



An Anthropological Exploration Of Overdose Prevention Experiences and Perceptions Among People Who Use Drugs in Orlando, Florida

Maria Ocando Monaco

University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL



INTRODUCTION

- The overdose rate has increased steadily in the United States (U.S.) over the last decade. Most recently, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there were over 111,000 overdose deaths in the U.S. from a 12-month period ending in July 2023.¹
- A major driver of recent overdoses is fentanyl, a synthetic opioid. Due to its low manufacturing costs, this highly potent opioid has permeated the illicit drug market, causing a significant public health concern in the U.S.
- The current standard response to opioid overdose is naloxone, an opioid antagonist medication used to reverse the effects of opioids.
- In December 2022, the Florida Department of Health in Orange County started to distribute naloxone to people who use drugs (PWUD) and others who may witness an overdose to reduce overdose deaths.² In March 2023, the Food and Drug Administration approved Narcan (a brand name naloxone nasal spray) for over-the-counter sale.³
- Despite increased availability of naloxone to PWUD, the rising rate of overdose deaths across the country suggests a need for further examination of the socio-cultural and contextual factors that impact the implementation of overdose prevention strategies, including the use of naloxone.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the barriers to accessing and administering naloxone among PWUD?
- How do the personal experiences of PWUD with overdose and naloxone shape their willingness to carry and administer naloxone to others?
- To what extent does having access to a syringe services program (SSP) impact overdose risk perceptions among PWUD?

METHODS

- I collected ethnographic data⁴ at a not-for-profit healthcare organization that provides syringe exchange services in Orlando, Florida, as well as their outreach location at a non-profit drop-in center for people experiencing homelessness in downtown Orlando.
- I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with members of the organization’s syringe services program (SSP). Additionally, over the course of the 9-month internship with the SSP, I engaged in participant observation⁵ at both the SSP headquarters and its outreach location.
- Throughout my internship, I gained privileged access to SSP participants where I fostered relationships and connections with both SSP participants and staff.
- I analyzed verbatim audio transcripts of the interviews to identify key themes to understand how PWUD respond to the social factors that increase vulnerability to opioid overdose.⁶ I also analyzed data gathered through participant observation of the daily activities and routines of the SSP operations.
- This research received human subject ethics approval from UCF’s Institutional Review Board.

Figure 1a. 12 Month-ending Provisional Counts of Drug Overdose Deaths: United States

