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### The Hidden Epidemic: The Unforeseen Impacts of COVID-19 on the Treatment of Opioid Addiction

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# The Hidden Epidemic: The Unforeseen Impacts of COVID-19 on the Treatment of Opioid Addiction



**PRESENTER:**  
**Frank DeRosalia**

## Background

- In 2001, the Joint Commission for Hospital Accreditation declared pain as the “fifth vital sign” of the human body (Strang et al., 2020, p. 4).
- To further combat the severe pain experienced by many patients worldwide, physicians and other medical providers greatly increased their rate of prescribing opioid analgesics.
- Unfortunately, as a result, instances of severe opioid addiction are on the rise, and many are forced to turn to illicit substances such as heroin and fentanyl to satisfy crippling dependencies.
- Those who suffer from opioid use disorder (OUD) often do not receive necessary treatment, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened the current opioid crisis.
- While public health organizations are primarily focusing on the prevention of COVID-19, many healthcare workers within emergency clinics also reiterate the importance of continuing to combat the opioid epidemic nationwide.

## Methods

Two primary methods of conducting research were utilized in this study.

- The first of which involved quantitatively analyzing the relationship between COVID-19 and OUD case numbers/overdose fatalities over time.
- The second method, making up the bulk of the research, consisted of evaluating the opinions of professionals in various medical journals and media sources.
- By comparing the results of quantitative analysis with the personal accounts of those responsible for treating and researching OUD since the COVID outbreak, a clear depiction of the current state of the opioid crisis and its treatment was revealed.

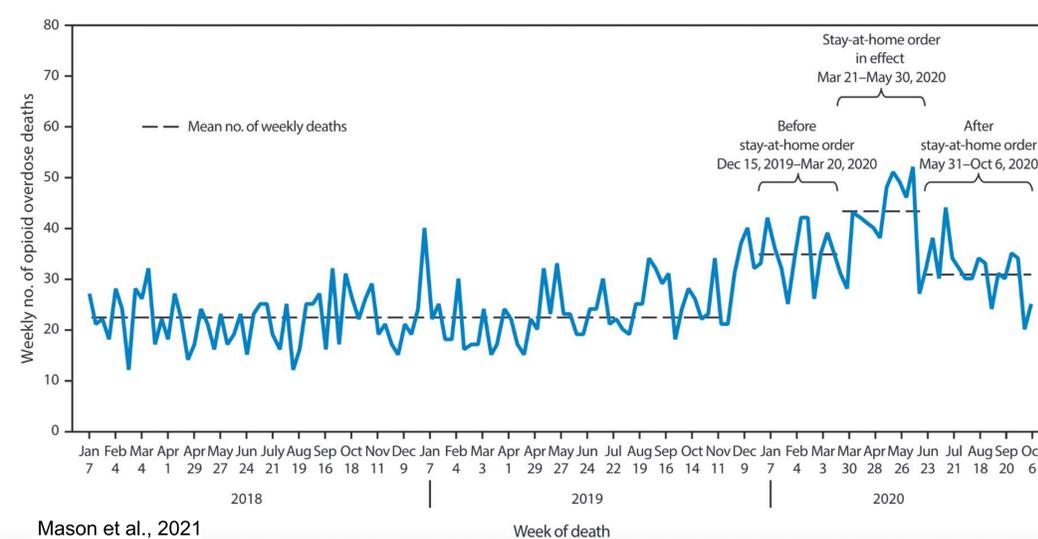
The COVID-19 pandemic has hindered the availability of opioid addiction treatment, restricting the effective distribution of medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD) along with forms of psychosocial treatment.

Rx

It was found that there are three ways that the treatment of opioid use disorder (OUD) has been recently affected:

- The isolation of quarantine periods and the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic have worsened the mental health of Americans, correlating with increased drug use and overdose as a result.
- Significant changes are occurring within the drug supply/distribution networks of both the pharmaceutical industry and illicit drug markets, restricting the availability of MOUD.
- The failure of current drug policies to regulate opioid distribution while effectively combating pain during the pandemic are limiting the resources available for OUD treatment.

FIGURE. Weekly number of opioid overdose deaths — Cook County, Illinois, January 1, 2018–October 6, 2020



## A Persisting Issue Since the Initial COVID Outbreak

- According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, over 100,000 Americans died as a result of a drug overdose from April 2020 to April 2021.
- 75,000 of these fatalities resulted from opioid use (Drug Overdose Deaths in the U.S. Top 100,000 Annually, 2021).

## Conclusion

- This “hidden epidemic” of opioid addiction has been and will remain to be a public health emergency within the medical community.
- More resources must be devoted towards combating this issue without harshly penalizing those with OUD and PWUD.
- While COVID-19 remains the primary concern of public health organizations worldwide, it is imperative that the opioid crisis and its millions of victims are not overshadowed by the looming pandemic.

## Terms/Acronyms to Know

Analgesic = Painkiller Drug  
MOUD = Medications for Opioid Use Disorder  
OIRD = Opioid-Induced Respiratory Depression (also known as an overdose)  
OUD = Opioid Use Disorder  
POs = Prescription Opioids  
PWUD = People Who Use Drugs

## References

Scan the QR Code with a mobile device to view a bibliography listing all sources that were consulted and used in this research.

