

# The Synthetic Opioid Epidemic: A Study Protocol to Determine Whether People Who Use Drugs Can Influence or Shape Public Opinion via Mass Media

Ehsan Jozaghi (✉ [ej2@sfu.ca](mailto:ej2@sfu.ca))

University of British Columbia <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3555-085X>

VANDU Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users

Vancouver

---

## Methodology

**Keywords:** Fentanyl, people who use drugs, media, public opinion, VANDU, epidemic, criminalization, marginalization, newspapers, magazine, advertisement, human rights

**Posted Date:** June 4th, 2021

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-542380/v1>

**License:**  This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[Read Full License](#)

---

# Abstract

## Background

We are currently witnessing an ongoing drug overdose death epidemic in many nations linked to the distribution of illegally manufactured potent synthetic opioids. While many health policy makers and researchers have focused on the root causes and possible solutions to the current crisis, there has been little focus on the power of advocacy and community action by people who use drugs (PWUDs). Specifically, there has been no research on the role of PWUDs in engaging and influencing mass media opinion.

## Methods

By relying on one of the longest and largest peer-run drug user advocacy groups in the world, the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), newspaper articles, television reports, and magazines that VANDU or its members have been directly involved in will be identified via two data bases (the Canadian Newsstream & Google News). The news articles and videos related to the health of PWUDs and issues affecting PWUDs from 1997 to the end of 2020 will be analyzed qualitatively using Nvivo software.

## Results

Not Applicable because it is a study protocol and data has not been collected and analyzed.

## Conclusion

As our communities are entering another phase of the drug overdose epidemic, acknowledging and partnering with PWUDs could play an integral part in advancing the goals of harm reduction, treatment, and human rights.

## Trial registration

Not applicable because it uses secondary data.

# Introduction

Many nations, including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States have shown rapid increases in cases of opioid overdose deaths [1-4]. There are indications that a shift towards a global epidemic of opioid use and misuse is also inevitable, if appropriate preventative and harm reduction measures are not implemented [5,6]. While researchers and policy makers have offered causes and possible solutions to the current opioid epidemic, many jurisdictions have already implemented numerous initiatives aimed at reducing drug overdose deaths.

One such initiative that has been implemented in many regions is the public health/awareness campaigns about the potency of synthetic opioids through media and paid public advertisement [7-9]. Mass media, such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines can be used effectively to reach large proportions of populations and change public opinion. In fact, recent public health campaigns, most notably the effects of tobacco use, have shown the success of mass media in changing social norms, attitudes, and behaviors related to addictive behavior [10]. Similar results have been shown in other health areas, such as the National High Blood Pressure Education Program and the National Cholesterol Education Program, where large scale national campaigns helped to reduce both blood pressure and blood cholesterol in the United States [11].

While mass media campaigns through paid advertisement could be successfully implemented to change attitudes, norms, perceptions, and eventually behavior, there has been little focus on the power of advocacy and community action by marginalized groups to accomplish similar outcomes. This is especially true for people who use drugs (PWUDs) who not only face numerous barriers in accessing health care, but have historically faced discrimination, stigmatization, and criminalization for their chronic relapsing medical condition [12-16].

However, recent research that evaluates the social and scientific impact of North America's longest and largest drug user advocacy group, the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), has demonstrated that PWUDs are capable of collectively advocating for health and wellbeing of marginalized groups [17]. Furthermore, prior ethnographic studies have noted that PWUDs through VANDU and its affiliate drug user lead groups have the capacity to not only advocate and give voice to the most marginalized members of society, but they have the capability to transform the discriminatory rhetoric around the war on drugs [18-27].

Therefore, if PWUDs have the power to lead, collaborate, and facilitate ground breaking research while advocating for the members of their community, then the question of whether PWUDs can inform and engage public opinion via mass media is topical. This is especially pivotal, because there has been no research thus far to evaluate such power of engagement and community action via mass media by PWUDs. By identifying, analyzing and reporting on news articles, videos, and magazines that have been written, reported, and influenced by VANDU's membership, this article aims to show the level of engagement of marginalized groups with mass media. This is especially critical, as minor language adjustments can boost the support around harm reduction intervention in the current opioid crisis [28].

