‘Two people overdose a day here’: A qualitative study exploring solutions for opioid overdoses at a public library

Melanie Nicholls, MSW, LCSW
Lianne Urada, PhD, MSW, LCSW

**Introduction:** In 2018, California experienced 2,311 deaths from opioid overdose, 743 deaths related to fentanyl overdose alone, and these numbers continue to rise nationwide. Southern California is a gateway for fentanyl distribution to the rest of the country. Recently, there has been an increase in substance use and opioid overdoses at public libraries, which are easily accessible public places for those struggling with homelessness. This study aimed to explore the barriers unstably housed people who use substances face in getting help and what innovative solutions the library and its community and research partners might offer.

**Methods:** From January-June 2019, researchers surveyed 50 library patrons experiencing homelessness and 10 library staff at a large Southern California library. Participants were also either interviewed in-depth (n=31) or participated in a focus group (n=29). Patrons were recruited through fliers via a university-library partnership and consensus organizing methods. Sociodemographic data were collected via self-administered surveys. Data were coded and analyzed using a thematic analysis. Coders independently coded text files for data analysis and discussed codes until agreement and inter-coder reliability was reached.

**Results:** Library patrons were a mean age of 44, (range: 18-75). Approximately half were white (47%) and male (51%). 63% of participants reported housing instability; 22% lived in shelters. About half reported a current or prior substance use history. Participants suggested the library could offer education on the effects and health risks of drugs, fentanyl awareness, and overdose prevention, and connect patrons to treatment resources, e.g., medically assisted treatment (MAT), and Narcan. Findings suggest that barriers to quitting are related to a lack of access to MAT and detox and low knowledge of services for those struggling with opioid addiction.

**Conclusion:** Public libraries are perceived as one of the few places persons living with homelessness and opioid addiction can safely rest at during the day. Patrons often engage in substance use at the library due to its availability of clean water and bathrooms, leading to an increase in overdoses. Public libraries present an opportunity to provide linkage to care to treatment and education for patrons struggling with substance use.