *social or physical space in which a variety of factors*

interact to increase the chances of drug-related harms (Rhodes, 2002:88). There are four types of environments—physical, social, economic and policy—which interacts with three levels of environmental influence—micro, meso and macro (Rhodes, 2002; Rhodes et al., 2005; Strathdee et al., 2010). Among these types of environments, the physical micro-environment, especially drug use setting, has garnered much scientific attention. Drug use settings, which are both geospatially and socially defined, have been shown to influence risky sex and drug use behaviors. (Rhodes, 2002; Rhodes et al. 2005; Dickson-Gomez et al., 2007; Weeks et al., 2001). In this perspective, the study of crack houses as sale and consumption settings enhances understanding of the contexts that foster risk-taking among crack smokers and the people around them.

According to the literature, the term "crack house" applies to a broad variety of settings in regards to physical features, activities that take place there, and social norms and rules in place (Geter, 1994; Inciardi, 1995; Briggs, 2010). Despite this variability, the most common definition of crack house is an established site where crack users gather to smoke crack, socialize and engage in sexual activities (Ratner, 1993; Weeks et al., 2001). Previous ethnographic studies of crack houses have revealed significant elements that enhance understanding of the social contexts of risky behaviors associated with crack use (Ratner, 1993; Inciardi, 1993; 1995; Bourgois & Dunlap, 1993; Weeks et al, 2001). These behaviors revolve mainly around “sex-for-crack exchanges” which are often prevalent in crack houses. Driven by a compulsive need to regain the short-lived pharmacological effects of crack, female users (and sometimes male users) exchange sex for crack. Studies have shown that sexual activities in crack houses tend to be anonymous, frequent, uninhibited and often unprotected (Carlson & Siegal, 1991; Ratner, 1993; Williams, 1993; Inciardi, 1995). Women who engage in sex-for-crack exchanges in crack houses are highly

vulnerable: they are sexually exploited and often victims of violence and rape (Inciardi, 1993; 1995; Weeks et al. 2001; Sharpe, 2005).

In recent years, cities across Canada have experienced a marked increase in the use of crack cocaine (Haydon & Fischer, 2005; Fischer et al., 2006; Werb et al., 2010; Roy et al., 2012). Yet, there is a scarcity of research regarding the social organization of crack houses (or analogous drug use settings) and the role they could play in HIV and HCV transmission. Moreover, most studies on this topic have been conducted elsewhere and already date back over 15 years.

According to a recent study carried out in downtown Montréal, a gradual shift started around 2003, with the crack street market overtaking the powder cocaine street market (Roy et al., 2012).

In light of the risks associated with crack use, such a shift could influence the risks of infection and needs of users. To inform public health authorities and harm reduction programs, this paper explores the operational style of a specific indoor crack sale and consumption setting, and its impact on drug users' risky sexual and drug use behaviors in a changing drug market.

Methods

The present study was carried out in the context of a larger one called the “Interface project”, the aim of which was to examine the links between drug injection, crack use and the potential roles in the evolution of HIV and HCV epidemics in Montréal, Canada. Qualitative methods were used to explore complexities of risk management by street-drug users in a specific drug use setting.

Data collection, carried out by an ethnographer familiar with fieldwork among street-drug users, included two main strategies. One consisted of semi-structured interviews with adult crack users

and the other was long-term participant-observation. We used two data collection techniques during the visits to the settings: (1) direct observations of the social organization and physical attributes of crack houses and of users' interactions and behaviors; and (2) informal conversational interviews as part of participant observation.

Data were collected from July 2011 to August 2012 in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, a Montréal neighborhood well known for widespread crack sales and consumption in indoor drug use settings. Participants in semi-structured interviews were recruited in the neighborhood community-based harm reduction program using non-probabilistic sampling and the snowball technique (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The interview guide covered the following topics: participant's definition of "crack house"; social organization and management of crack houses; physical attributes of crack houses; social interactions among users; sex work operations; and personal experiences in crack houses. Although semi-structured interviews were conducted throughout the study period, many were carried out early on in the project, so as to gather crucial information to guide participant observation and assure optimal and safe introduction of the ethnographer in a drug use setting known to be harsh and hostile, especially for "outsiders". All semi-structured interviews were recorded and lasted 45 min. to 90 min. Interviews were conducted in a private room of the neighborhood community-based harm reduction program and participants were given a monetary stipend of \$10 for their participation. At the end of the study, 25 participants had completed semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were transcribed for coding.

As for the participant-observation component, an outreach worker familiar with the local drug scene facilitated access to crack houses and accompanied the ethnographer, who was introduced to crack house gatekeepers as a public health researcher. A targeted sample was selected using the snowball technique (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). To obtain a broader sample and reduce idiosyncratic effects of snowball selection biases, the ethnographer subsequently engaged in more strategically selected, purposeful recruitment on the street and in crack houses in order to reflect the wide range of profiles of street drug users. To reduce data distortion due to socially desirable responses, interviews during participant observation were conducted in a conversational format while drug users were actively engaged in their routine activities of seeking, purchasing and using drugs. This classical anthropological strategy of participant observation allowed a triangulation of responses to conversational prompts with *in vivo* observations of behaviors unfolding in real time (Bourgois et al., 2006). At the end of the study, three crack houses had been visited. Two of them were visited 5 times and one of them more than 25 times. Visits lasted between 30 minutes to several hours. Furthermore, participant observation was extended outside of piaules (street corners, alleys, etc.) where sex workers and crack users engaged in their routine activities. In total, more than 250 hours was spent on participant observation activities and data had been informally collected from over 30 participants. Data was also collected from two outreach workers of the neighborhood's community-based harm reduction program. Field notes, which included observational data and summaries and crucial quotations of conversations with participants and outreach workers, were handwritten in a notebook immediately after participant observation sessions or during a short break. These field notes were then elaborated in a word processing software for coding. Monetary compensation was not offered for the participant observation component of the study.

