

COPING WITH COVID IN CORRECTIONS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY AMONG THE RECENTLY INCARCERATED ON PURSUING SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER TREATMENT DURING THE PANDEMIC

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Background:

Two-thirds of justice-involved individuals have substance use disorders (SUD). While correctional facilities can stabilize residents on various forms of SUD treatment including pharmaco- and behavioral therapy, little is known about how pandemic-related service disruptions impacted motivation for and access to SUD treatment.

Methods:

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 adults incarcerated in a U.S. correctional facility between March 2020 and May 2021. We asked participants about facility enforcement of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention COVID-19 guidelines. We conducted a secondary analysis examining how this affected access to SUD treatment among those reporting SUD treatment in the last five years. We analyzed qualitative data thematically using an iterative process.

Results:

Of the 20 participants, 10 (50%) reported receiving SUD support in the last five years. Most participants were male (90%) with a median age of 51 years, and non-Hispanic white (50%). Overall, perceptions were discordant on whether COVID-19 positively or negatively impacted SUD services. The first theme was resiliency to pursue treatment despite facility limitations. Despite COVID-19's adverse impacts on service access, some remained motivated to pursue treatment: *"I'm trying to really work on my sobriety. Because if not, I may end up dying."* Another theme was peer support filling gaps in services, which for some, was more effective. Others hosted their own SUD meetings: *"While we was inside, ... because there was no counselor ... we'd bring the books in and yeah. So, we conducted our own meetings."*

Conclusion:

Participants described resiliency in pursuing SUD treatment despite COVID-19-related program changes. Given the high rate of SUD among justice-involved individuals, it is imperative that correctional facilities have contingency plans to provide SUD treatment amidst a pandemic. This is especially important as the lack of control over one's environment may adversely impacted one's desire to start or continue.

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