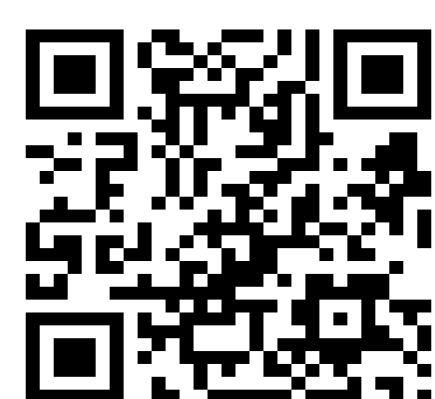


“Loss to follow-up increased sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic, with many never returning to care. Without tailored interventions to re-engage marginalized people, we will fail to meet HCV and HIV elimination targets.”

PARTICIPANTS LOST TO FOLLOW-UP FROM THE CANADIAN COINFECTION COHORT BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



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Background

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted access to HIV care and may have had longstanding impacts. The Canadian Coinfection Cohort (CCC) is a national prospective cohort following individuals with HIV-hepatitis C virus (HCV) coinfection. Study follow-up visits are scheduled every six months. We assessed lost to follow-up (LTFU) from the CCC, before, during, and after the pandemic.

Methods

We included CCC participants enrolled before March 2018, on antiretroviral therapy for at least 6 months and with one or more follow-up visits after March 2018 (Table 1). The characteristics of those not attending visits after the pandemic (Mar 2022 – Feb 2024) were compared with those having at least three visits after the pandemic. We also compared the characteristics of study participants LTFU (no visit for 18 months) who never re-engaged with those who re-engaged at least once between March 2018 and March 2024.

TABLE 1: CHARACTERISTICS FOR OVERALL STUDY PARTICIPANTS AND EACH SUBGROUP.

Characteristics	All participants (n=929)	gbMSM (n=216)	Indigenous (n=246)	Active PWID (n=330)	Other (n=329)
Duration HIV (yrs), median	18	21	12	15	21
HCV RNA+, %	30	15	46	47	20
Age (yrs), median	52	54	46	49	54
Female, %	31	0	50	33	34

TABLE 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS AT THEIR LAST FOLLOW-UP VISIT.

Last follow-up visit	Before March 2018	Before March 2024	
Median or percent (%)		At least three visits after March 2022	No visit after March 2022 ²
	n = 929	n = 324	n = 373
Age, years	51	59	53
Female, %	31	26	28
Indigenous, %	27	19	32
gbMSM, %	24	29	21
Injection drug use, % ¹	32	18	29
Illicit drug use without injection, % ¹	40	34	28
Duration of HIV infection, years	17	24	19
HIV RNA >50 copies/mL, %	16	7	21
HCV RNA positive, %	29	4	21

HCV, hepatitis C virus; gbMSM, gay and bisexual men reporting sex with men.

¹ As reported by the participant, in the previous six months.

² Characteristics at last visit (after March 2018) of participants with no visits after March 2022.

Results

Among 929 participants, 5% had no visits between March 2018 and February 2020, 30% had no visits between March 2020 and February 2022, and 27% had no visits between March 2022 and February 2024 (Figure 1). The number of deaths in each time period were: 44 (Mar 2018 – Feb 2020), 66 (Mar 2020 – Feb 2022), and 41 (Mar 2022 – Feb 2024).

Those with no visits post-pandemic were more likely to be Indigenous, report injection drug use, have detectable HIV RNA and be HCV RNA positive compared to those who had at least three visits (Table 2). Study participants who never re-engaged were more likely to have detectable HIV RNA versus those who re-engaged at least once (Table 3). Disengagement from care was the most common cause of LTFU between March 2018 and March 2024 (Figure 2).

Conclusions

Over a third of CCC study participants were LTFU during the pandemic and were not re-engaged afterwards. People LTFU were disproportionately from marginalized groups and remain at risk for HIV and HCV transmission and disease progression.

Tailored strategies and dedicated resources to re-engage people in care and treat ongoing co-infection are urgently needed if HIV and HCV elimination targets are to be met.