Informed consent for both data collection methods was obtained verbally. To ensure anonymity, all participants' names and specific locations were changed. Ethical approval for the "Interface project" was provided by the *Le comité d'éthique de la recherche en santé chez l'humain du CHUS et de l'Université de Sherbrooke*.

The ethnographer first coded the field notes and interview transcripts. Data was then included in a database where it could be organized by the themes relevant to the study objectives pertaining to the impacts of the operational style of a drug use setting on sexual and drug use risk behaviors. Data was organized and managed using the FileMaker Pro 7© software. To obtain consensus regarding the principle factors affecting risk-taking patterns, the content of the field notes and the interview transcripts were regularly discussed with the principal investigator throughout the study period, in face-to-face meetings. These sessions also allowed consideration of emerging findings and redirection of priorities for data collection and analyses. Through an inductive technique of iterative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), the field notes and interview transcripts were reviewed again to identify new themes and subthemes to further refine the coding process. Finally, the general contents of the field notes and interview transcripts as a whole were collated to discern any convergences or divergences and provide a comprehensive summary of the data. Although the data was managed using a computerized database, no computer software was used for data coding.

Results

Terminological considerations

Although the all-encompassing “crack house” term has been used from the beginning of this paper, and is largely employed in the media and in academic literature, it does not seem to be part of the local language (nor does its French counterpart, *maison de crack*). The preferred and widespread term used by all participants was *piaule* [pjol], which literally means “small apartment” in French. The term was so dominant in the neighborhood that even English-speaking participants employed it to refer to this specific drug use setting. While the media and police reports often use other terminologies than *piaules*, the term is pervasive among users and outreach workers: “*In the press, they’ll often say ‘police raided a crack house’. That’s not necessarily true what they’re saying. The popular term is piaule. It’s been there for years and it stuck. It’s become a habit to call them piaules*” (John, male 47 y.o). *Piaules* have been around for at least 25 years and have always been the main cocaine sales site in the neighborhood, even before crack becomes widely available.

Nowadays, in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, a place qualifies as a *piaule* if it meets the following criteria: an indoor place 1) where crack is sold; 2) where crack can be smoked on the premises; and 3) where one can get sexual services from sex workers and thus there are rooms reserved to this end. *Piaules* are explicitly organized and belong to criminal groups, therefore not run out of personal apartments by independent individuals.

“It’s a place of consumption. That’s pretty much it. I mean, you know... You have

people who work (sex work). They are working to consume. There's people who go there to buy to consume and when they buy to consume, they typically search services of... you know, the women who are working and they consume sex.”
(Don, male, 42 y.o. Interview transcript quotation)

“Logically, it's a seller and it belongs to a gang member, of course; all *piaules* belong to someone...”. (Marc-André, male, 43 y.o. Interview transcript quotation)

Organizational structure of piaules

Although the goal of the study was not to describe and understand the criminal organization charts of groups involved in selling crack in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, some participants brought up this topic spontaneously when asked about operational rules in *piaules*. This information is interesting since it contextualizes how *piaules* work and, as a result, allows us to better understand the behaviors of users.

“Ethnographer:

I'm talking about *piaules*, how they work, the rules...

Participant:

Ok, it's like a chart. First, in a given area, where you can make money, it's like a company. It's the same principle. There's the president, the secretary, the others, and at the bottom, the asshole. Y'know. And then after the asshole, well there's the clients. So everyone serves a purpose. Piaule sectors are defined by streets, specific sectors. There's several families in the sector... they're there, and they come directly [names the criminal group]. You can't not name them.

So it starts here and goes down, down to a group of people, if you want, ... each person in that group has a bunch of people. It's sort of like a pyramid. It's the same idea. The people who run the *piaules* work within sectors. Also, one piaule has to be more than two-three blocks from another one. They can't be next to each other. So you can't have four *piaules* on a same corner. It's not possible. It's the law. Ok? If you do it, it'll be closed down. That's really clear.

Ethnographer:

It's a law established by... the top of the pyramid?

Participant:

Established by the top of the pyramid. That's how it works. So, in other words, everybody wants to eat, but they all have their sector for that. It's like lions. They have their territory so... and they do whatever they want in that territory”. (John, male, 47 y.o. Interview transcript quotation).

“You have no business... ... an independent seller has no business being here.

If you wanna be an independent, go elsewhere...”. (Rick, male, 38 y.o. Interview transcript quotation)

One important characteristic of *piaules* is that they are hierarchically structured and organized underground business endeavours. As participants mentioned, any crack sale or opening of a new *piaule* must be approved by the “company’s top brass”, who are the sole decision makers.

Different groups operate in the neighborhood and have to comply with the rule issued from above. During the fieldwork, three to five *piaules* were operating simultaneously. This number fluctuated due to police raids. *Piaules* in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve are concentrated on the same street along a 20-block stretch. They are separated by a minimum of 3 blocks. Each one operates independently but compete with each other.

