

Factors Contributing to Increased Opioid Overdoses in the COVID-19 Pandemic: A scoping review

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INTRODUCTION

The opioid epidemic was one of the most discussed and divisive issues within healthcare in the United States before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As of early 2020, the nation had just experienced its most devastating year on record for opioid overdose deaths.¹ Simultaneously, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, and subsequent data revealed an alarming acceleration in opioid-related fatalities, surpassing the already concerning pre-pandemic trend.

This scoping review aimed to conduct a qualitative thematic analysis to uncover the underlying reasons and contributing factors behind the surge in opioid overdose deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODS

- Following Arksey and O'Malley's² five-step protocol for scoping reviews, we formulated the question: **"Compared to the period before the COVID-19 pandemic, what contributed to the increase in opioid overdoses in the United States?"**
- Inclusion criteria stipulated that articles be conducted and published within the United States between March 2020 and July 2021 and contain the terms 'COVID-19' in conjunction with 'opioid overdose,' 'opioid overdose response,' or 'opioid use disorder'.
- Out of 883 screened articles retrieved from the four databases utilized, 44 met these criteria and were included in the scoping review (Figure 1). These studies were categorized by region, study design, and the specific issues they addressed.

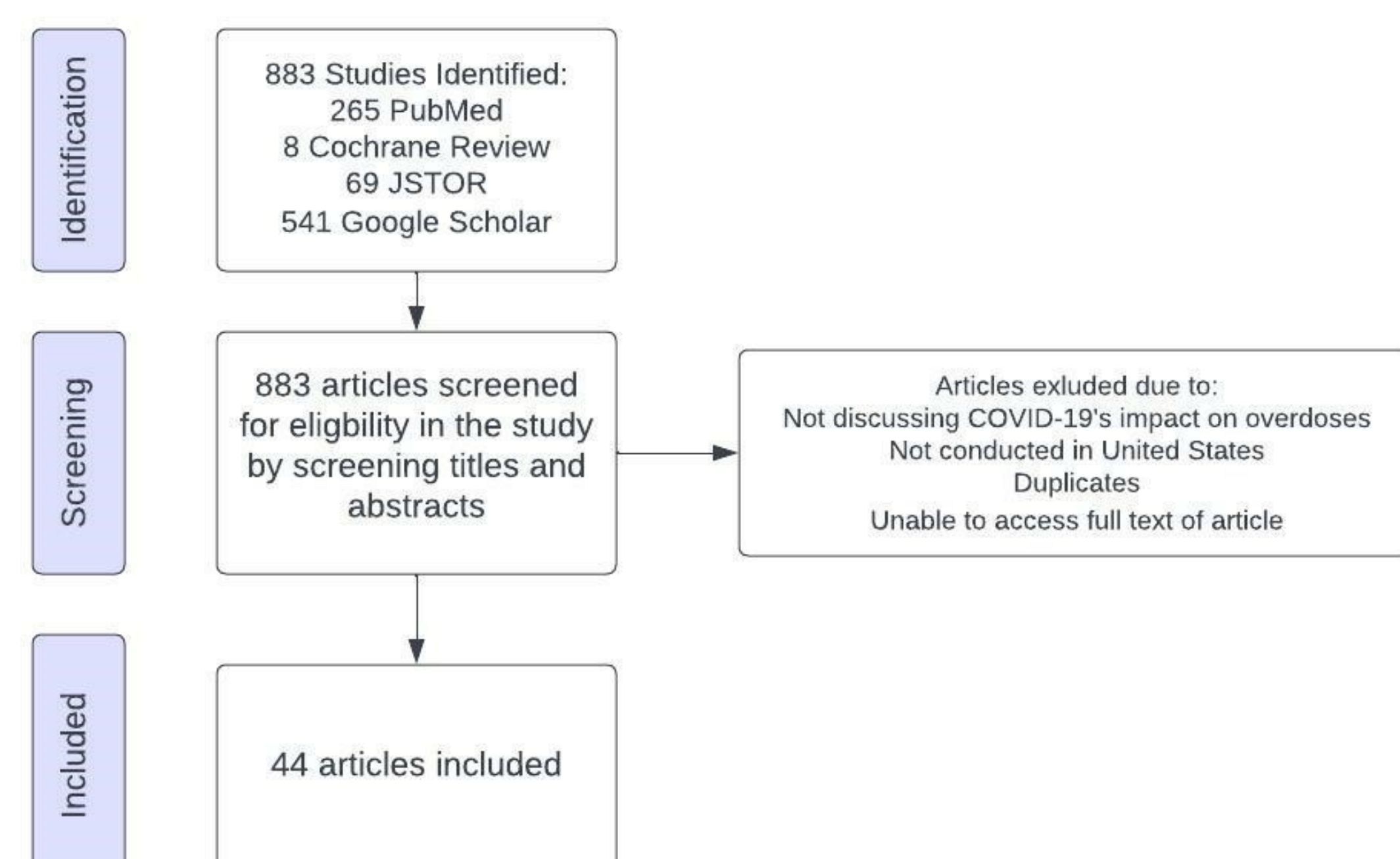


Figure 1. Flow diagram outlining the databases used in the scoping review; title and abstract screening; and total number of articles included within the review.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This scoping review identified prominent contributors to the surge in opioid overdoses during the pandemic:

Stigma, Social Isolation, Mental Health

- Isolation and reduced socialization are known to be powerful triggers for drug relapse, especially when combined with heightened negative emotions.
- Delayed prompt naloxone administration during overdoses, substantially elevating the risk of fatality.

