

**UHRN**



**Uganda Harm Reduction Network**

**Covid-19 Situation Analysis Report  
for People who use Drugs in  
Uganda**

## Background

On March 25<sup>th</sup> 2020 government banned public transport and restricted individual movements, non-food markets, and announced nighttime curfew as a response to the Covid-19 crisis. Further still on March 31<sup>st</sup>, the Ugandan army spokesman, announced that the police, the army, and an armed community-policing paramilitary group called the Local Defense Unit (LDU), would conduct patrols to help enforce the directive.

This put marginalized group especially people who use drugs at increased risk since they are a stigmatized and marginalized populations that are excluded due to drug use prohibition and criminalization. The measures that were announced have continued to disproportionately affect people who use drugs and security forces have used excessive force including beating, shooting, and arbitrarily detaining people across the country while enforcing measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Enforcing such measures has led to unprecedented public health challenge such as violation of human rights and others have ended up losing their lives.

People who use drugs face the same risks as those of the general population and therefore need to be aware of the appropriate advice to reduce their risk of infection.

These have been exposed to additional risks that require assessment and mitigation strategies.

These are linked to some of the behaviors associated with drug use and to the settings in which drug use take place, or where care is provided. Risks have been increased by the high level of physical and psychological comorbidity found among some people who use drugs and the stigmatization that people who use drugs often experience.

The health system must not only measure Covid19 but also other health factors such as HIV and other essential harm reduction interventions while ensuring that the basic human rights of people are at the center of the government's response to this pandemic.