Physical spaces

Typically, *piaules* operate from apartments located in low-rent residential buildings (3 to 20 apartments, sometimes more). Although the physical spaces can vary from place to place, a *piaule* is usually characterized by a lack of furniture and uncleanliness. Several respondents used the terms “dirty” and “disgusting” to describe them. They also said these places were usually infested with bedbugs. The apartments are often poorly kept, shabby and dreary. The following field note excerpt, drawn from the first visit of a *piaule*, depicts

“I go along the hallway that leads to the main room. On the way, there’s a room. It’s in really bad shape. Aside from an old beige sofa leaning against one of the walls, the room’s empty, full of garbage and really filthy. There are no lights. I continue along the hallway until I get to another one that goes off to the right. There’s a door there that’s closed and locked. I later learned that this door gives access to bedrooms where sex workers can bring their clients. I then walk up to the main room. Just before I get there, there’s a bathroom on the right. It’s not very clean but seems to be functional. The common room measures about 10 X

12 feet and has just one window, on the wall facing the entrance. Right away, I felt that it was really hot in the room. There's a stove and the oven's door is open, definitely to warm up the room because the window's open despite the cold in order to let some of the smoke out (crack and cigarette smoke). Next to the stove and along the same wall, there's a small bit of counter that looks like it's falling apart and a filthy sink full of dirty dishes. Above the sink and the counter there are cupboards (in just as bad a shape as the counter). In fact, the room looks like one in a rooming house since the bathroom is outside the room off the "public" hallway. There's a stove, but no fridge. There are also three old stained couches full of holes, a little coffee table and a small round kitchen table with two chairs. The walls are smeared with dirt, graffiti and even blood and there are a few holes. The old wood floors are damaged and very dusty". (Field note excerpt)

Generally, each room in a *piaule* has a specific use, for example, sales or transaction room; consumption room, for those who want to use on site; room for sex work. The living room and/or kitchen are most often used for consumption. The bedrooms are "formally" reserved for sex workers and their clients.

Operational style of the piaule

Piaules operate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. As one participant mentioned: "Twenty-four hours! Addicts are addicts twenty-four hours a day. We don't sleep, right!" (Don). They are regulated drug use settings where access is controlled and supervised. To be admitted onto the premises, an individual must be known to the gatekeeper or other members of the drug-using network. New clients have to be introduced by regular, trusted users; otherwise the gatekeeper will refuse to sell them drugs. Distrust of strangers is a strategy to limit drug sales to undercover agents, which could jeopardize the *piaule's* operations.

To ensure proper operation, clients of *piaules* must follow a set of rules and a code of conduct.

The rules help maintain a good atmosphere and prevent conflict, which would hurt business and

risk attracting police attention. Although there is no entry fee, anyone who goes in must buy crack and spend a minimum of \$20 (the price of one bag of crack). People who want to use on-site can do so, but they are generally allowed to stay only about 20 minutes unless they buy more crack. This is no strict rule: it depends essentially on the traffic.

“Ethnographer:

Can you talk about the rules a bit?

Participant:

In principle, you’re not supposed to ask other people to give you any [crack], to bum money. It’s pretty much the basic rule. Not everyone follows it, though. Aside from that, well it depends; it’s really the *piaule*. If you’re well known, most of the time, nobody bothers you; but when you’re new to a place, you pretty much let yourself get stepped on because you don’t know anything and, well, people take advantage of you.

Ethnographer:

And what happens if people start to bum money?

Participant:

Well in general, if you’re new, either you get up and leave or you try to talk to the seller and, “look, I’ve spent \$400-\$500, can’t I be left alone?”. (Léandre, male, 38 y.o. Interview transcript quotation)

Clients of *piaules* are strongly encouraged to be respectful of each other and not bother other clients. For example, users must be quiet, avoid talking loudly, begging and, of course, stealing from others. As the following interview transcript indicates, individuals who harass the seller to front them some crack and especially those who steal from him will suffer the consequences.

“There are 15-20 people in the *piaule*, the guy’s alone, and then someone who hasn’t used in an hour, like, and has the shakes, and they’re not all small, some guys are really big, he decides to get up and he doesn’t give a fuck about the bouncer or nothing, ‘I want a quarter, are you gonna give me one, fuck’, and on and on, and then knocks his teeth out and leaves with the bag, takes off. That’s happened in the past. Of course, there’s consequences to doing that. I’ve even seen bosses go into *piaules* that didn’t even belong to them but with the permission of the other bosses and say, ‘Look, there’s an asshole who uses in your place and I have to go get him.’ So then, he calls the boss, because they all know each other, he calls the boss, ‘I gotta go get such-and-such a guy, I gotta go get him – yeah?’ - ‘Ok, I’ll call my guy and I give you permission to go in and get him but don’t do anything. You take the guy and leave with him, ok’.

So, they go in, -‘Uhh, what are you doing here guys? What are you doing here?’ In general, the seller will say to the guy, ‘We’re asking you to go with these guys, and don’t make a fuss. We don’t want the police here. They have business with you, you’re gonna talk outside in the alley.’ – ‘No, no, no, I don’t wanna go out!’. Then they’ll take him out by force. They don’t wanna make any trouble inside in any of these places. Of course, the guy’s scared of getting beaten up. He will get punched in the mouth but no, they won’t kill him. Except there’ll be a deal between the boss and the guy and they’ll say: ‘Listen. First you beat up one of my employees, then you didn’t respect the place. Now, you owe me a lot of money and it’s now double’ – ‘What do you mean double?’ – ‘You took a load that doesn’t belong to you and so it’s double, that’s it’”.

