

Implications of stigma by association experienced by alcohol and other drug and harm reduction workers

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Introduction: The pervasive stigma directed at people who use drugs also affects the workers and services that support them. AOD workers can face presumptions of being low-skilled or professionally illegitimate, and AOD services can be separated from other health services and expected to operate with comparatively less resourcing and more restrictions.

Methods: A survey measuring the prevalence and impacts of this *stigma by association* was distributed to AOD workers in 2023 (n=228), with short written reflections also received from 188 respondents. The research aimed to understand how AOD workers are affected by stigma, including the strengths they have developed in response.

Key Findings: Stigma exacerbates social harms, limits the effectiveness of health interventions, and increases work difficulties. These impacts can be compounded for workers in peer identified roles or who disclosed living/lived experiences. Addressing stigma can be relentless and underappreciated, and AOD workers described it as alternately frustrating and motivating, but necessary. Workers who reported experiencing more stigma by association experienced poorer workplace wellbeing, higher burnout and greater intentions to leave the AOD/harm reduction field. However, experiences of stigma by association were unrelated to job satisfaction, which may indicate that workers derive considerable value from working in this field, despite the challenges.

Discussions and Conclusions: Understanding and combatting stigma comprises vital but under-acknowledged work performed within AOD services. Supportive management and colleagues help in this, as does having personal values that are aligned with the work.

Implications for Practice or Policy: We suggest that the AOD sector share, resource, and build upon the skills, knowledge and support strategies that workers have developed in response to stigma, which will help protect against work dissatisfaction and burnout. We also recommend that AOD workplaces examine stigma and its effects as a distinct topic within their reflective practices and service continuous quality improvement processes.

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