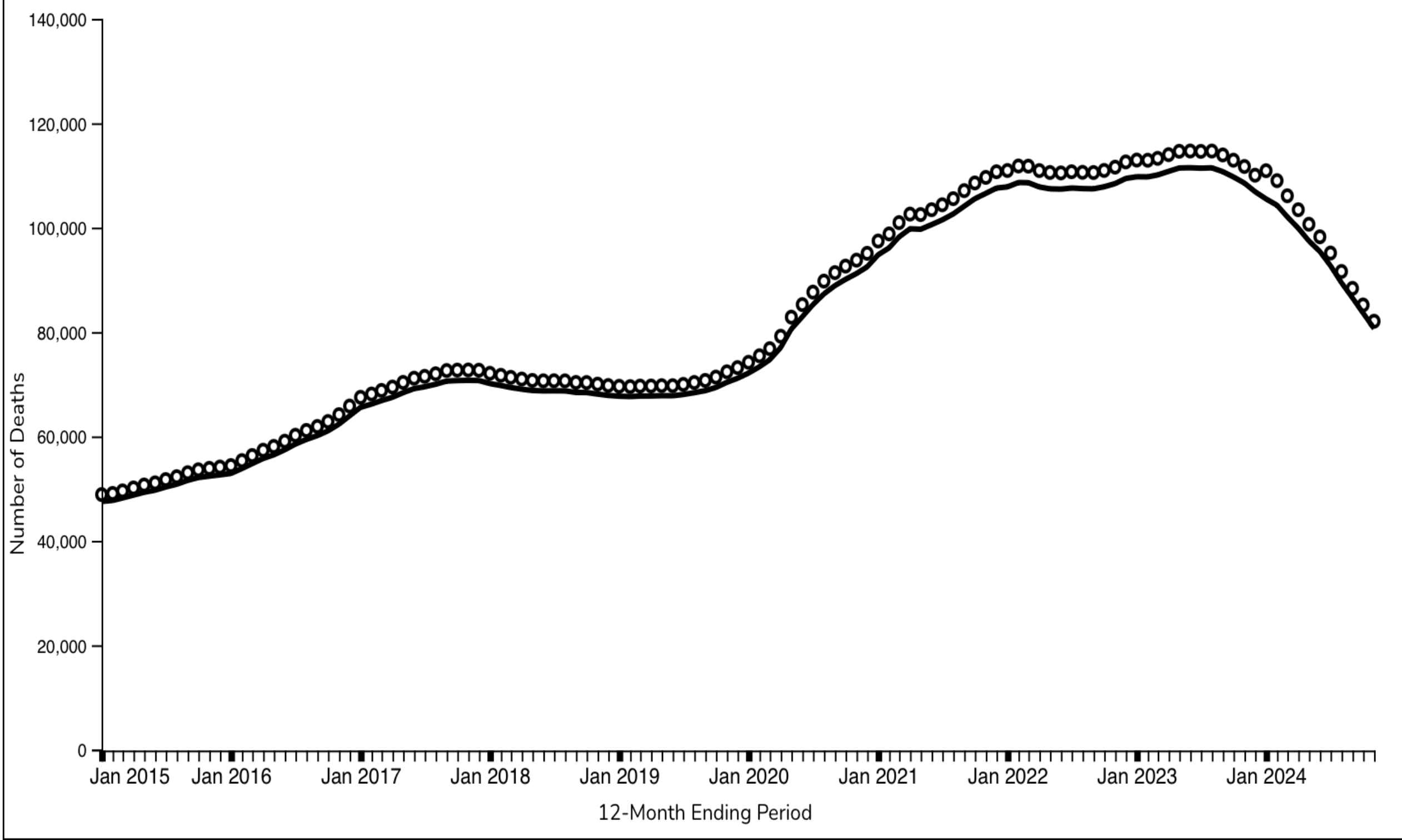


Image Credit: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsn/drug-overdose-data.htm>

FINDINGS

- Systemic stigma and discrimination have a profound impact on the access to and success of overdose prevention resources available to PWUD in Orlando.
“Nobody prevents it [overdose]. Nobody comes around or says anything or does anything. We're the ones that save our people. We're the ones that save our people, unless it's too late.”
- Stigma also prevents PWUD from accessing overdose prevention education and resources that would allow them to act confidently in overdose situations.
Researcher: “Have you ever received training into how to administer Narcan?”
Participant: “No, it was like trial by fire, just using it on people and having to sit there.”
- PWUD learn about overdose response through observation of their peers or personal experience. Such events can lead to adverse outcomes such as the spread of misinformation regarding overdose prevention strategies.
“I see a lot of people trying to use it [Narcan], but a lot of times they don't really know what they're doing. They think they know what they're doing and at least they're trying, and I give them A-, you know, for trying. But the problem is nobody knows what they're doing and there isn't anybody teaching you how to do anything. We basically learn amongst ourselves. It's sad but true.”
- 80% of participants would rather use other lay overdose prevention methods before utilizing naloxone, potentially causing harm:
“...because we didn't have to use it on everybody, because like I said, with the ice water-, or even a soda with ice in it, like, I would use that. And I strived to make that happen and make it work so I wouldn't have to use the Narcan. But sometimes it wouldn't work so we had to use it”
- Past experiences with discrimination deter PWUD from accessing emergency services and lead PWUD to mistrust formal institutions, affecting the prevention of overdose deaths:
“I dialed 911. The police came. He [Policeman] goes, 'What kind of drugs is he on?' I said, 'I'm thinking it's fentanyl.' He said, 'Well, we need to find out what type of drug this is on.' He would never administer Narcan. I said, 'It doesn't matter what he's on, Narcan is not going to hurt him... I mean, the officer would not hit him with Narcan. If they would have, he would have lived.”
- Stigma in the PWUD community creates social pressure to save a life. Stigma also causes naloxone to have a negative connotation among PWUD due to fear of its effects.
“I mean, obviously it's [Narcan] life saving, but someone administering it wouldn't want to put that on someone else, I guess. Knowing that it's going to be saving their life, they would still do it, but try anything else they can before the last resort of saving their life.”