(Marc-André, male, 43 y.o. Interview transcript quotation)

Furthermore, it is strictly forbidden to inject drugs in a *piaule*. This rule was strongly emphasized by all study participants and will be discussed in a subsequent section.

A gatekeeper—simply called a “seller”—is responsible for the operations on-site. The seller is not the leaseholder of the apartment from where the *piaule* operates, but simply an employee of the organized crime group that administers and manages the *piaule*. Hierarchically speaking, he holds the lowest position in the organizational structure and has no influence on the decision-making process that defines the rules and operations. He belongs to a team of sellers who share work shifts that usually last 12 hours. During these work shifts, the seller has two main functions: sell crack and enforce the rules to maintain order.

“Participant:

The seller’s the one who’s in charge inside. He’s the one that’s authorized to open the door, close the door and he manages what goes on during his shift. There’s one there 24 hours a day. So sometimes, there’s two per shift per 24 hours, sometimes even three. Eight-hour shifts...

Ethnographer:

Three 8 or two 12.

Participant:

Two 12, that’s it. Exactly.

Ethnographer:

And what are his responsibilities?

Participant: He has to keep order, collect money, sell his product, and report to his boss”. (John, male, 47 y.o. Interview transcript quotation)

If clients violate house rules or conflicts erupt between clients, it is the sellers' responsibility to settle the disputes. However, some situations get out of hand. When this occurs, a protocol is set up and violence is often the mechanism used to resolve the problematic situations.

“Ethnographer:

So the seller who's there, aside from selling, what are his other responsibilities?

Participant:

To... that shit doesn't happen in the place, that there's no fighting. Because sometimes when they're high or... some need their drugs, but don't have enough money and nobody wants to lend them the \$5 they're missing, so he starts to lose it, or the whores sometimes in the morning, bitching and moaning “blah-blah-blah”, well him, he's in charge of security, you know. If he lets people yell at each other, it'll become intolerable. So he warns them, ‘Stop’. Or he throws them out. If it looks like it's gonna get worse, well then he calls in what we call a bouncer; a guy who comes in and whore or not, man or not, it's just too bad. If you don't shut up, he's gonna shove his fist down your throat.

Ethnographer:

Oh yeah?

Participant:

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

Ethnographer:

And does it take long for him to get here?

Participant:

No. Two minutes. The other one makes a call, two minutes later, the doorbell rings, he opens the door, the guy comes in and... it takes 2 seconds, 3 seconds, I know that bouncer, when he comes in, it's not too long”. (Marc-André, male, 43 y.o. Interview transcript quotation)

Crack is not produced or stored in *paules*. It is only sold. The seller is given an initial supply of 20-25 bags of crack (called a “load”); each bag contains around 0.2gr and sells for \$20 (interestingly, users continue to call these bags “quarters” even though the volume sold for 20\$ dropped from a quarter to a fifth of a gram through the years). Carrying a limited supply of crack is a strategy to limit judicial charges in the event of a police raid and to curtail losses in case of

theft by competing groups or users in a state of craving. When the load is sold out (which in some cases may take less than an hour), the seller must be supplied with another load.

“Ethnographer:

About the supply of drugs, how does that work? The seller, how much does he have on him?

Participant:

Usually they’re loads of 20 quarters.

Ethnographer:

Ok

Participant:

He gets an order. As soon as he has none left, he grabs his cell phone and calls the delivery guy.

Ethnographer:

His runner?

Participant:

His runner, whatever you want to call him, he says ‘I don’t have anymore.’ In general it takes 3 to 4 minutes before he gets the next 20 quarters. At that time, when the delivery guy gets here, he rings twice. So he knows it’s the delivery guy, so he asks someone he knows in the piaule, a guy he trusts, he says, ‘Look, no one comes into my office’ because the seller has to go out. Because you, you can’t see who’s making the delivery. Those are faces you can’t see”. (Jacques, male, 37 y.o. Interview transcript quotation)

The seller has the important duty to manage the money from crack sales. Each time he gets a new load of crack, he has to pay three-quarters of the money generated by sales to the “bosses”. The remaining money is his profit. Therefore, each bag of crack sold gives him a \$5 profit.

Drug use patterns

As stated previously, cocaine is the drug that has been traditionally sold in *piaules* for decades.

During our ethnographic work, crack was the only form of cocaine available (no powder cocaine) and no other drug was sold. There was so much crack in the neighborhood that users and outreach workers nicknamed the area *Rochelaga* (Rocklaga). According to study participants, the

exclusivity of crack in *piaules* dates back to the early 2000s. Beforehand, powder cocaine was the only form available. This shift in cocaine sales strategy—favoring crack (ready to smoke) rather than powder form (easy to inject)—appears to be a determining factor in drug consumption habits in the neighborhood. According to participants, the decision to change the form of cocaine sold was taken by the heads of criminal groups involved. It was motivated by a desire to eradicate inconveniences related to injection drug use. Participants notably talked about discarded needles, chaotic behaviors and drug overdoses which can draw attention of the police.

“Ethnographer:

So there’s no more powder cocaine?

Participant:

No. No. Not now. Before some did both, but it’s because they were always in *piaules* where people injected. And that’s bad because there, like, you can OD, you can ... it’s too much trouble, you know? But rock, you can’t really OD on rock unless you’re really new to it and stupid or your system can’t take it at all...”. (John, male, 38 y.o)

“Ethnographer:

Ok. So no powder cocaine sold?