# Challenges faced by People Who Use Drugs during the Covid-19 crisis



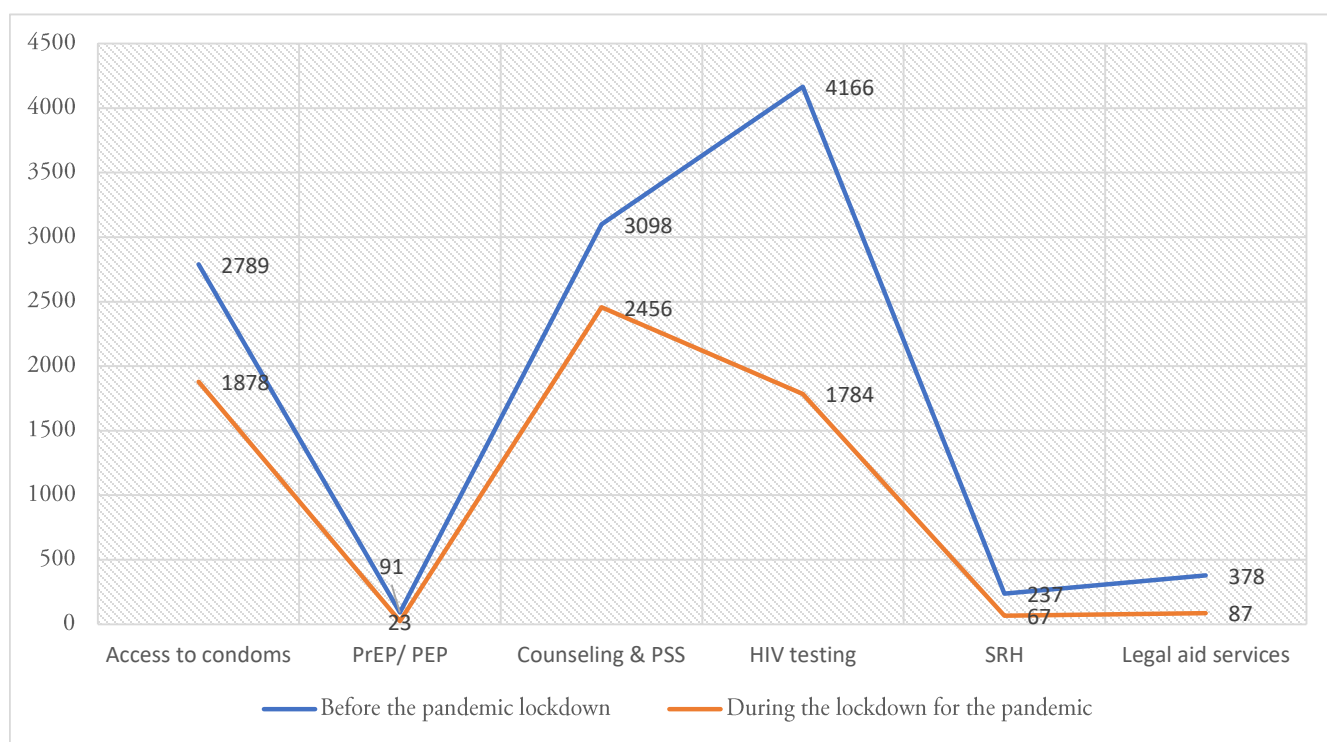
## Access to treatment

People who use drugs have been in a state of great vulnerability even before the pandemic and Covid-19 has worsened things even more. PWUDs face stigmatization within their communities since the community perceives them as criminals. UHRN's concern is that if PWUDs become infected with COVID-19, and with so many myths and misinformation, they will face even further stigmatization, making their lives harder.

Currently PWUDs are struggling to afford face masks and disinfectant which are all expensive to achieve. Access to treatment and care especially those living with HIV has been hard due to restriction in movement. Such measures have led to increased mental health cases among PWUD.

Analysis shows that, between October - December 2019 and January - April 2020, there has been a high decline in access to care and treatment as illustrated in the graph below