## **Methods**

### **I. Data source**

In order to effectively conduct the qualitative content analysis of news items, this protocol will rely on a news data base: 1) the ProQuest Canadian Newsstream (formerly the Canadian Newsstand Complete) and 2) Google News. The Canadian Newsstream via ProQuest web interface was chosen because it provides not only the largest newspaper, video, and magazine article data bases in Canada (full text items

of nearly 300 unique newspapers and news organizations), but the timeline for many of the articles goes beyond many of the other archive bases (some items date back to the 1970s) [29-30]. Furthermore, the ProQuest Canadian Newsstream is able to provide access to other major Canadian news sources (e.g., the Globe & Mail, CBC News, and Maclean's ) while at the same time allowing many regional media sources to be easily attainable (e.g., the Hamilton Spectator, the Medicine Hat News, and the Vancouver Courier) [29].

Google News was chosen as the second data source because it is a free based news portal that is simplified based on public use, rather than solely for academic purposes [31]. More than a decade ago, it was estimated that more than 9 million people access their news from Google news each month [31]. At the same time, Google News has a broader appeal in today's society, as more and more people are relying on social media such as YouTube and Google Chrome products to access news and up-to-date information via the clustering of news information on topics of interest [32]. This is especially important in the context of this research, as the main objective relates to mass media's role in shaping public opinion.

In addition, one of the main advantages of Google News over all other archival data bases, such as ProQuest, Factiva, JSTOR, Periodicals Archive Online, or LexisNexis, is its ability to provide not only text items, but other graphics (e.g., photos) and background information (e.g., headline size and story placement) that are often eliminated before a story is archived in traditional data bases [31]. Finally, Google news is able to capture local news or smaller non-print articles (e.g., VICE, the Georgia Straight, the Tyee, the North Shore News, and rabble.ca) that are often missed by other data bases, such as in this case, the ProQuest Canadian Newsstream.

## **II. Data collection**

The data pertaining to this study protocol related to openly accessible news items available to the public via Google or the membership/subscriber-based academic portal of Canadian Newsstream; therefore, no ethics approval was needed from a university or institution. The search query for both Google News and Canadian Newsstream involved the phrase, "Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users". No restriction on the publication date of news items was considered for both data bases, because some web interfaces and search engines have no details by which they order their results [33].

The inclusion criteria for news items (e.g., newspapers, magazines, and videos) will be based on the following criteria: 1) items written or spoken in the English language; 2) items that are related directly to VANDU's recent activism, work, or action; 3) items that involve members of VANDU (e.g., action, comments, or activism). The news items that met the initial inclusion criteria will be further reviewed in full before being added for qualitative analysis.

During the full review, each news item's geographic area will be divided via an excel worksheet into local (e.g., British Columbia (B.C.)), national (e.g., Canada), and International categories. Moreover, the data range for each article will also be noted in the excel worksheet. All items collected via the excel worksheet

will later be included in the quantitative findings to link the data to major epidemics in the region and in the Downtown Eastside neighborhood.

### **III. Material**

In addition to Microsoft Excel which will be used for quantitative analysis linking geography and important dates to the data set, this study protocol also relies on Nvivo software (version 12) for the qualitative analysis. Version 12 of Nvivo software (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018) has many new features that not only allow for greater exploration and visualization into the qualitative analysis (e.g., coding videos, photos, maps, interviews, pdf files), but also allows for easy cross tabulation of data and information exchange via other software. Many of these features helped in the analysis of news articles and better visualization of imported items.

### **IV. Data analysis**

The data analysis of news items that have passed the first and second review will be imported into Nvivo for further qualitative analysis. The initial qualitative analysis will involve open coding, where, based on the review of the whole news item (e.g., the title and news content), each article will be placed into its own category. Placing a whole news item in a coding category in Nvivo is achieved based on the inductive principles of grounded theory, whereas during the data collection, there will already be interplay between coding and data review [33-36]. In effect, during the final review and subsequent uploading of the news items, there could be 'constant simultaneous comparison' between items that belong to specific coding categories and whether a new coding category needs to be constructed [36]. Codes will be developed in an iterative process, as emergent news items and themes will be identified in accordance with grounded theory principles [37]. In fact, the emergent themes will be constantly compared with established codes to observe similarities and differences across categories.

To provide linkage and examples from the new inductive, open, and emergent coding [38], Nvivo software will be used once again for a deductive approach in coding the content of news items [39-41]. During this stage of analysis, latent content analysis will be employed, where the focus is not only on the interpretation of the content [42], but the main objective is to display the true usage [43,44]. Therefore, by relying on Nvivo's word frequency query, the most frequent words and phrases will be identified. This quantification of the most frequent words or phrases is an attempt to contextualize the text of the news items, rather than infer meaning [40].