FINDINGS (CONT.)

- The influence of legal safeguards, such as Good Samaritan laws that provide legal protection to PWUD who seek help for overdose emergencies, positively impacts overdose prevention in Orlando.

The guy...he was completely gone, you know...They didn't even call 911, so, when I got there, I said, 'Did you all call 911?' 'No, no, we're scared.' I said, 'No, you don't need to be scared. Call 911. You're not going to get in trouble.' They're under the impression you're going to get in trouble. And at that point everybody thought I was crazy. They thought, 'Man, you're going to go to jail and all that.' But, no, you won't, you go to jail when you don't call. First thing, call 911. That's how I'd do it.”

CONCLUSIONS

- Although PWUD in Orlando, Florida, actively take measures to address overdose incidents and prevent overdose deaths, my data show several socio-cultural barriers still challenge the overall efficacy of overdose prevention initiatives.
- This research emphasizes the necessity for developing community-focused programs aimed at reducing deeply rooted stigma associated with drug use, such as harm reduction programs that provide PWUD with naloxone and naloxone training.
- This research shows that there is a pressing need for comprehensive overdose training and education in Orlando, Florida, that can further enhance the effectiveness of these prevention strategies.

SIGNIFICANCE

- By exploring the socio-cultural and contextual factors that shape overdose prevention strategies among PWUD, this research can inform harm reduction services and public health authorities of evidence-based approaches to overdose prevention that resonate with PWUD.
- My findings can assist in improving the access to and delivery of overdose prevention programs in the specific local context of Orlando, Florida, to improve the health and support of PWUD, their families, and their communities.
- This research contributes to the anthropological literature on drug use, overdose, and overdose prevention by focusing on the perspectives of PWUD on overdose, which is currently scarce⁶.

REFERENCES

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 2023. “Provisional Drug Overdose Death Counts.” Accessed on December 28, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsn/drug-overdose-data.htm>

² Florida Department of Health Orange County. 2023. “As a Reminder: Florida Department of Health Orange County Providing Lifesaving Naloxone to Reduce Substance Abuse Deaths.” Accessed on December 28, 2023. <https://orange.floridahealth.gov/newsroom/2023/02/Naloxone.html>

³ Federal Drug and Administration (FDA). 2023. “FDA Approves First Over-the-Counter Naloxone Nasal Spray.” Accessed on December 28, 2023. <https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/fda-approves-first-over-counter-naloxone-nasal-spray>

⁴ Sangaramanororthy, Thurka, and Karen A. Kroege. 2020. *Rapid Ethnographic Assessments: A Practical Approach and Toolkit for Collaborative Community Research*. Abingdon: Routledge.

⁵ Parkin, Stephen. 2017. “Observant Participation with People Who Inject Drugs in Street-Based Settings: Reflections on a Method Used During Applied Ethnographic Research.” *Addiction Research & Theory* 25(1): 39-47.

⁶ Harris, Shana, and Allison Schlosser. 2021. “At the Intersection of Harm Reduction and Covid-19: The Role of Anthropologists during and Post-Pandemic.” *Human Organization* 80(4): 272-281.