**Access to care and treatment by PWUD between October - December 2019 and January - April 2020 in Kampala, Wakiso, Luweero, Mbale, Masaka Region**



Source: UHRN Community tools and data base October 2019 - March 2020



## Access to food relief

As the Covid-19 pandemic progressed, food accessibility and availability emerged as a serious concern among PWUD since the vast majority of PWUD in urban cities depend on seasonal jobs in building construction, garages, and in small industries which have been closed.

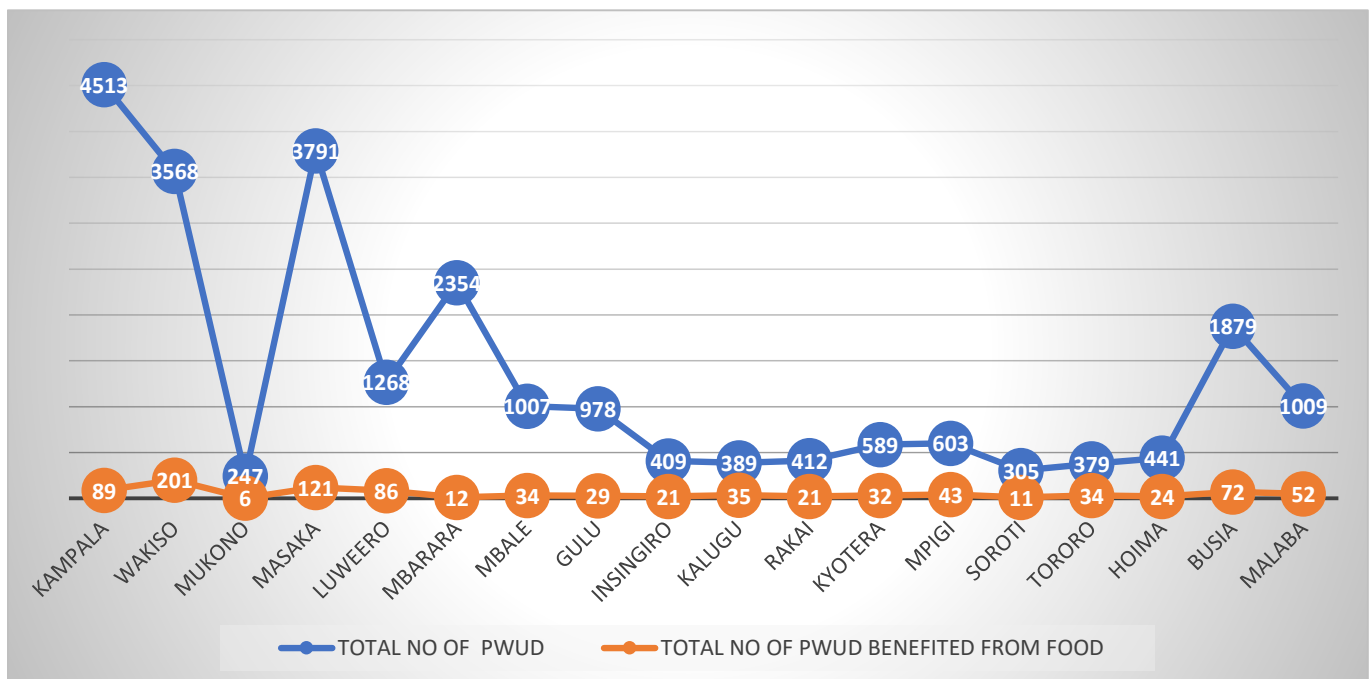
Food relief by government were delivered at the household and family units doorsteps, yet many of the people who use drugs in Kampala do not even have houses. Many PWUD in Kampala sleep in shacks, verandahs, taxis, sewerage tunnels, disused vehicles, under trees or abandoned structures which has made it hard for the national taskforce to reach them.