Later on, the most frequent words and phrases will be used within the context of the previous inductive codes to form new templates and code guides as a means of sorting the text within each news item [45]. The theme identified through this deductive process will help provide further interpretation in terms of latent meanings [46]. Since validity is an important concept in research regardless of the methods used, this research also presents findings with quotes from each news item to present the context for each theme and as a standalone representation of the theme.

## Results

Not Applicable because it is a study protocol and data has not been collected, analyzed and reported.

## Discussion

While previous research related to the effectiveness of public opinion and public campaign has been conducted through surveys [7-9], <sup>7-9</sup> it is important to note that survey research has historically underestimated the effectiveness of an intervention because of the stigmatized nature of drug use [47,48]. Therefore, one of the strengths of this qualitative research is its unique ability to report on the largest and longest running drug user advocacy group in North America and its impact on public opinion, through mass media engagements.

It is important to note that social stigma, where society via mass media endorses stereotypes or negative feelings against an already marginalized group [49], manifests itself at a personal level. As the current opioid epidemic has demonstrated, stigmatization can also manifest at a structural level. Therefore, this research could demonstrate that drug users and their allies could have a profound influence on mass media engagement. In effect, previous research has demonstrated the benefits of motivational interviewing, such as newspaper or news organization interviews [49]. Moreover, positive stories initiated by peer-led advocacy groups, such as VANDU via mass media engagement could have the power to slowly change the stigma that target PWUDs.

It is also important to note that while previous research has clearly demonstrated the activism and community action of VANDU since the late 1990s, such as numerous demonstrations, night time syringe distributions, injection support teams, and the implementation of unsanctioned supervised injection facilities (SIF), unsanctioned inhalation facilities, scientific research, and education [17-21], VANDU's mass media engagement as the longest run drug user organization has not been reported in any previous study.

## Conclusion

Therefore, since the formation of VANDU as a response to the public health declaration of blood borne infections (e.g., HIV and hepatitis C cases) and drug overdose cases (e.g., 300 cases per year) in the late 1990s by the Vancouver/Richmond Health Board [50], there has been numerous mass media engagements by VANDU's memberships. This study protocol attempts to show how VANDU's past mass media engagements via qualitative content analysis have had impacts on mass media. As the overdose crisis linked to synthetic opioids continues, VANDU's mass media engagements study could demonstrate the level of advocacy by PWUDs for harm reduction (e.g., SIFs), de-criminalization, and human rights.

## Abbreviations

British Columbia: B.C.

People who use drugs: PWUDs

Supervised injection facility: SIF

Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users: VANDU

## Declarations

### Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not required as this is a study protocol that uses secondary data via World Wide Web.

### Consent for publication

Not required as this study protocol is not based on interviews.

### Availability of data and material

Available via request from the corresponding author.

### Competing interests

Nothing to report regarding the first author. The second author is the organization that the study protocol is attempting to assess.

### Funding

No funding was received for this study protocol.

### Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to this study protocol

### Acknowledgements

Many thanks to VANDU board members and Caimen Yen for their contribution to this study.

## References

1. Roxburgh A, Burns L, Drummer OH, Pilgrim J, Farrell M, Degenhardt L. Trends in fentanyl prescriptions and fentanyl-related mortality in Australia. *Drug Alcohol Rev* 2013;32(3):269-75.
2. Gomes T, Mamdani MM, Paterson JM, Dhalla IA, Juurlink DN. Trends in high-dose opioid prescribing in Canada. *Can Fam Physician* 2014; 60(9):826-32.
3. Giraudon I, Lowitz K, Dargan PI, Wood DM, Dart RC. Prescription opioid abuse in the UK. *Brit J Clin Pharmacol.* 2013; 76(5):823-4.

