
Thinking Matters Symposium

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Opioid Use and Harm Reduction

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Opioid Use and Harm Reduction

Elise Bourassa, David Lee, Jason Rogers, Christian Silverthorne, Rachel Casey, USM Department of Social Work.

Introduction

Calls for various harm reduction approaches to the opioid epidemic are increasing in activist communities (Chapkis, 2020; Kennedy-Hendricks et al., 2019; Sederer & Marino, 2018). Given that harm reduction approaches, if implemented, will be provided by people in various helping professions, the current study investigates the relationship between choice of human service-focused college major and level of support for harm reduction interventions for people who use opioid drugs.

Research Question

Does choice of human service-focused college majors have a relationship with level of support for harm reduction interventions for people who use opioid drugs?

Methods

- The researchers utilized a 26-item quantitative survey which aimed to measure student perceptions and knowledge about harm reduction strategies for people who use opioid drugs.
- The first 3 survey items asked students to provide demographic information regarding choice of major, age, and gender.
- Two survey items aimed to measure student knowledge of harm reduction and other treatment options.
- Remaining survey items utilized likert-type scales to measure student perceptions and support of various harm reduction interventions including supervised injection sites, clean needle distribution, naloxone, and prescription heroin.
- 30 students completed the survey.
- Data was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics to look at frequency distributions, measures of central tendency, measures of dispersion, and Spearman Correlations.

References

- Chapkis, W. (2020). Keynote address 2018 southern maine harm reduction conference. *Deviant Behavior*, 41(7), 905-912. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2020.1735024>
- Kennedy-Hendricks, A., Bluestein, J., Kral, A. H., Barry, C. L., & Sherman, S. G. (2019). Establishing sanctioned safe consumption sites in the united states: Five jurisdictions moving the policy agenda forward. *Psychiatric Services (Washington, D.C.)*, 70(4), 294-301. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201800398>
- Sederer, L. I., & Marino, L. A. (2018). Ending the opioid Epidemic by changing the culture. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 89(4), 891-895. <https://doi-org.wv-o-ursus-proxy01.ursus.maine.edu/10.1007/s11126-018-9589-0>

Findings

- Twenty-eight students identified as social work majors, one student identified as majoring in nonprofit management, and one student did not provide an answer to the survey item which asked participants to identify their majors.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (N=30)

Variable	M(SD)*
Increasing access and utilization to Narcan/Naloxone (medicine that rapidly reverses an opioid overdose) is a good solution to the current Opioid problem in Maine.	3.6(1.1)
There should be needle distribution services in my community to help people use intravenous drugs more safely.	4.2(1.1)
There should be legally sanctioned space for people to inject opioids under medical supervision in my community.	3.7(1.2)
If there was a legally sanctioned space for people to inject opioids under medical supervision, I would refer future clients who use IV drugs to that program.	4.2(0.6)
Increasing access and utilization of Narcan/Naloxone (medicine that rapidly reverses an opioid overdose) encourages individuals with opioid use disorder to continue their drug use.	2.0(1.1)
Providing a legally sanctioned space for people to inject opioids would encourage non-injecting drug users to inject for the first time.	2.0(1.0)
Providing a legally sanctioned space for people to inject opioids would encourage injecting drug users to use higher drug doses than they would otherwise use.	2.0(0.9)

*Range 1-5, with 5 indicating strong agreement

Discussion

- Research was limited by non-response bias of 3 out of the 4 majors researchers attempted to recruit participants from. Social work students made up an overwhelming majority of respondents (28 out of 30). Time constraints prevented researchers from adopting alternative recruitment methods to increase participation from other fields of study. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, recruitment methods were limited to electronic communication.
- Students who responded were overwhelmingly supportive of harm reduction and did not endorse the idea that increasing harm reduction approaches would encourage or enable increased substance use.
- Recent research has found that first responders and people in other professions often hold stigmatizing beliefs about people who use opioid drugs and do endorse beliefs that harm reduction encourages ongoing drug use.
- Social workers should be involved in both the policy formation of harm reduction programs, as well as the delivery of harm reduction services.