In addition, providing food required national identifications which made it hard for PWUD not to benefit from the program since most of them do not have national identification cards.

Given the current food scarcity and its consequences among PWUD, UHRN has mobilized food relief from Global fund through the Uganda Key Population Consortium and this will benefit 450 PWUD across the regions of Uganda.

**However,** it is important to note that the biggest percentage of PWUD have not benefited from government relief food items as illustrated in the graph below.

**Number of PWUD who have benefited from Government food relief**



Source: UHRN PWUD peers and paralegals

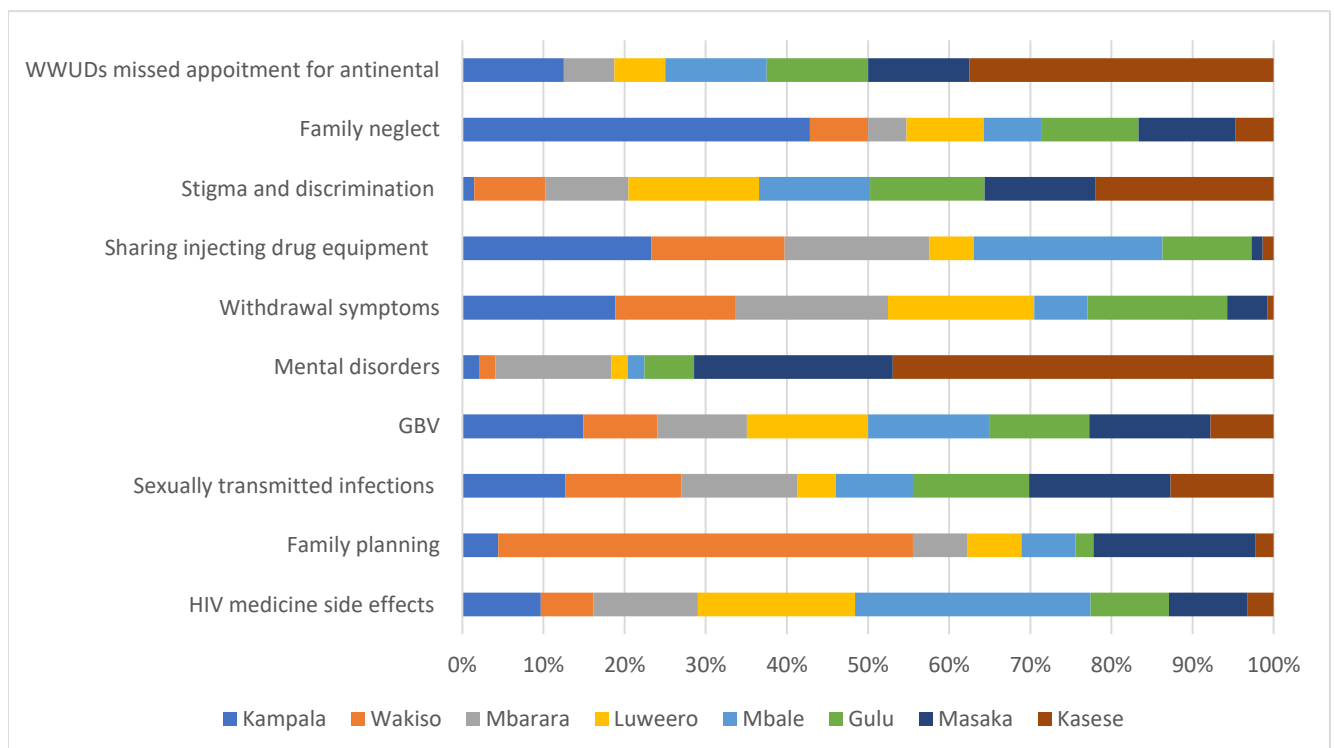
# Impact of Covid-19 Crisis among Women who use drugs during in Uganda