4. Rudd RA, Seth P, David F, Scholl L. Increases in drug and opioid-involved overdose deaths – United States, 2010–2015. *Morb Mortal Wkly Rep*. 2016; *65*:1445–52.
5. Degenhardt L, Whiteford HA, Ferrari AJ, Baxter AJ, Charlson FJ, Hall WD, Freedman G, Burstein R, Johns N, Engell RE, Flaxman A. Global burden of disease attributable to illegal drug use and dependence: Findings from the Global Burden of Disease Study 2010. *Lancet*. 2013; *382*(9904):1564-74.
6. Nolan S, Socias ME, Wood E. The Threat of an International Opioid Crisis. *Curr Addict Rep*; 2018; 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40429-018-0231-x>
7. Kerr T, Small W, Hyshka E, Maher L, Shannon K. 'It's more about the heroin': injection drug users' response to an overdose warning campaign in a Canadian setting. *Addiction*. 2013; *108*(7):1270-6.
8. Hedberg K, Bui LT, Livingston C, Shields LM, Van Otterloo J. Integrating Public Health and Health Care Strategies to Address the Opioid Epidemic: The Oregon Health Authority's Opioid Initiative. *Journal of public health management and practice: J Public HealthMan*. 2018; 1-7. DOI: 10.1097/PHH.0000000000000849
9. Soukup-Baljak Y, Greer AM, Amlani A, Sampson O, Buxton JA. Drug quality assessment practices and communication of drug alerts among people who use drugs. *Int J Drug Policy*. 2015; *26*(12):1251-7.
10. Wakefield MA, Loken B, Hornik RC. Use of mass media campaigns to change health behaviour. *Lancet*. 2010; *376*(9748):1261-71.
11. Roccella, EJ. The contributions of public health education toward the reduction of cardiovascular disease mortality: experiences from the National High Blood Pressure Education Program. In: Hornik, RC., editor. *Public Health Communication*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2002. p. 73-83.
12. Lunze K, Lunze FI, Raj A, Samet JH. Stigma and human rights abuses against people who inject drugs in Russia-a qualitative investigation to inform policy and public health strategies. *PLoS One*. 2015; *10*(8).
13. Kiriazova T, Lunze K, Raj A, Bushara N, Blokhina E, Krupitsky E, et al. "It is easier for me to shoot up": Stigma, abandonment, and why HIV-positive drug users in Russia fail to link to HIV care. *AIDS Care*. 2017; *29*(5):559–563.
14. Rivera A V., DeCuir J, Crawford ND, Amesty S, Lewis CF. Internalized stigma and sterile syringe use among people who inject drugs in New York City, 2010–2012. *Drug Alcohol Depend*. 2014; *144*:259–264.
15. Jozaghi E. 'The biggest mistake God ever made was to create junkies': Unsafe injection practices, health care discrimination and overdose deaths in Montreal, Canada. *Can Grad J Soc Criminol*. 2012; *2*(1):20-34.
16. Thomson E, Lampkin H, Maynard R, Karamouzian M, Jozaghi E. The lessons learned from the fentanyl overdose crises in British Columbia, Canada. *Addiction*. 2017; *112*(11):2068-70.
17. Jozaghi E, Greer AM, Lampkin H, Buxton JA. Activism and scientific research: 20 years of community action by the Vancouver area network of drug users. *Subst Abuse Treat, Pr*. 2018; *13*(1):1-9.

