Recovery Science and Harm Reduction Reading Group

03/21/2024

**Meeting summary**:

This month’s article looked at the relationship between housing and overdose deaths across the United States. The guest speaker, Alex Skinner, researches the relationship between housing eviction and overdose. Her interest in housing came to the forefront during the pandemic when housing policies, like stay-at-home orders and eviction moratoriums (i.e., bans on eviction) were used to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Neighborhoods with higher eviction rates have higher rates of overdose. So, banning eviction might reduce overdose rates. This topic has not been well-researched. Alex discussed a few questions she hopes to answer with her research, like what is happening first, eviction or overdose? Eviction occurs more often than people think, and eviction can have major impacts on a community. The eviction of one person/family also impacts their greater neighborhood (e.g., reduced social cohesion, sense of community). The group discussed how people may be displaced after an eviction to a different neighborhood. This displacement can lead to changes in where they receive drugs, ultimately, contributing to a larger risk of overdose. The group concluded by thinking of several new questions for this area of research on housing and overdose risk: Which stages of the eviction process are most harmful to individuals who use substances? For example, does the greatest overdose risk occur when they are removed from their home? How do stressful court processes impact health? Does being involved with the criminal legal system (i.e., prior arrest or incarceration) increase the risk of eviction and overdose?

**Please find the full meeting notes below**:

Siena introduced the guest speaker, Alex Skinner, a 2nd-year epidemiology doctoral student at Brown. She works at PPHC. <https://pphcollective.org> She has a history of public health science work.

Siena provided a quick overview of the article:

Although we in recovery science understand well that not having access to steady, safe, and secure housing is a risk factor for drug overdose for a given individual, less is known about the relationship between homelessness and overdose mortality (the rate of death resulting from drug overdose) at the state level. In this study, researchers looked at data on housing, population, substance use, overdose, unemployment, and other variables from 2007–2020 for all US states and Washington DC. They used statistical methods to better understand the connection between homelessness and overdose mortality, adjusting these models for factors like number of people living in the state and the availability of fentanyl. The result was that overdose mortality was found to be positively associated with homelessness at the state level in other words, the more homelessness there is in a state, the higher the state’s overdose mortality rate is likely to be. However, they found that this association becomes weaker when fentanyl is widely available in a given state. Researchers concluded that, given this association, policies, and programs to prevent and reduce homelessness should be considered critical elements of overdose prevention efforts.

The study examined the role of housing and overdose mortality across the US. Researchers found that more homelessness in a given state predicted a higher overdose mortality rate for that state.

Alex described her own interest in housing, which came to the forefront during the pandemic. Housing policies, like stay at home orders and eviction moratoriums (i.e., people could not be forcibly displaced) were used to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Ultimately, the pandemic, as it relates to housing, had impacts on many other health outcomes. Banning this mechanism of homelessness (via “eviction moratorium”) might reduce overdose rates and other poor health outcomes. Alex is also interested in the role of policing and state-specific laws. For example, in RI, people can be evicted from their residence if the police have responded to that home; for example, if an overdose occurs and the police are called, then the landlord can evict that person. Many of these pathways can exacerbate overdose risk. Alex’s work aims to tease out these risks and understand pathways to overdose prevention. At a neighborhood level, neighborhoods with higher eviction have higher rates of overdose. During the pandemic, when eviction moratorium existed, there was no relationship between eviction and overdose. This might be due to several pandemic-related factors (i.e., eviction moratorium, other stressors). There is a need for future research in this area (e.g., what is happening first, eviction or overdose?; examine differences by race and ethnicity, as individual demographic characteristics can predict differential treatment by landlords and police). The harms of eviction also impact the greater environment in a given neighborhood (e.g., reduced social cohesion, sense of community).

Homelessness broadly is well-explored in the overdose literature. At the state-level, it is important to look at spill-over effects – those who don’t necessarily experience homelessness might also be impacted by others who experience homelessness.

If you are evicted, are you able to re-gain housing or do you become homeless? There are many stages to the eviction process. Displaced 🡪 (1) Temporary housing or couch serving (2) Secure housing in a new area 🡪 this also leads to change in drug use behaviors. This is not well documented in research. State-level data on these topics is not well compiled and is often messy to collect in one place, making it more difficult to draw conclusions about homelessness. For example, even the census is limited on asking people who are homeless any questions. There are many administrative barriers to research and good data collection.

We often think that homeless does not occur to many people. Eviction occurs often. A recent article found that one in five Black children experience eviction in the US. This impacts individuals and communities more broadly.

An attendee spoke about isolation across the US and how enhanced isolation (self-selected or not) contributes to overdose risk. Research often does not account for these individuals.

Another attendee discussed how housing first models reduce alcohol use related risks. This attendee works with people who are chronically homeless. Overdose risk is often the result of many complex factors that one individual experiences.

What are your next-steps? What is missing from the research on eviction?

Neighborhood-level data is interesting. The next step is to look at the individual-level records on eviction (which are available in RI; data on eviction and name, no DOB, so it is difficult but can try to link with name and address of record). Also, which stages of the eviction process are most harmful to individuals who use substances? What other overdose risk factors arise? Is it the final displacement or continuous stress? Moving to a different neighborhood and receiving different drugs? The court process – how does that stressor impact health? Plus, the experience of prior criminal-legal involvement. Does this worsen eviction outcomes?