PWUD women have faced the greatest brunt of Covid-19 crisis. They have faced greatest challenges such as gender-based violence (GBV), unintended pregnancies stigma and discrimination, access to HIV drug refills, Family planning, sexually transmitted infections, sexual and physical assault, mental disorders and drug withdrawal symptoms. Government measures like quarantine have put WWUD women at heightened risk of violence in the home and cutting them off from essential protection services and social networks.

Women who use drugs are unable to receive modern contraceptives and other essential services and as a result Women who use drugs are likely to report high unintended pregnancies in the coming months.

There are reported cases of women who use drugs who missed their antenatal services at hospital due to lack of public transport.

## Effect of Covid 19 on the Health of Women Who Use Drugs

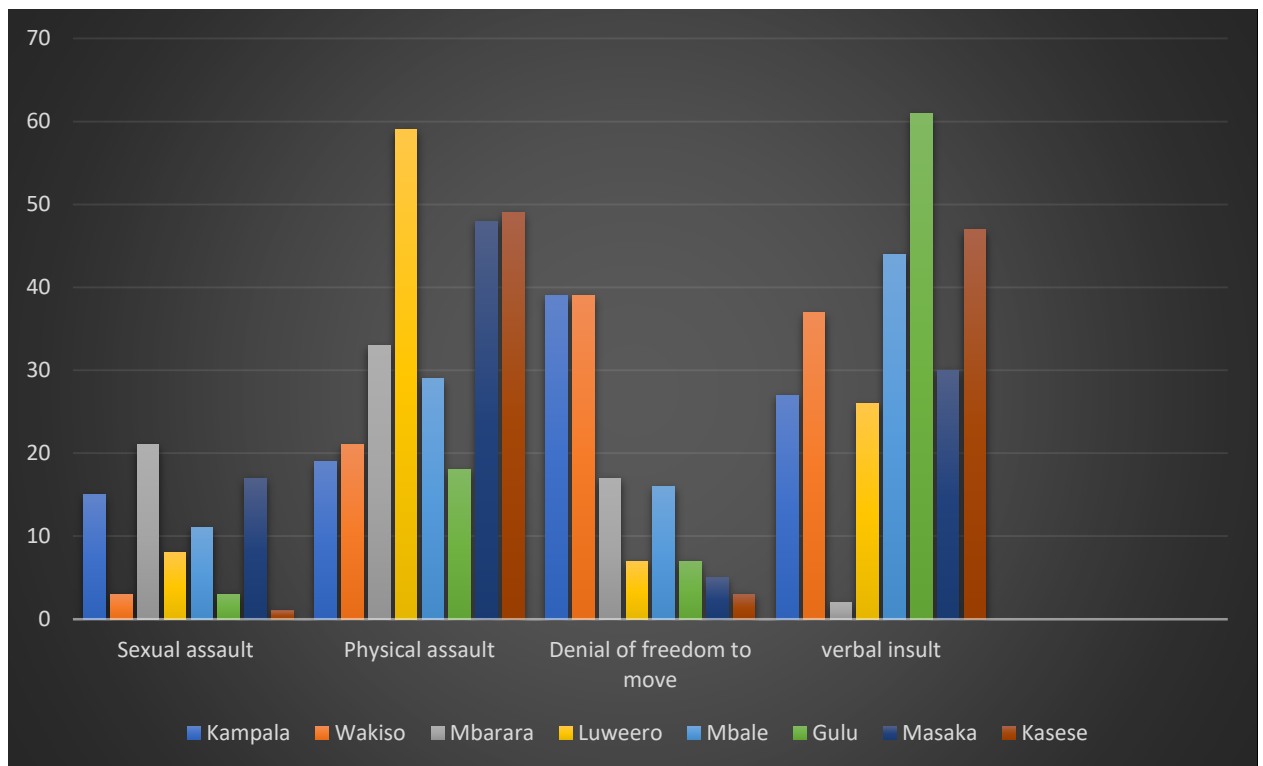




## Gender Based Violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) among PWUD has been high during Covid-19 outbreak and has drastically affected women who use drugs. Pre-existing toxic social norms and gender inequalities, economic and social stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with restricted movement and social isolation measures, have led to high numbers of GBV. Many women who use drugs during the lockdown have been at home with their abusers while being cut off from normal support services such as; SRH services, access to referral sites, and access to justice mechanisms.