Participant:

No powder cocaine is sold there because they don’t want the *piaule* to become a shooting gallery. Before, they accepted that people would shoot up on site. Except at one point they noticed that it was a real free-for-all, there were overdoses, there was this, there was that... ... it prevents a lot of trouble and they don’t want to mix crack and powder either”. (Philippe, male, 45 y.o)

“Ethnographer:

Do you have an idea why injection is not tolerated?

Participant:

It’s not tolerated. One, it’s because I believe, one of the main reasons is... the charges against people selling go up if there’s people injecting. That’s one. Two, people who inject typically once they inject and they’re on their high aren’t capable of capping their needles. They... they’re paranoid, they hide their needles without the caps and it puts everybody else at risk for the diseases”. (Don, male, 42 y.o)

Financial motivation also seems to have influenced decision-makers. A veteran seller, who had worked in several *piaules* in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve for over 15 years, mentioned that the

transition from selling powder cocaine to crack was also part of a marketing strategy aimed to increase profits. The logistical aspects of preparing and smoking a rock of crack are much simpler than those required for preparing and injecting powder cocaine, and thus can shorten the time between two doses. According to the veteran, decision-makers would have also relied on the pharmacological effects of crack that heighten craving which, in turn, makes users buy more crack.

Everything has been implemented to ensure there is no injection on-site. For instance, outreach workers, who have access to *piaules* to distribute safer crack use kits (which consist of one cylindrical glass crack pipe, one plastic mouthpiece and five metal screens) and condoms, are strictly forbidden to distribute sterile injection equipment. Sanctions for users who inject on-site are also in place. They range from being kicked out for a time to physical violence.

“Ethnographer:

So you, you say that no one shoots up in these places

Participant:

No.

Ethnographer:

And if ever someone gets caught, what can happen then?

Participant:

He gets a beating.

Ethnographer:

Oh yeah?

Participant:

Big time!”. (Lili, female, 23 y.o)

The injection ban is problematic for some users met during the study. While all were crack smokers, a fairly high number of participants also injected drugs, especially opiates (heroin or prescription opioids). For injectors with residential instability or those who did not want to inject in their homes, the ban forced them to sometimes inject in non-optimal locations or situations.

“Well I have my own apartment now so... I hardly do it outside anymore. When I do, I’m paranoid since... My apartment, I’ve lived there for five years. It’s like, wow! Before, it was a year, two max, then I’d end up on the street, y’know. When I started using, it was outdoors. I shot up outside. But at some point, when you move away from that and you have your own place, you change your habits a bit. It’s not interesting. I got caught twice, so... If they [the police] catch you and you don’t have anything, you’re okay. At worst, they’ll throw it away, if it’s in the syringe, they’ll throw it away; but if you have any on you, like no water in it, then you can have problems. They can bring you to the station... but if you’re sick, going through heroin withdrawal and you lose your stuff, it’s a drag. So you’re always stressed out and you go fast, sometimes I miss because of that. So I do what it takes not to do it outside, but it does happen”. (Louis-François, male, 28 y.o)

“...I saw Steve. His eyes were wide open and he was holding his right arm in pain. I noticed right away that Steve’s behaviors were typical of someone who had just injected coke. I asked him gently if he was okay. Steve tells me that he just shot up in the alley and he missed because of the cold and he was hurrying because he was afraid someone would see him. When he took his left hand off the place where he’d shot up, I saw a little bump on his forearm. He tells me that the lower the temperature drops, the more difficult it’ll be to shoot up outdoors. I acted innocent and asked him, “You don’t go to the *piaules*, to shoot up?” He simply answered, “Well no. You’re not allowed.” (Field note excerpt).

With injection banned in *piaules*, the main risky drug use practices observed by the ethnographer were related to the hypothetical risk of HIV/HCV transmission through the sharing of crack smoking paraphernalia. Fieldwork observations point to a normalization of sharing crack smoking paraphernalia (especially crack pipes). Sharing crack pipes is driven by the fact that users who have run out of crack can lease their pipe in exchange for a small piece of rock. This type of exchange is widespread in *piaules*.

Users who did not have stems were encountered regularly during fieldwork. Ordinarily, crack smoking paraphernalia is not supplied by gatekeepers in *piaules*. When questioned about the availability of smoking equipment, one participant said, “You use whatever you have”.

Smoking paraphernalia is mainly supplied by outreach workers who have access to the *piaules*.

However, the latter cannot freely enter every *piaule*. They have to negotiate access with

decision-makers through a seller, who acts as a go-between for outreach workers and decision-makers.

Sex work

Our observations and discussions indicate that sex workers are pillars of this underground economy. As one participant told us, “*If it wasn’t for the women, piaules wouldn’t work*”. Sex workers have always been associated with *piaules*, even when the product sold there was powder cocaine. They are known to be very good *piaule* clients since they spend a lot of money on crack for themselves and for their clients who use it.

“Ethnographer:

What about sex work?

Participant:

There’s lots of whores in all the piaules.

Ethnographer:

Oh yeah?

Participant:

In a way, it’s because of them, more than the clients, that piaules make money. Like us [his running partner and him], we don’t support the *piaule* per se. We go there 3 times a day, we spend \$60 to \$100 a day on coke.

Ethnographer:

Still...

Participant:

We are good clients, but whores, they can do 20 clients a day, 10 clients a day at \$100 a client. So that’s \$1000. She spends \$700, \$800, \$900 on crack, so...”.