18. Jozaghi E. *The role of peer drug users' social networks and harm reduction programs in changing the dynamics of life for people who use drugs in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, Canada*. 2015; Doctoral dissertation: Simon Fraser University.
19. Jozaghi E. The role of drug users' advocacy group in changing the dynamics of life in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, Canada. *J Subst Use*. 2014; 19(1-2):213-8.
20. Jozaghi E, Reid AA. A case study of the transformative effect of peer injection drug users in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, Canada. *Can J Criminol Crim*. 2014; 56(5):563-94.
21. Jozaghi E. "SALOME gave my dignity back": The role of randomized heroin trials in transforming lives in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, Canada. *Int J Qual Stud Health*. 2014; 9(1):23698.
22. Boyd S, Murray D, MacPherson D. Telling our stories: heroin-assisted treatment and SNAP activism in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. *Harm Red J*. 2017; 14(1):27.
23. Goodman A, Fleming K, Markwick N, Morrison T, Lagimodiere L, Kerr T, Society WA. "They treated me like crap and I know it was because I was Native": The healthcare
24. experiences of Aboriginal peoples living in Vancouver's inner city. *Soc Sci Med*. 2017; 178:87-94. Olding M, Hayashi K, Pearce L, Bingham B, Buchholz M, Gregg D, Hamm D, Shaver L, McKendry R, Barrios R, Nosyk B. Developing a patient-reported experience questionnaire with and for people who use drugs: A community engagement process in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. *Int J Drug Policy*. 2018; 59:16-23.
25. Brown L, Skulsh J, Morgan R, Kuehlke R, Graham B. Research into action? The eastside illicit drinkers group for education's (EIDGE) experiences as a community-based group in Vancouver, Canada. *Drug Alcohol Rev*. 2018; 37:S156-8.
26. Maynard R, Jozaghi E. The drug war must end: The right to life, liberty and security of the person during the COVID-19 pandemic for people who use drugs. *Harm Reduct J*. 2021; 18(1):1-2.
27. Jozaghi E, Yake K. Two decades of activism, social justice, and public health civil disobedience: VANDU. *Can J Public Health*. 2020; 111(1):143-4.
28. Barry CL, Sherman SG, McGinty EE. Language matters in combatting the opioid epidemic: Safe consumption sites versus overdose prevention sites. *Am J Public Health*. 2018;
29. 108(9): 1157-1159. Rosenbloom D. Framing low-carbon pathways: A discursive analysis of contending storylines surrounding the phase-out of coal-fired power in Ontario. *Envir Innov Soc Trans*. 2018; 27:129-45.
30. Rosenbloom D. A clash of socio-technical systems: Exploring actor interactions around electrification and electricity trade in unfolding low-carbon pathways for Ontario. *Ener Res*
31. *Soc Sci*. 2019; 49:219-32. Weaver DA, Bimber B. Finding news stories: A comparison of searches using LexisNexis and Google News. *J Mass Commun Q*. 2008; 85(3): 515-30.
32. Banerjee S, Ramanathan K, Gupta A. Clustering short texts using wikipedia. In Proceedings of the 30th annual international ACM SIGIR conference on research and development in information retrieval. 2007; (pp. 787-788). ACM.

33. Haddaway NR, Collins AM, Coughlin D, Kirk S. The role of Google scholar in evidence reviews and its applicability to grey literature searching. *PLoS One*. 2015; *10*(9): e0138237.
34. Maher C, Hadfield M, Hutchings M, de Eyto A. Ensuring Rigor in Qualitative Data Analysis: A Design Research Approach to Coding Combining NVivo With Traditional Material Methods. *Int J Qual Methods*. 2018; *17*(1):1609406918786362.
35. Charmaz K. *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage; 2006.
36. Suddaby R. From the editors: What grounded theory is not. *Acad Manag J*. 2006; *49*(4): 633-642.
37. Strauss A, Corbin J. *Basics of qualitative research*. Sage publications; 1990.
38. Wilson L, Vannice S, Hacksel C, Leonard L. Peer worker or client?: conflicting identities among peer workers engaged in harm reduction service delivery. *Addict Res Theory*. 2018; *26*(5):361-8.
39. Elo S, Kyngäs H. The qualitative content analysis process. *J Adv Nurs*. 2008; *62*(1):107-15.
40. Hsieh HF, Shannon SE. Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qual Health Res*. 2005; *15*(9):1277-88.
41. Vaismoradi M, Turunen H, Bondas T. Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study. *Nurs Health Sci*. 2013; *15*(3):398-405.
42. Holsti OR. *Content analysis for the social sciences and humanities*. 1969; Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
43. Morse JM, Field PA. *Qualitative research methods for health professionals*. 1995; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
44. Catanzaro M. Using qualitative analytical techniques. In: Woods NF, Catanzaro M, *Nursing research: Theory and practice*. 1988; St. Louis, MO: Mosby: 437-456.
45. Crabtree B, Miller W. A template approach to text analysis: developing and using codebooks. In: Crabtree B, Miller W, editors. *Doing qualitative research*. Newbury Park: Sage; 1999. p. 163–77.
46. Fereday J, Muir-Cochrane E. Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *Int J Qualitative Methods*. 2006; *5*(1):80–92.
47. Shield KD, Rehm J. Difficulties with telephone-based surveys on alcohol consumption in high-income countries: the Canadian example. *Int J Methods Psychiatr Res*. 2012; *21*:17-28.
48. Zhao J, Stockwell T, MacDonald S. Non-response bias in alcohol and drug population surveys. *Drug Alcohol Rev* 2009; *28*:648-57.
49. Livingston JD, Milne T, Fang ML, Amari E. The effectiveness of interventions for reducing stigma related to substance use disorders: A systematic review. *Addiction*. 2012; *107*(1):39-50.
50. Kerr T, Small W, Pease W, Douglas D, Pierre A, Wood E. Harm reduction by a “user-run” organization: A case study of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU). *Int J Drug Policy*. 2006; *17*(2):61-9.