Disruption in Drug Supply and the Rise of Fentanyl

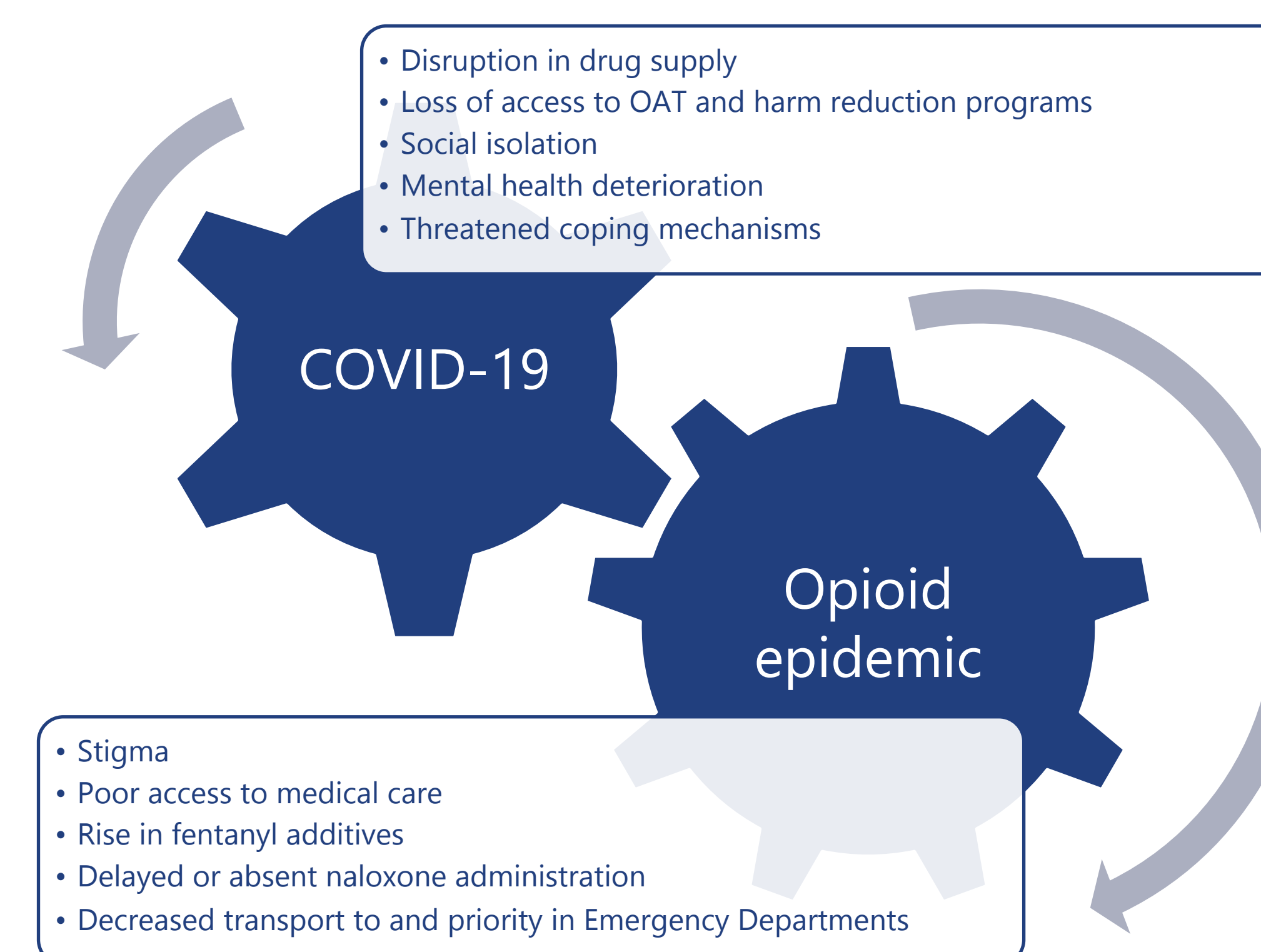
- Widespread disruptions in the drug supply have led to a dangerous surge in fentanyl additives in both opioid and non-opioid substances, as well as disrupted, inconsistent use.
- Simultaneous loss of access to fentanyl test strips at local harm reduction centers, further increasing their risk of overdose.

Lack of Access to Medical Care

- Individuals who received naloxone often hesitated to seek further medical assistance due to stigma and COVID-19 concerns, resulting in a rise in cases of refused EMS transport (a 71% increase from non-pandemic years).³
- Medical triage became increasingly weighted during the pandemic with addiction treatment cited as a relatively low priority (Volkow, 2020).⁴

Lack of Access to Opioid Agonist Therapy

- The additional globally-reduced access to OAT programs during the COVID-19 pandemic compounded to only further push away access to medical care in this population.
- Closure of OAT support programs during the pandemic, despite SAMHSA allowing buprenorphine prescriptions in the ED.
- Daily de-stigmatized medications were dispensed in significantly larger quantities to reduce pharmacy visits, but this option was not broadly available to medications like buprenorphine or methadone.⁵



CONCLUSION

- Opioid overdoses surged during the pandemic due to a combination of new issues emerging from the pandemic and the intensification of existing problems.
- These findings offer potential targets for future programs aimed at addressing the nation's exponentially growing opioid epidemic.
- We have an opportunity to reevaluate and adjust the nation's approach to opioid abuse and access to treatment.
- Acknowledging the rapidly evolving nature of the pandemic and the limitation of available data, we set a cutoff date for article inclusion in July 2021, coinciding with the review's start. This eliminated new data from being included in the study.
- The results presented here provide critical insights into the fundamental issues surrounding the nation's opioid overdose epidemic, offering a robust foundation for the necessary next steps in addressing this crisis.

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“Epidemics don’t smolder in pandemics, they ignite”

- Dr. Utsha G. Khatri