(Marc-André, male, 43 y.o. Interview transcript quotation)

“Ethnographer:

So what you’re saying is that those places are really set up for the women?

Participant:

The priority in a *piaule*, it’s the women and their clients

Ethnographer:

Oh yeah?

Participant:

That’s what it’s for. For the women and their clients. Or else, the guy in the street, yeah, but like I said, he has to be known, to have been seen before. Because the guy whose walking around and decides to buy a quarter or two, he

comes by once a day and that's it; the women who comes in 25 times a day to buy 25 quarters ... because the minute she has \$20, she doesn't wait to have another. No, no, no. She goes off and buys one". (Rick, male, 38 y.o. Interview transcript quotation)

During the fieldwork, all sex workers proudly stated that they were not "pimped". Therefore, the *piaule* and/or gatekeepers don't take a cut of the women's work. However, even though they don't "belong" to a *piaule* or a pimp, sex workers can be connected to the house by the debts they can accumulate.

Ethnographer:

Are the sex workers connected to *piaules*?

Participant:

Only when they owe money. If they don't, they can go anywhere.

Ethnographer:

What about the pimps?

Participant:

It's not Québec City. You see that in Québec City. You see it downtown and in the West Island, but not in Hochelaga.

Ethnographer:

Unless she has a debt, like you said.

Participant:

That's it. If she has a debt, 'well pay your bill and then you can go to another *piaule*'. (Rick, male, 38 y.o. Interview transcript quotation)

Since the sales figures for a *piaule* are proportionate to the women's work, some sellers connive to make them work more. The "startup" tactic, a dose of crack given at no charge to sex workers to accelerate feelings of "craving" is one example. A sex worker who feels a craving will be more likely to "do clients" so she can buy more crack. Some sellers can be even more controlling; they force women to work through verbal violence, emotional manipulation and sometimes even physical violence. The next field note excerpt illustrates the type violence that can be used to force women to work.

"I head up to the street corner to meet up with Philippe. We were supposed to go to the *piaule* together, but when he sees me, he tells me that it will have to wait. I ask him why. He tells me that the seller (who was a woman) just threw a tantrum. Curious, I ask him what triggered the tantrum. He tells me that she got

fed up and frustrated with a couple of sex workers who were in the *piaule* for a long time without buying any crack. Frustrated with the lack of profit she was making, she started yelling at the sex workers and insulting them. She ordered them to get out of the *piaule* and go make some money. She did not want to see them until they had some money. He told me that she even slapped one who did not want to leave. She finally left”. (Field note excerpt)

The type of sex work observed during the study was mainly street sex work, and sex workers were operating on the basis of a “sex-for money-for drugs exchange”. Women picked up clients from the sidewalk and worked mostly outside the *piaule*. Sexual services were provided directly in the clients’ cars or in hotel rooms. Once finished, the women usually came back to the *piaule* to buy and consume crack. Therefore, even if *piaules* have specific rooms for sexual transactions, sex workers rarely use them. The following interview transcript quotation and field note excerpt summarize well the reasons why *piaules* are rarely used by sex workers to dispense sexual services.

“Participant:

The place is very rock and roll, so... I mean... I know that if I... if I walked into that place with a client... I wouldn't feel comfortable renting a room there. Just because... it's so noisy, right? It's not private, even though, you know, I don't find it that private and hum... You know, the police enter so often and eh... ..you know, I don't know if I'd want to... I don't know if I'd be comfortable... .. they're taking their customers elsewhere... to perform whatever... .. services. Getting rid of their customers, coming back... buying. Or, if the customer actually smokes as well, sometimes eh... they just accompany the customer 'cause the customer's not comfortable being there by themselves. Or, it starts off as... we start here, and then they leave, and they do whatever they do”. (Don, male, 42 y.o. Interview transcript quotation)

“Sylvain invited me to go with him so he could change a burnt-out light in the room for sex workers. Before going in, he has to unlock the door. He told me they keep the door locked so that no one else in the *piaule* can have access to it. When he opened the door, my sense of smell was invaded by funny odours. It smelled stuffy and mouldy, among other things. At first, you couldn't see much since the light didn't work. I used the flashlight app in my phone so Sylvain could have a bit of light to change the bulb. Once he turned on the light, I could finally see what the room that was always locked looked like. It's dirty and dusty. There's lots of garbage on the floor, including empty condom packets and lots of old used tissues. Sylvain even took the time to jokingly warn me, 'Watch where you step'. Right in the middle of the room, there is a couch that looks like it's straight out of the '70s. Not only because it's old style, but also

because it's really worn. It's worn and dirty. There's holes and stains on it. Before leaving the room, Sylvain asked me the following question (again jokingly): 'Fuck, would you come here to get a blow job?!?'. (Field note excerpt)

One of the reasons concerns the cleanliness of the rooms. Rooms that are set aside for sex work are not maintained properly and do not provide much intimacy. A second reason pertains to the characteristics of the majority of sex workers' clients. Although the clients may be very diverse, most are middle-aged men who do not necessarily live in the neighborhood. Many do not even go to *piaules* or inevitably use crack. Some clients do not use at all and are only looking for sexual services. Clients who use drugs appear to be mostly occasional users, which explains their reluctance and discomfort related to receiving sexual services in the *piaule*. These are the clients that sex workers prefer.

Ethnographer:

Do you work in those places?

Participant:

No. The clients aren't there. Clients who are users, I don't want any. People who use, it's useless. It doesn't pay.

Ethnographer:

But do they, I mean, will they use? Like do any clients say, 'Can you get me anything?'

