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Addressing the Opioid Crisis in San Joaquin County, California: Evaluating the Impact and Limitations of the Opioid Safety Coalition's Interventions

Ibteisam Madhi[1,2]

Abstract

Background: The opioid crisis is one of the main challenges facing public health. In San Joaquin County, California, the issue has escalated due to increased prescribed opioids and easy access to street drugs. This paper evaluates the interventions implemented by the San Joaquin County Opioid Safety Coalition (OSC) and identify current or future challenges.

Methods: This qualitative study assessed the effectiveness of interventions implemented by the OSC in San Joaquin County through key informant interviews in June 2019 to August 2019. Twelve OSC members were initially selected based on expertise, including public health officials, policymakers, and law enforcement personnel. Semi-structured interviews explored participants' roles, perceptions of opioid challenges, familiarity with OSC strategies, and barriers encountered. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Data were categorized into three main themes: 1) the significance of the opioid epidemic, 2) evaluation of OSC's interventions, and 3) limitations and future challenges.

Results: Ten out of 12 participants completed interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes each. Participants overwhelmingly recognized the severity of the opioid crisis in San Joaquin County, emphasizing the rise of fentanyl-related overdoses, particularly among individuals aged 25 to 64. OSC interventions—including public education campaigns, naloxone distribution, and prescriber training—were highlighted as critical yet insufficient to overcome persistent barriers. The key limitations identified were inadequate financial resources, community resistance to the use of naloxone, limited stakeholder cooperation, and restricted access to addiction treatment. Furthermore, the stigma associated with opioid addiction posed significant challenges, while hesitancy among law enforcement personnel to administer naloxone emphasized the need for clearer policies and expanded training programs.

Conclusion: The opioid epidemic remains critical in San Joaquin County despite significant interventions by the Opioid Safety Coalition. Future management requires increased community engagement, targeted training for law enforcement, expanded addiction treatment accessibility, and sustained funding to overcome persistent barriers and reduce opioid-related morbidity and mortality in the region.

Key Words: Opioid crisis, San Joaquin County, California, Opioid Safety Coalition (OSC), Naloxone, Addiction stigma

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1 Libyan International University, Benghazi, Libya
2 University of San Francisco, San Francisco, California, United States of America (May 2017- Dec 2019)

Corresponding Author:

ibteisam.madhi@limu.edu.ly

Introduction

Over the last decade, opioid overuse has been considered as one of the top public health crises in the United States, contributing to high morbidity and premature mortality. The issue arose in the 1990s, during the first peak wave of highly prescribed opioids, leading to deaths that continued over the years.[1] According to the 2024 report provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the nationwide death toll related to opioids was 89,740.[2] In California, almost 7,847 fatalities were attributed to opioid abuse, including 191 deaths recorded in San Joaquin County alone (Table 1).[3]

The disproportionate demographic distribution signals an urgent need to implement interventions that target certain age groups. Not all of those prescribed opioids become addicted, however, addiction rates are much higher in states where the issue has become prolific and more deadly with the introduction of highly concentrated synthetic opioids like fentanyl.[4] A great portion of these prescriptions were likely issued to recurring patients. However, it seems that opioid prescriptions were just as prevalent in San Joaquin County.

To address this acute epidemic, many efforts have been conducted to provide support, such as community-based programs, first responders, and law enforcement initiatives. If the efforts follow a continuous approach in a coordinated and collaborative model, public health interventions could be increasingly effective in responding to the epidemic.[5]

Table 1: The San Joaquin County Dashboard Data. [3]

San Joaquin County Dashboard Count (Age-adjusted Rate/100k Adjusted)	
191 (23.8/100k) Deaths related to Any Opioid Overdose in San Joaquin, 2023	**530 (67.9/100k)** ED Visits Related to Any Opioid Overdose in San Joaquin, 2023
152 (18.5/100k) Hospilizations Related to any Opioid Overdose in San Joaquin County, 2023	**302,840 (360.2/1k)** Prescriptions for Opiods in San Joaquin County, 2023

Statewide Standing Order for Naloxone

In 2017, the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) issued a statewide order to help control opioid abuse. The plan was to widely distribute and enhance the use of naloxone to facilitate cessation of substance abuse in California. These efforts led to the launch of training programs and videos targeting law enforcement personnel and first responders to easily administer naloxone.[6,7]

In 2018, the Naloxone Distribution Project (NDP) was supported mainly by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) in addressing opioid-related deaths throughout California. The San Joaquin County Public Health Services receives their naloxone doses from DHCS and distributes them locally to all registered organizations after filling out a signed naloxone refill form.[7,8] Naloxone is effective for opioid overdoses, but personnel responsible for its administration often question whether their training sufficiently covers the technical aspect of its usage and the recognition of the signs and symptoms of overdose.

The Opioid Safety Coalition

In 2018, the San Joaquin County Public Health Services formed the San Joaquin County Opioid Safety Coalition (OSC), which was supported by local organizations like Sutter Health, involving stakeholders, policymakers, law enforcement, first responders, and local community partners. The coalition has three main intervention strategies: Education and Outreach, Prescriber and Pharmacy Education, and Overdose Prevention and Medication-Assisted Treatment.[6,7] The main initiatives of the OSC's strategic plan are to increase local community awareness about the opioid crisis, call for prescriber training, and expand the naloxone distribution project. The aim of this survey is to define the impact of the epidemic, OSC's interventions, and the challenges facing it.

