

“IT’S NOT WHAT YOU KNOW, IT’S WHO YOU KNOW”: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR PEOPLE RECEIVING OPIOID AGONIST TREATMENT AMID COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS

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Background:

People receiving opioid agonist treatment (OAT) experienced significant changes to their healthcare and support networks due to COVID-19 restrictions. These restrictions limited opportunities to connect with peers and services and disrupted the provision of healthcare. Impeded access to much-needed social resources can negatively impact on social capital, which in turn, can have negative consequences on a person’s health and wellbeing. The aim of this study was to assess the role of social capital for people receiving OAT during restrictions related to COVID-19.

Methods:

In-depth interviews were undertaken with 40 people receiving OAT from September-December 2020. Interview questions addressed the impacts of COVID-19 on drug use and access, OAT dosing, and social and financial resources. We applied a social capital lens to understand the implications of the pandemic on the social resources of people receiving OAT amid city- and state-wide restrictions.

Results:

Having ongoing access to a trusted drug seller was critical to access supply and retrieving information about drug quality during the pandemic. Friends and peers often provided stand-in needle and syringe services, including delivery of sterile injecting equipment. However, stay-at-home orders isolated people from colleagues and friends, with some relying on in-person healthcare as their only reprieve from home confinement. Some participants were diverted entirely to telehealth appointments, leaving them feeling unattended, and their needs de-prioritised. Service delivery amid COVID-19 precautions occasionally left people feeling abandoned.

Conclusion:

Restrictions had the effect of inhibiting the development and ongoing maintenance of social capital for some people receiving OAT. The expansion of telehealth, particularly for mental health care, was detrimental to people with lower social capital.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: *See example below:*

LL, AC, and ADM have nothing to declare. CT has received speaker’s fees from Gilead and Abbvie and research funding from Merck and Indivior. JG is a consultant/advisor and has received research grants from AbbVie, Camurus, Cepheid, Gilead, Hologic, Indivior, and Merck outside the submitted work.