### GBV Reported cases in the UHRN Operational Districts



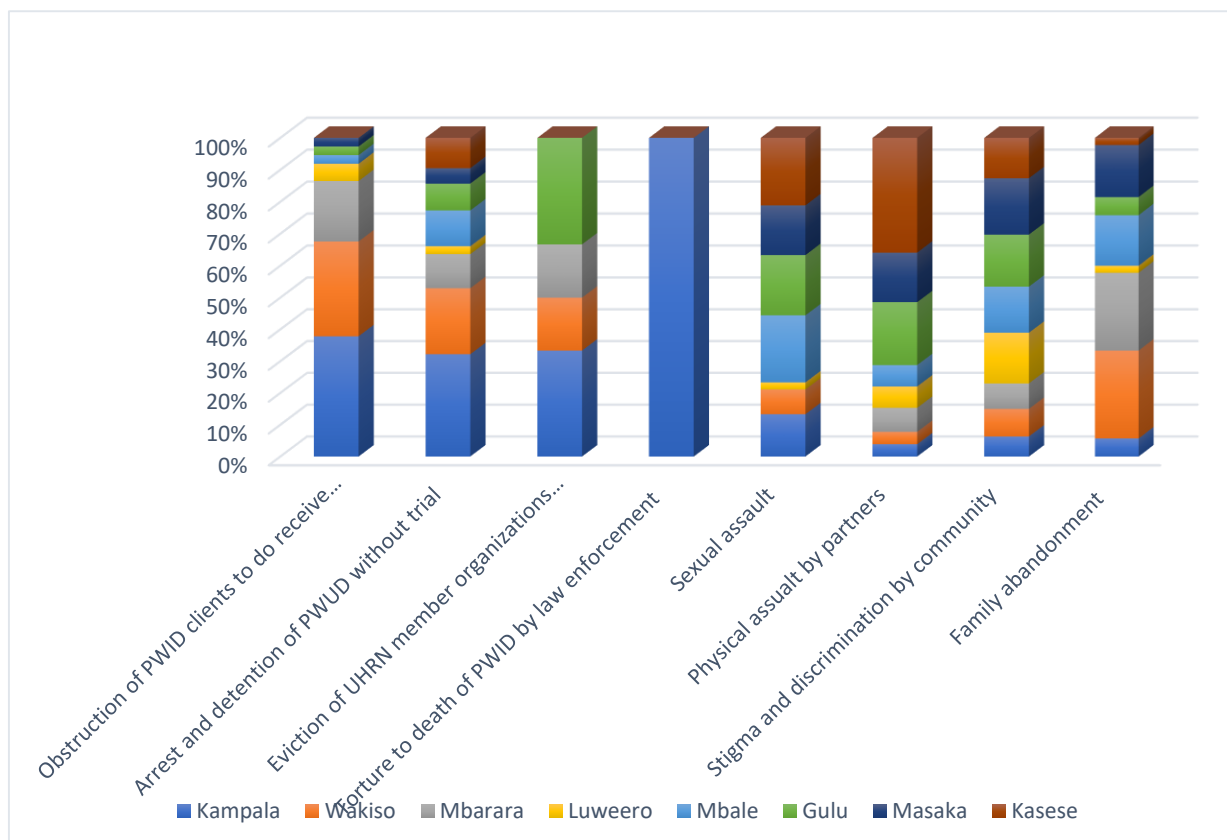
Source: UHRN peer and paralegal diaries

## Covid-19 Human Rights Violations for People who use Drugs

The most significant human rights issues reported among people who use drugs during Covid-19 lock down include; failure of PWID clients on ART to have their ART refill, arrest and detention of PWUD, eviction of UHRN member organizations because of accommodating PWUD, death of PWID due to torture by law enforcement and gender-based violence.

PWUDs have been evicted out of their houses in the ghettos by the police at night due to overcrowding in their dens and this has been to enforce one of the COVID 19 prevention measures of social distancing. This has made them more susceptible to assault, sexual and gender based violence

**Human Rights Violation cases among PWUD reported under the lockdown**



Source: UHRN PWUD peer diary

## Recommendations and Way forward

We recommend;

- ① Continuous provision of drug treatment services, including opioid substitution medications and other essential medicines to PWUDS amidst the Covid 19 crisis.
- ① Adopt crisis mitigation alternatives to reach PWUDS in the community including provision of online services, medication and equipment supply via pharmacies, home visits, phone calls for assessment and follow-up and adapting existing practices.
- ① The National Covid-19 Task force to liaise with UHRN to reach the PWUDs in the community with food supplies
- ① Police operatives to adopt Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) programs to allow PWUD have access to treatment or social services, rather than arresting and detaining them. This is because drug use is a public health issue rather than criminal justice matter and access to treatment is a human right which every Ugandan must respect.
- ① Immediate release of all people who use drugs in incarceration arrested during Covid-19 crisis to reduce the high chances of transmission of Covid-19 among PWUD.
- ① Government to prioritize harm reduction interventions in both community and prison settings
- ① Task force and law enforcement to use the harm reduction approach in food distribution, “do no harm” approach (support don’t punish).
- ① Continuous sensitization of people who use drugs within the drug user hotspots on Covid-19 and prevention strategies for Covid-19



## Conclusion

Drug treatment services and low-threshold harm reduction services for PWUD are essential health services, which will need to stay in operation under restricted conditions. However, the Covid 19 crisis and the lockdown has continued to disproportionately affect vulnerable population especially people who use drugs and as a result, people who use drugs have become homeless, beaten, shot and arbitrarily detained by security forces in the bid to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic government directives .

UHRN remains committed and open to engage in any interventions that saves and protects the lives of people who use drugs and calls for Government adoption of Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) programs, release of people who use drugs in incarceration to reduce the high chances of transmission of Covid-19 among PWUD and ensure availability and accessibility of services for PWUD who are homeless with limited resources to self-protect and self-isolate.

## CONTACT



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