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Title: Allegheny County Health Department Overdose Surveillance Experience: Death Narratives during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Background/Objective: In Allegheny County, long-lasting effects of the pandemic on overdose-related deaths for residents is still not fully known. Allegheny County Health Department's (ACHD) Overdose Surveillance Team works to address the opioid epidemic affecting county residents. In one effort to investigate overdose data, ACHD accumulated overdose-related death narratives for the 2020 year. The objective of this project was to examine key overdose-related terms to measure how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected those facing the opioid epidemic.

Methods: ACHD's overdose surveillance group received overdose-related death records from the Allegheny County Medical Examiner's office (ACME). The narratives originated from overdose-related fatal events where a report was filed by an investigator present on scene. Information on narratives contained personal medical history, circumstances around the overdose event, and family statements. Each narrative in the cumulative set was read for frequencies of key themes of interest relating to overdoses and the pandemic. For consistency, each narrative was re-read and compared for consistency when another reader participated.

Results: ACHD received in total 465 death narratives from ACME. Dates of the events ranged from January 1, 2020 to November 10, 2020. Consistency varied by investigator/officer who authored the report. The preliminary number of overdose deaths in 2020 was higher than that of 2019 by approximately 64 deaths. Key themes included housing insecurity, release from jail, quarantine, COVID-19, methadone, medication-assisted treatment, naloxone, saving money, use of substances alone, employment, and delayed EMS arrival. In the future, this information will be further compared to the frequency of key themes in 2019 narratives to quantify the full effects of the pandemic.

Conclusion: This experience taught me the importance of analyzing effects of national-level catastrophe on vulnerable populations such as those with substance use disorders. I gained skills in analyzing qualitative data and displaying current, local statistics and trends to share vital information with the public and raise awareness. Simple breakdowns of data can educate on health disparities that can be exacerbated in system-stressing events.