Factors Contributing to Opioid Use Initiation

Findings from the Vermont Opioid Use Harm Reduction Evaluation

Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) conducted the Vermont Opioid Use Harm Reduction Evaluation between June 2018 and November 2019 in Franklin, Rutland and Windham Counties, Vermont. Participant interviews and a questionnaire were completed with 80 adults who currently used opioids or had formerly used opioids.

PROJECT AIMS

1. Assess current harm reduction services and behavioral strategies that are being used to lower the risk of opioid overdose and infectious disease transmission

2. Assess gaps in knowledge and use of services and behavioral strategies that can lower the risk of opioid overdose and infectious disease transmission

3. Assess content and formats for effectively communicating health messages from the Department of Health and other agencies to populations at risk for opioid-related overdose and infectious disease transmission

FINDINGS

Participants were asked to describe how and when their opioid misuse started. Answers included initiation arising from injury or disease, influence of peers or romantic partners, family influence, and wanting to feel numb after a traumatic event or traumatic childhood.

Forty-three percent of the 80 participants who were interviewed explained that their initiation arose from an injury, disease, or medical procedure that led to an opioid being prescribed by a medical professional for pain. Examples included car crashes, work-related injuries, C-sections, cancer, wisdom teeth removal, and injuries sustained while serving in the military. Half of these individuals attributed their illicit opioid use to their medical provider terminating their opioid prescriptions.

Approximately 30% of participants shared that their drug use started as a result of peer or romantic partner influence, sometimes combined with other factors such as childhood trauma, mental health struggles or domestic abuse.

“I had some major operations and I was issued high doses of oxycodone and fentanyl for pain management for a long period of time. Then overnight they were just taken away from me. So, I spent four months getting clean…I couldn’t get into a rehab program. I had to manage it myself and essentially do it cold turkey…I was clean for two and a half years and then I got back into seeing a pain management specialist... and after four months of seeing them they wanted to put me back on pain meds...Of course your tolerance goes right back up to where it was and once they saw that happening after four months of being issued narcotics, they said that they didn’t want to do it anymore, they pulled my meds away from me and at that point in time I had gone to school, enrolled in college, and I was trying to better myself and so it was a very tough position for me ... so I in turn started getting the same medications on the street and then what happened was is I couldn’t afford the prescription medication on the street, it was cheaper going to the heroin and that’s what I did.”

“My doctor never said ‘Oh, be careful because you know’... then one thing leads to another and before you know you’re a full-fledged drug addict.”

“I was young...a lot of my friends were doing it [prescription pills]. And hanging out with them, being around it and being offered it and then feeling like, you know, if I turn it away that they would feel some type of way towards me or I wasn’t cool enough to be with them no more or hang out with them and I didn’t want to lose my friends at the time and I realized that in all reality they really weren’t my friends, you know, to be offering me the drugs to begin with.”

“I was raped, and he made sure at my six-week checkup that I was pregnant again with his kid, so I ended up with postpartum very bad and then you know two small children, I went through a lot of shit and that’s where the prescription [opioid] drugs stuff like that started coming in because I started seeing doctors and what not. I remember him having me smoke because he was very controlling like at everything I did so I remember him telling me to smoke a joint one day, that it would feel like so much more calm because I’d be so angry with him I mean I just got beat up you know...and then within a year I was doing like Ritalin and Adderall because within four years’ time I had four kids and I just spiraled out of control there.”

“My ex-husband had left me for the last time, and I got with a person that was heavily using opiates. He was already addicted and so he kind of introduced me to it and that’s how I got started.”
The factors that contribute to drug use initiation, and opioid use specifically, are complex and were varied among participants. As the quotes demonstrate, factors such as physical pain, emotional pain, and childhood or history of trauma often intersected, as well as played into one’s vulnerability to peer or romantic partner pressure. Knowing the factors that contribute to drug use initiation can inform prevention efforts by helping to address underlying issues that contribute to drug use. Understanding these factors may also remove some of the notions around “that could never happen to me” or the “otherness” that is often placed on individuals struggling with opioid use disorder. In this way, the voices reflected in this brief may help inform interventions focusing on both prevention and stigma.

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