Participant:

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Ethnographer:

What do they use, mostly?

Participant:

Well me, they pay me first.

Ethnographer:

OK. And it's what, mostly? Do they use everything?

Participant:

Mostly Rock". (Lili, female, 23 y.o. Interview transcript quotation)

"A lot of my clients don't like coming in the building 'cause there can be a lot of people. So they're scared... they're afraid of being attacked or robbed". (Francine, female, 31 y.o. Interview transcript quotation)

If sex workers go to *piaules*, therefore, it is not really to dispense sexual services. *Piaules* have other advantages, such as supply a place where they can consume, offer some respite or even provide a roof to the many among them who are homeless. It imparts substantial benefit to them, especially during winter. In the rare case where sexual transactions occur in the *piaules*, they may also provide women with some type of protection in case their clients try to rob or assault them. We were told that gatekeepers or other people in the *piaule* automatically step in when a client gets aggressive, or refuses to pay or to wear a condom.

Prices charged for sexual services seem to vary among sex workers, mainly depending on their physical appearance. For a fellatio, which is the most common sexual service provided, the price can vary from \$20 to \$40; for sexual intercourse with penetration, it ranges from \$80 to \$200. However, some sex workers often complain about other women who suffer from physical and psychological distress caused by crack-craving and charge as low as \$5 to \$10 for a fellatio or accept extra money for sex without a condom.

Discussion

To our knowledge, there are no published papers based on ethnographic observations of crack houses in Canada. The study design was founded on theories and perspectives asserting that structural and environmental factors shape HIV (and HCV) risk and drug use patterns (Rhodes, 2002; Bourgois, 2003; Rhodes et al., 2005). Among these factors, place and setting are crucial components that can modulate the influence of individual and social factors on sexual and drug use behaviors. It is in this perspective that the study of *piaules* is considered relevant to

understanding how a specific crack use setting influences risks of HIV and HCV transmission among users and other social actors gravitating to this milieu.

It is interesting to note that the way *piaules* are organized, based on a structure and rules imposed by heads of criminal groups (upon which public health has no influence), affects sexual and drug use behaviors. By changing the “feature product” sold (powder cocaine, which was replaced by crack) and prohibiting injection, organized crime has certainly contributed to the rise in crack consumption in the neighborhood, as observed in earlier studies (Roy et al., 2012; Leclerc et al., 2012). At first glance, this seems to be good news. From a public health perspective, the transformation of “shooting galleries” into drug use settings where only crack can be smoked seems advantageous since shooting galleries have long been associated with injection risk behaviors and drug-related harms (Neaigus et al., 1994; Latkin et al., 1994; Klein & Levy, 2003; Deren et al., 2004). However, despite the greater presence of crack, some street-based users continue to inject drugs, especially long-term IDUs who persist in injecting cocaine or opiates (prescription opioids or heroin) (Roy, Arruda & Bourgois, 2011; Roy et al., 2012; Roy et al., 2013). Quite a few people met during the ethnographic fieldwork injected drugs, mostly in a pattern of polyconsumption (cocaine-opiates). Similar observations were made in recent epidemiological studies demonstrating that street-based drug users in Montréal still injected, and that cocaine-opiate co-use (heroin and/or prescription opioids) as well as polyroutes of administration were common (Roy et al., 2012; Roy et al., 2013). In addition to increased availability of crack, Montréal is witnessing a growing popularity of prescription opioid injection among street-based drug users, which certainly contributes to maintaining injection prevalence in the city (Roy, Arruda & Bourgois, 2011; Roy et al., 2012).

The decision to only sell crack and to ban injection may have eliminated risky injection behaviors and related harms from *piaules*. However, the operations and rules of *piaules* might have contributed to displacing potential risk behaviors and drug-related harms associated with drug injection. Since IDUs are no longer allowed to inject in *piaules*, they are constrained to inject elsewhere. For many, especially IDUs with precarious residential status, injecting in public places is the only option. Alleyways, back doors of businesses, public bathrooms and parks have become the drug use setting for many injectors in the neighborhood. This raises concerns because public injection has been associated with risky injection practices and drug-related harms (Rhodes et al., 2006; McKnight et al., 2007; Small et al., 2007). Public injection locations are often unsanitary and users are often in a hurry to inject due to fears of being arrested by police or seen by residents or merchants, which renders optimal injection practices difficult (Small et al., 2007).

While shooting galleries have been associated with risky drug injection behaviors, some studies have pointed out benefits for users to inject in such settings. For example, shooting galleries can provide an alternative to public injection and offer a sense of privacy and “safety” to some IDUs (Rhodes et al., 2006; Parkin & Coomber, 2009). Shooting galleries can provide an important socialization environment for IDUs in which they can build and solidify relationships and their own drug-user identity (Parkin & Coomber, 2009). By deciding to solely accommodate crack smokers, *piaules* have also contributed to amplifying the social marginalization and symbolic violence to which IDUs are subjected. In addition to being exposed to social marginalization

from outside their drug-using subculture (police, residents, merchants), IDUs in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve are now facing ostracism from within their own subculture.

