

Critical window to help young opioid users missed, study says

Many opioid users in their teens and 20s are not accessing harm-reduction services that could lessen their risk of disease, overdose and death.

So says Pedro Mateu-Gelabert, principal investigator at National Development and Research Institutes, who spoke Thursday at an event on the opioid crisis hosted by NYU College of Public Health and Center for Drug Use and HIV/HCV Research.

Efforts in harm reduction among this barely visible population are missing a critical four-year window before young opioid users progress to injecting drugs, he said.

In the city, harm-reduction services include syringe-exchange programs and the use of naloxone to reverse the effects of opioid overdose. But in Mateu-Gelabert's recent study of opioid users in the city ages 18 to 29, roughly half had experienced an overdose. And about half who overdosed did so more than once.

"Unfortunately the experiences of these young people, to our surprise, are equally harsh," Mateu-Gelabert said.

Of the drug injectors in the sample, with a mean age of 24, just about half obtained needles from safe syringe-exchange programs, Mateu-Gelabert said. And 30% tested positive for hepatitis C.

Young opioid users in the study generally started with prescription opioids around age 16, transitioned to heroin around age 19 and began injecting roughly a year later, he said.