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University of Lethbridge study finds racial discrimination may play role in prescription drug misuse among Aboriginal populations

A new University of Lethbridge study suggests an expanded focus is needed in the fight against prescription drug addiction, including fentanyl abuse, within Aboriginal populations.

The study, published in the [Canadian Journal of Public Health](#), found that racial discrimination and subsequent post-traumatic stress symptoms might be key factors contributing to prescription drug problems among Aboriginal people.

“We do not have a common understanding of why disparate numbers of Aboriginal Peoples have prescription drug problems. This research suggests racial discrimination may play an important role,” says Dr. Cheryl Currie, AIHS Translational Chair in Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing and assistant professor in the U of L’s Faculty of Health Sciences.

“These findings encourage us to think outside the box. Most efforts to address addictions within Aboriginal populations have focused on the role Aboriginal people play in the problem, and the changes these groups need to make to fix the problem. This research combines with other studies to call for an expanded focus.”

The study came out of data collected through in-person surveys with Aboriginal adults living in Edmonton in 2010. It found that each additional situation in which Aboriginal adults experienced racism in a one-year period – be it at work, in public spaces, or seeking health care – was associated with a half-point increase in prescription drug addiction score.

“That is a big jump,” says Currie. “Scores of 2 for women and 6 for men on this scale suggest a person should undergo further testing for a drug use disorder.”

The study also found that this relationship was explained by increased PTSD symptoms among those experiencing high levels of discrimination.

“The idea that racism is stressful is not new,” says Currie. “The idea that racism may lead to symptoms of PTSD is more controversial. Yet, a growing body of research suggests individuals may respond to discrimination in ways that extend beyond their psychological control; in ways that are consistent with PTSD symptoms.”

Currie notes that multiple studies have linked racial discrimination to poor mental health and addictions as people try to cope with these experiences, as well as stress-induced endocrine dysfunction, cardiovascular dysfunction and accelerated aging across various racial groups.

“This is a rapidly growing field of research - the impact of racism on body, mind, and behaviour is complex,” she notes. “These findings open the door to new conversations about the breadth of factors that may be contributing to prescription drug misuse problems in Canada, and potential solutions.”

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