As for the influence of *piaules* on sex work, it would be completely false to state that the shift to selling crack only has led to the emergence of survival sex-work in the neighborhood. The link between drug use and sex work is not limited to crack and has existed for many years, especially among users of powder cocaine and heroin (Ratner, 1993). In Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, sex work had been associated with *piaules* long before crack flooded the market. However, as other authors have observed, the arrival of crack appears to have made sex workers more vulnerable (Bourgois & Dunlap, 1993; Ratner, 1993; Miller, 1995). For instance, veteran sex workers who have been in the neighborhood for several years and those with moderate crack use often complained of women “crackheads” who performed fellatio for as low as \$10 or \$5 and who did not hesitate to deliver their services without the use of protection when clients offered financial incentives. Feelings of craving and the desperation to get more crack (especially during binges) that are often associated with crack use seem to limit the power of sex workers to negotiate price and, more importantly, condom use with recalcitrant clients or clients willing to pay extra for sexual services without a condom.

When compared to earlier literature on crack houses and sex work, one interesting result of this study is that “sex-for-crack exchanges” were not the norm. Also, degrading, open sex scenes, like the one described by Inciardi (1993: 39-40) were not observed or reported by informants, nor was the presence of “house girls” (women employed by crack houses to offer any kind of sexual service to clients in exchange for crack, food and shelter). Instead, the most common type of

exchange was “sex-for-money-for crack”. As Jeal, Salisbury and Turner observed in Bristol, England (2008), sex workers mostly operate in a “work-score-use” cycle where they stroll the streets to offer their services, go back to the *piaule* with money to buy and smoke crack and return to the streets to work in order to repeat the cycle. For the sex workers met during the fieldwork in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, sex work was their main income-generating activity and a large part of the money earned was spent on drugs.

Interestingly, even if *piaules* have designated rooms for sex workers and their clients, very few sexual transactions occur inside the *piaule*. The social and physical characteristics of *piaules* play important roles in this phenomenon. Clients of sex workers are mainly men from outside the drug subculture and are rarely regular attendees of *piaules*. This is mainly conditioned by the fact that regular attendees have few income-generating strategies. The little money they earn is usually spent on drugs and they rarely have money for sexual services. Contrary to regular attendees, sex workers’ clients are usually middle-class men with jobs and fixed addresses. *Piaules* are social settings with their own specific social codes that can be harsh and unwelcoming for people outside the drug subculture. Therefore, clients from outside this subculture prefer not to spend much time there. Consequently, sexual services are mostly provided outside *piaules*, which prevents the women from benefiting from the safety they can confer. When they work in the street or in other similar types of places, sex workers who end up alone with their clients are more vulnerable to violence, victimization and the risks of being pressured into unprotected sex (Jeal, Salisbury & Turner, 2008; Shannon et al., 2007; Shannon et al., 2009).

Although the sex workers we met were not formally under the control of pimps, they were still vulnerable to exploitation by men. While their position as “big spenders” conferred some advantages, it also put them in situations where gatekeepers could try to exploit them. Gatekeepers take commissions. With each bag of rock sold (value of \$20), \$5 goes to the gatekeeper. The more he sells, the more money he makes. Since sex workers’ money goes mainly to purchasing drugs, it is to a gatekeeper’s advantage to sell to sex workers who “turn lots of tricks”. The gatekeeper may not get a percentage of the money women make by offering sexual services, but the more tricks they turn, the more crack they buy, and the more money the gatekeeper makes. To maximize their earnings, some gatekeepers were known to use strategies to increase the number of “tricks” turned by women. As Miller noted, drug dealers paralleled pimps since a large part of the money sex workers earned was turned over to them (1995).

Limits of the study

The study results cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, ethnographic field observations and conversational interviews drawn from snowball samples and supplemented by purposeful strategic recruitment within and across social networks provide a good opportunity to increase the generalizability of participant observation data that are limited to small non-random samples. The combination of direct observations, semi-structured interviews and conversational interviews in natural environments makes it possible to cross-check information, ensuring better data validity. Finally, during the study, the ethnographer and some participants developed enduring relationships, and the latter have become key informants able to provide additional critical and self-reflexive information when queried.

Implications for intervention

In regards to specific drug use settings such as crack houses and shooting galleries, some authors have highlighted the potential to conduct interventions where gatekeepers could act as providers of harm reduction materials and information (Weeks et al., 2001; Dickson-Gomez et al., 2004; Dickson-Gomez et al., 2007). While this strategy is innovative and feasible in some parts of the world, its potential is limited in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve *piaules*. This is largely due to the hierarchical structure of *piaules*, where on-site gatekeepers have very little power to make decisions regarding the rules and activities, including harm reduction strategies. Since the real decision makers are somewhat untouchable and invisible, it becomes extremely complicated to negotiate implementation of new harm reduction strategies.

Despite the fact that putting new harm reduction strategies into effect is complex, it is important that the authorization outreach workers have obtained (permission to hand out drug inhalation equipment and condoms) be maintained and extended to all *piaules* in the neighborhood. Since many users gather there, they are the best places to connect with members of this hard-to-reach population. Also, specific interventions aimed at sex workers clients' should be tailored. Besides putting sex workers at risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, clients who insist on having unprotected sex are putting themselves at risk and could also act as "bridges" for such infections.

Our study stresses the potential of environmental factors to shape drug use patterns and HIV and HCV risk behaviors. In this perspective, we believe that individual-based interventions should be complemented by structural interventions. It is increasingly important to think about implementing a supervised injection site that could limit drug-related harms associated with public injection and the social stigma IDUs experience. Access to housing projects and drug treatment services should also be widely available to drug users, including sex workers. In terms of sex work, there is an urgent need to offer enabling environments to sex workers that could facilitate their ability to negotiate condom use and increase their safety. For example, decriminalization and regulation of sex work could be advantageous for sex workers health.

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