

**Oral Presentation Finalist**

**“Women Never Use Drugs Alone”: Assessing Stigma & Access to Care among Women who Use Drugs**

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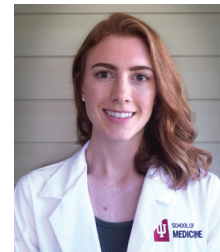
♦ **Amanda Essex**, Carrie Lawrence, Brooklyn Sean Turner

**Background:** Substance misuse remains a significant health threat in communities across Indiana. Despite the 2015 HIV outbreak in Scott County, Indiana’s health systems continue to lack the capacity to reduce health harms associated with substance misuse. Unlike general patient populations, people who use drugs (PWUD) face various social and structural barriers that impede access to health care and result in poorer health outcomes. Such impediments are of more significant concern for pregnant women who use drugs (PWWUD) who experience greater stigma, complex health needs, and require more specialized care. The purpose of this study was to assess access to healthcare and related services among women of childbearing age with a history of substance misuse.

**Methods:** For this qualitative study, participants (n=20) completed a sociodemographic questionnaire and semi-structured interview. Interview questions included perceptions of their overall health, healthcare experiences, and how to improve access to and retention in these services.

**Results:** The results reported reflect a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. Two key care barriers identified were: (1) experiences of stigma related to professionals’ attitudes towards PWWUD and (2) fear of losing custody of their child as a result of physician mandated reporting to child welfare.

**Conclusions:** Addressing social and stigma related barriers experienced by PWWUD are key to increased linkage to and retention in care as well as improved health outcomes. Additionally, our findings call for mandated student and physician education on patients who use drugs as well as reform of mandated reporting laws to reduce barriers and increase care access among PWWUD.



*Amanda Essex is a third year medical student who is currently undecided on her specialty of interest, but considering OBGYN.*

**What is your most important take-away from your research experience?**

The interviews I conducted throughout the summer were emotionally taxing but also one of the most valuable experiences I’ve had throughout medical school. Collecting the stories of stigma and barriers that so many of these women faced when trying to get medical care was disheartening, but it also inspired me to continue working to improve care for these patients so future women don’t have to experience the same hardships.