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Future Trends: Opioid Use Disorder and Opioid-Related Overdose Deaths

Opioid addiction and overdose is a major problem facing the world today. Globally, 60,000,000 people struggle with opioid addiction, and over 100,000 people die of opioid overdose every year.¹ In the United States, 80,411 opioid-related deaths were reported in 2021.² In New York City more specifically, opioid-related unintentional drug poisoning (overdose) deaths totaled 2,252 in the same year.³ Opioid use and overdose death often impact low-resourced and racialized communities disproportionately. In New York City, Black and Latino individuals constituted 31% and 35% of all opioid-related unintentional drug poisoning (overdose) deaths respectively.³

I ranked this particular issue as having the highest importance because I have seen the effects of opioid use—and drug use more broadly—firsthand. Opioid use can have cascading effects on our society, and serve as a risk factor for infectious diseases like HCV, HBV, and HIV. Furthermore, low-resourced and racialized communities—such as homeless, Latino, and Black populations—are often disproportionately impacted by opioid use disorder (OUD) and opioid-related overdose deaths. In order to achieve health equity domestically and abroad, it is important to start by addressing OUD. Incredible steps are currently underway to help address OUD and overdose-related deaths in progressive-facing cities in the U.S., like New York City, San Francisco, and Seattle. These measures include Narcan training and distribution, overdose prevention centers, and syringe exchange programs. These measures should be further expanded in the United States and internationally to reduce and prevent OUD and opioid-related overdose deaths. Additionally, steps should be taken to increase federal funding and support for harm reduction programs across the country, starting with a law to decriminalize all drugs. Portugal serves as a good model for novel and human-centered approaches to drug policies. Unfortunately, it might be difficult to push for harm reduction policies across the United States, given the long, ugly legacy of the War on Drugs, and our conservative, penal approaches to drug use.

References

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