



University of Victoria

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-dependant 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.

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.

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!



http://farm2.staticflickr.com/12205/78304919_cdf60e806_.jpg

"While it may be politically popular to jail injection-drug users, it's not a very effective public health measure." The Globe and Mail October 10, 2008

"Four opioid-addicted prisoners are challenging a BC Corrections policy they say impedes swift access to methadone that could treat their addiction." The Globe and Mail March 19, 2016

"Junkies stay hooked behind bars." The Globe and Mail October 10, 2008

"AIDS in prisons threatens to become an epidemic unless a strategy is developed to fight it." The Toronto Star March 11, 1994

"Denied methadone, inmate says he smuggled his own drugs to jail." The Ottawa Citizen March 19, 2017

"The war on drugs is not working." The Vancouver Sun June 10, 1994

"As the opioid crisis persists, prisons are among the institutions wrestling with how to respond to the problem." The Toronto Star October 25, 2018

"Mental illness and drug addiction requiring treatment are more prevalent in the prison population." The Toronto Star October 25, 2018



http://www.policestateusa.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/prisoners-line.jpg

"It's easier to obtain heroin in prison than it is to get legal approval to enter a program using methadone." The Vancouver Sun February 5, 2000

"There is an increased demand for methadone and Suboxone." The Globe and Mail July 17, 2017



https://www.topimages.com/magnum/person-jail-e7.html

"Corrections Canada said it doesn't condone methadone treatment for inmates because there is no medical support network behind bars and within communities." The Ottawa Citizen July 16, 1996

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.

Limitations of this Researcher

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.

Citations

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