Methods

This study consisted of a qualitative research approach to assess the impact of OSC's interventions on addressing the opioid crisis in San Joaquin County. The study conducted key informant interviews where twelve members were initially selected from a total of 40 OSC members, based on their expertise and knowledge of the OSC's strategic plan. These experts include public health professionals, policy-makers, and law enforcement personnel. The study included ten responders as two of the participants did not finish the entire call interview. Semi-structured phone interviews, which lasted 30 minutes, were conducted with the participants' consent. The participants were informed of the nature of the call, the recording process, and their right to terminate the call at any time. The interview began by exploring the participant's role, the perception of the opioid challenges, the knowledge of the OSC's intervention plan, and any barriers encountered. The study implemented a thematic analysis, and the data were categorized into three main themes: (1) the significance of the opioid epidemic, (2) the evaluation of OSC's efforts, and (3) the limitations and future challenges.[9] Ethical approval was obtained from the University of San Francisco Ethics Committee and the San Joaquin Department of Public Health. The data collected according to confidentiality and ethical standards.

Results

Majority of participants (70%) acknowledged the severity of the opioid crisis in San Joaquin, largely attributing it to the rise in Fentanyl-related overdoses. Meanwhile, 50% viewed opioids as a complex public health issue, though opinions varied on the extent of the problem. Among those working closely with the homeless population (30%), there was a strong emphasis on prioritizing life-saving efforts and preventing deaths from over-prescribed opioids. In contrast, participants in medical and behavioral health fields saw the epidemic as manageable, citing recent data from the California Opioid Overdose Surveillance Dashboard to support their view.[10]

In addition, 70% of the participants emphasized the importance of the OSC interventions to reduce the opioid crisis in the county, including the public education campaign, the health promotion through billboards, the naloxone distribution kits, and the prescriber training programs. However, the OSC efforts were a significant approach to managing the crisis. Despite the work done, OSC still face major challenges. Limitations still exist and these include lack of financial resources, resistance to the

adoption of naloxone among the local community, cooperation of stakeholders, and lack of access to treatment for most rehabilitation centers. Participants expressed their concerns regarding the addiction stigma and the difficulty of addressing it among certain communities. The study showed that some law enforcement officers hesitate to carry or administer naloxone due to perceived liability issues, suggesting the need to escalate the naloxone training program and policy clarification.

Discussion

The findings highlight both the success and the limitations of the current OSC's opioid prevention efforts in San Joaquin County. Community awareness, public education, prescriber training, and naloxone distribution have to a greater extent resulted in addressing the opioid crisis in the county. Nevertheless, there are still obstacles that need to be resolved, like insufficient funding, addiction stigma in the community, and affordability of treatments. The data stated the demographic weakness among certain ages, suggesting the interventions may target the community's subgroups (Figure 1).[10] Opioid-related deaths occur across multiple age groups, but they are especially common among adults between the ages of 25 and 69. These age groups represents a significant portion of the working-age population, highlighting the broad impact of the opioid crisis on families, communities, and the workforce. The data suggests that opioid misuse is not limited to any one demographic stratum, but rather affects people in their prime years of productivity and responsibility, making it a major public health concern.[10]

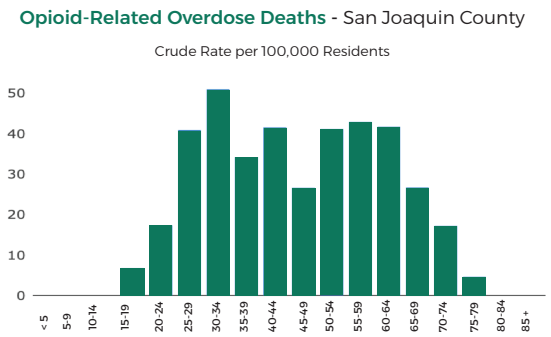

Figure 1: Prescription Opioid-Related Overdose Deaths based on Age Groups in San Joaquin County.

More initiatives should be designed to reach people at risk and provide them with the help that might be needed. There is an urgent need to focus on public education and to address the community addiction stigma by reinforcing all the efforts to facilitate treatment-seeking behaviors and destigmatize the addiction. In addition, law enforcement hesitated to administer naloxone due to a lack of clear policy and guidelines. To address this barrier, training programs should be implemented, and policymakers should be called upon to establish clear initiatives for the law enforcement regarding naloxone administration as first responders in cases of overdose emergencies.

The financial constraints restrict OSC's efforts to address the crisis. Securing more funds and increasing resources will improve and maintain the OSC interventions and implement its strategic plan. The cost of addiction treatment is unaffordable for many individuals, reduction of payment plans provided by health insurance and public funding initiatives to support post-addiction treatment such as rehabilitation centers. The opioid crisis in San Joaquin County requires continuous efforts from multi-disciplinary organizations. Although the OSC works to make interventions to overcome the challenges related to lack of funds, the community addiction culture stigma, and the addiction subgroup disparities, more success hinges on improving public awareness of the problem, sustained financial resources, and training of first responders and law enforcement personnel. This can be achieved through a coordinated, evidence-based strategic plan that will focus on addressing the crisis and reducing opioid morbidity and mortality in the county.

Disclosure Statement

Ibteisam Madhi is a member of the Editorial Board of the Journal of Best Available Evidence in Medicine.

Ethical Approvals

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of San Francisco (the Research Ethical Committee), and institutional approval was obtained from San Joaquin County, Department of Public Health, San Joaquin, California.

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