Xylazine, Fentanyl, and Synthetic Opioids as Emerging Threats in Oklahoma: A Qualitative Analysis of Perspectives on Harm Reduction and Overdose Response

Senthil, Harini (School: Jenks High School)

The United States is currently facing a polysubstance drug epidemic with the rise of emerging threats like fentanyl, xylazine, and other synthetic opioids. The evolving nature of this public health crisis requires strategic harm reduction practices and overdose response protocols. A mixed-method approach was used to contextualize the challenges and opportunities facing the harm reduction and overdose response landscape in Oklahoma. A statistical quantitative analysis of xylazine, fentanyl, and synthetic opioid NFLIS drug seizure reports in Oklahoma from 2018-2022 was conducted using JASP. Trends within fatal xylazine, fentanyl, and synthetic opioid-involved overdoses were identified using Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics (OBN) data from January 1, 2018, to December 31, 2022, following STROBE reporting guidelines. Semi-structured interviews with harm reduction program managers, overdose response providers, and public policy stakeholders (n=20) were conducted. The presence of xylazine, fentanyl, and other synthetic opioids in Oklahoma through drug seizure reports and toxicological results has increased drastically from 2018 to 2022. Qualitative analysis highlighted the presence of fentanyl in Oklahoma's unregulated drug supply and the need for increased naloxone education and awareness, person-centered language surrounding addiction, drug checking, and xylazine wound care. Stigma surrounding substance use, harm reduction, and overdose response continues to negatively impact the lives of people who use drugs (PWUD). PWUD have faced many barriers to accessing wound care, mental health services, harm reduction, and healthcare in general. Further research is needed to analyze specific health policies and harm reduction practices in Oklahoma and the United States as a whole.

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