Opioid Replacement in Prison: Narratives in the Media

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Grounded in critical narrative theory, this research examines how the media discusses opioid replacement treatment within the Canadian prison system.

The Issue

In contrast to the Canadian public, opioid-dependent inmates are more vulnerable to infectious diseases (HIV/AIDS and hepatitis), violence, and overdose.

Current harm reduction policies offer some drug users opioid replacement treatment (such as methadone or Suboxone) while they are incarcerated. For these inmates, opioid replacement treatment may be the difference between life and death.

Method

Grounded in critical narrative theory, this research examines thirty-two articles from four Canadian newspapers (The Globe and Mail, The Toronto Star, The Ottawa Citizen, and The Vancouver Sun). Key words, phrases, and themes were organized by decade and dominant societal narratives. Data was compared and contrasted noting changes in narratives overtime and how this might inform public opinion.

Key words, Phrases, & Themes

1990's
“The War on Drugs”
AIDS epidemic
More use of words “junkie” & “addict”
Less person-centered language
“Addiction as result of life choices/behaviour” vs. “Addiction as illness/disease”
Methadone treatment is controversial
Is harm reduction an option?

2000’s
“Harm Reduction for Public Health”
“Drug users” are people
More person-centered language
“Addiction is a health issue/disease”
More methadone treatment needed in Canadian prisons
Harm reduction is the best option for public health

2010’s
“The Opioid Crisis & Human Rights”
Person-centered language
Methadone treatment is necessary in Canadian prisons
“Addiction is a disease”
Canadian prisons = “ground zero” for opioid crisis
Harm reduction is a human right!

Research Questions

How is drug use and opioid replacement treatment in Canadian prisons discussed in the media?

Has this discussion changed over the past 30 years?

What dominant societal narratives surround these discussions?

Discussion

This research examined the media’s portrayal of drug use and opioid replacement treatment in the Canadian prison system. Results show that the media’s discussion on this issue has changed slightly over the last 30 years.

Evidence of this change can be seen in the evolution of language within the articles. For example, the word “junkie” (a derogatory and stigmatizing term) was used in the articles from the 1990’s and 2000’s, but not in any articles from the 2010’s. This change in language is likely informed by the current cultural shift around drug use and harm reduction.

More recent articles appeared to echo many of the public awareness campaigns aimed at the ‘Opioid Crisis’ and ending the stigma of drug use. These campaigns emphasize how stigma around drug use can prevent people from accessing help and how language can impact the way society perceives drug use and addiction treatment. Therefore, how we talk about addiction and drug use matters.

Personal Statement

This research topic was inspired by my experience working with adults who have recently returned to their community after leaving the prison system and my social justice activism in drug use and harm reduction. The knowledge that I gained from pursuing this research will greatly impact my work as an anti-oppressive social worker supporting marginalized and oppressed people, many of whom have substance use issues and/or criminal justice involvement.

I am a middle class female of European decent who has not experienced the challenges associated with addiction, nor have I been involved with the criminal justice system, let alone imprisonment. That being said, I do have opinions about drug use and addiction treatment within the Canadian prison system and have talked with adults whose lives have been impacted by the lack of access to treatment during and after incarceration.

Limitations of this Researcher

I am not in a position to share personal experiences related to addiction or the criminal justice system.

Citations