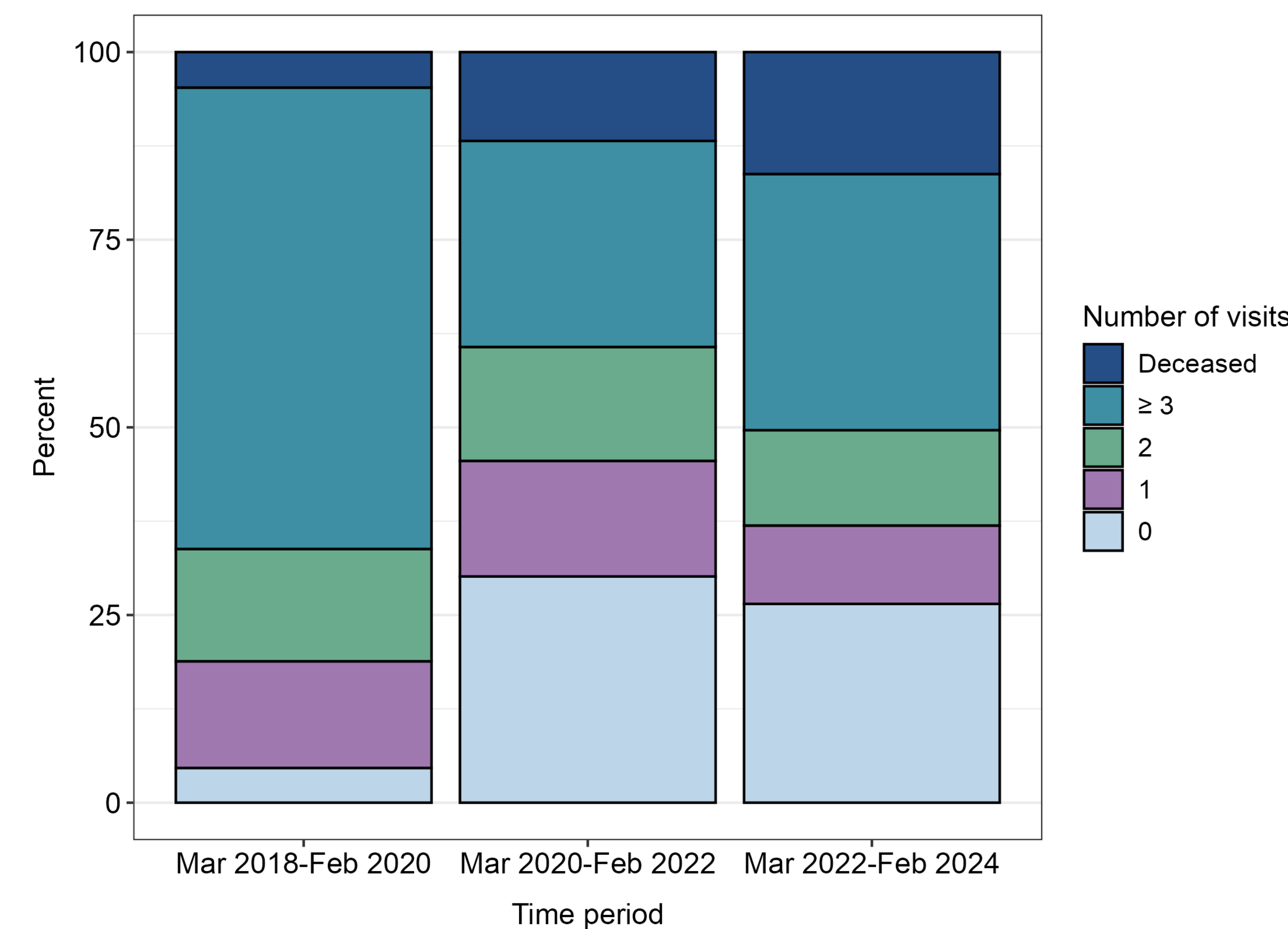
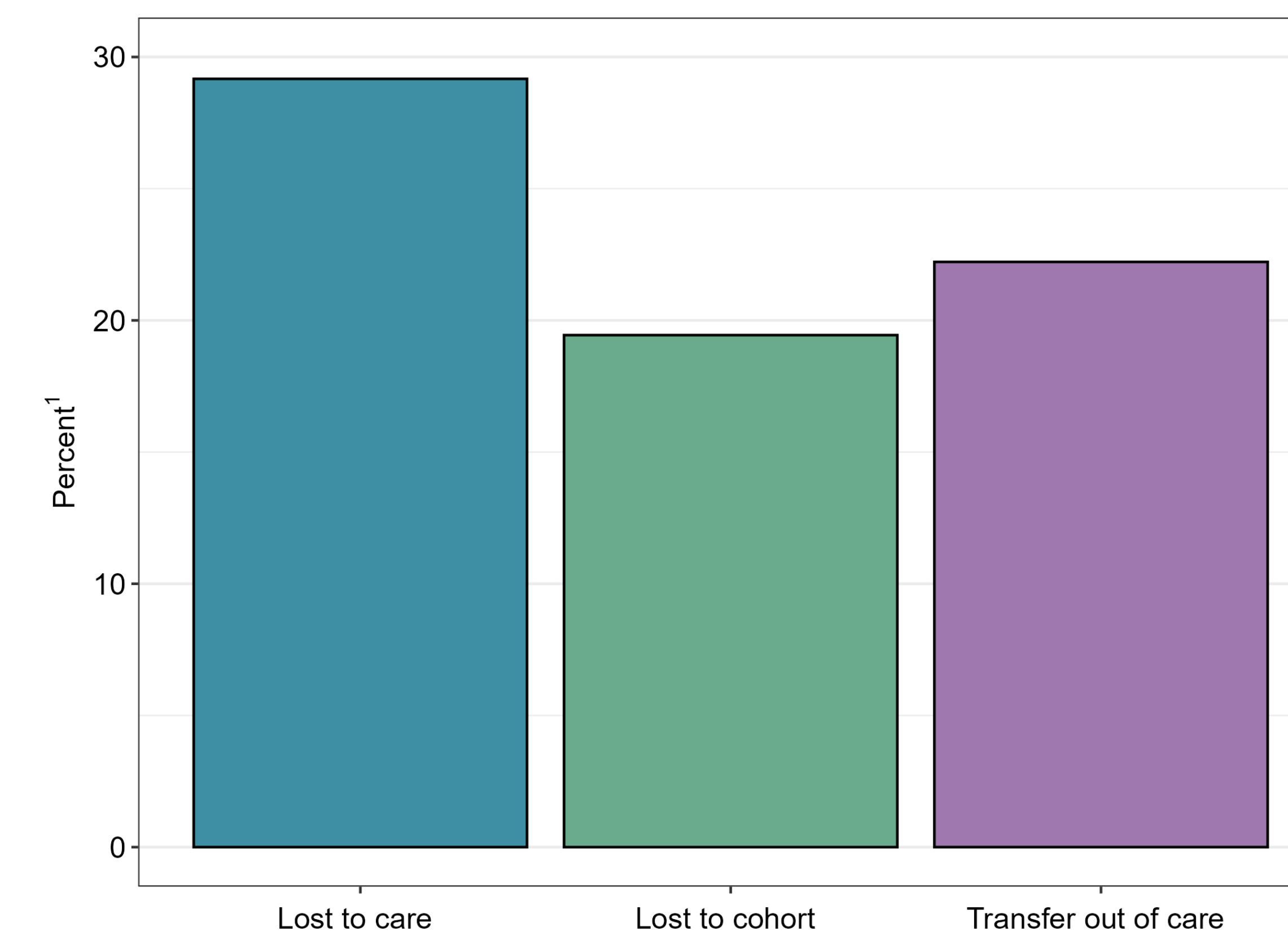


FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS ATTENDING FOLLOW-UP VISITS IN THE STUDY PERIOD.



¹ Note that 168 of the 240 who never re-engaged in Table 3 have yet to be audited.

FIGURE 2: REASONS FOR LOST TO FOLLOW-UP FOR STUDY PARTICIPANTS WHO NEVER RE-ENGAGED BETWEEN MARCH 2018 - MARCH 2024.

TABLE 3: CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS REMAINING ALIVE AT THEIR LAST FOLLOW-UP VISIT.

Last follow-up visit	Before March 2018	Before lost to follow-up ²	
Median or percent (%)		Never re-engaged	Re-engaged
	n = 929	n = 240	n = 232
Age, years	51	53	52
Female, %	31	31	32
Indigenous, %	27	27	28
gbMSM, %	24	25	21
Injection drug use, % ¹	32	24	25
Illicit drug use without injection, % ¹	40	25	27
Duration of HIV infection, years	17	20	19
HIV RNA >50 copies/mL, %	16	19	13
HCV RNA positive, %	29	17	15

¹ As reported by the participant, in the previous six months.

² Characteristics at last visit before first lost to follow-up between March 2018 and March 2024.

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SA and MK have no conflicts of interest.