

PERCEPTIONS OF OVERDOSE RISK AMONG AT-RISK PERSONS LEAVING CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES IN BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Background:

People recently released from correctional custody experience pronounced risk of overdose, due to reduced drug tolerance and service disruptions during transitions post-release. The unregulated toxic drug crisis in Canada has elevated population-level overdose harms, and heightened the need to engage this sub-population in innovative overdose prevention efforts. This project aimed to investigate perceptions of overdose risk among recently incarcerated persons that may impact an individual's receptiveness to, and use of, evidence-based risk mitigation strategies.

Methods:

This study included semi-structured interviews with 120 persons at-risk of overdose leaving correctional facilities in British Columbia, Canada. Data collection was conducted between February and August 2023 by trained peer researchers with a prior history of incarceration. Interviews ranged from 45-60 minutes and were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically using NVivo.

Results:

Participants shared contrasting perceptions of personal overdose risk that sometimes differed from public health evidence and perspectives on the overdose crisis, with current abstinence (and intention to not return to use of illicit drugs post-release) cited by many as indicating an absence of risk. A range of harm reduction approaches were endorsed, including perceived protective impacts of prescribed safer supply and novel ways of utilizing opioid agonist treatment to maintain a baseline opioid tolerance to mitigate overdose-related risks upon relapse. The criminal legal system was a powerful overdose risk environment influence, as community supervisory conditions requiring abstinence interacted with tenuous conditions of overdose risk and stigma to jeopardize the health and wellbeing of people formerly incarcerated.

Conclusion:

Gaps between individual overdose risk perceptions of recently incarcerated persons and the extreme burden of overdose harms documented among this population in epidemiological studies are of concern. These findings have important implications for shaping public health practice and messaging focused on supporting overdose prevention and risk reduction among this sub-population of people who use drugs.

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