



## Research Brief

### *'Running myself ragged':*

## Stressors Faced by Peer Workers in Overdose Response Settings

Zahra Mamdani, Sophie McKenzie, Bernadette (Bernie) Pauly, Fred Cameron, Jennifer Conway- Brown, Denise Edwards, Amy Howell, Tracy Scott, Ryan Seguin, Peter Woodrow, Jane Buxton. "Running myself ragged": Stressors Faced by Peer Workers in Overdose Response Settings. *Harm Reduction Journal*; 18;18 (2021). Available at [URL](#)

**Background:** Peer workers or 'peers' (workers with past or present drug use experience) are at the forefront of overdose response initiatives and their role is essential in creating safe spaces for people who use drugs (PWUD). Working in overdose response settings has benefits for peer workers but is also stressful, with lasting emotional and mental health effects. Yet, little is known about the stressors peer workers face and what interventions can be implemented to support them in their roles.

A new research paper published in the *Harm Reduction Journal* in January 2021 describes five themes pointing to stressors felt by peer workers working in overdose response settings in BC.

**Methods:** This project used a community-based sequential mixed methods research design. 8 focus groups were conducted at the two pilot organizations – SOLID Outreach Society in Victoria and RainCity Housing in Vancouver, Coquitlam and Maple Ridge. A total of 31 peer workers participated in the focus groups. These results informed a survey which was later conducted (n=50) to acquire quantitative data on peer workers' perception of health, quality of life, working conditions and stressors. Frequency distributions were used to describe characteristics of participants.  $\chi^2$  distribution values with Yates correction were conducted to check for association between variables.

### Findings:

#### 1 Financial Insecurity

Participants indicated financial insecurity as one of their top stressors. Many participants attributed their poor financial situation to inequitable pay and job instability. They spoke about getting paid much less than other support staff who have formal degrees, despite doing the same work. Furthermore, many mentioned that their jobs rely on unstable funding and they lack formal long-term employment contracts. The stress of both low pay and precarious work environment are significant for peer workers.

#### 2 Lack of respect and recognition at work

Several peers felt that they were not taken seriously or given due respect by their work colleagues and by other professionals they encounter in their work. This dynamic has many facets, including being identified via the potentially-stigmatizing term "peer", lack of basic work resources, lack of job clarity and relegation to menial labour, and disrespect from other professionals like police and paramedics.

#### 3 Inability to access and/or refer individuals to resources

Many focus group participants indicated that a lack of social services for PWUD is a key stressor in their lives. They described that they often serve as a bridge connecting PWUD to social services and other supports. Inability to do so, despite a genuine desire to help, creates a sense of powerlessness and adds to peer workers' stress and dissatisfaction. Examples of services that peer workers found hard to access were 'detox', legal services, welfare and income assistance, and civic services such as government identification.

## 4 Housing challenges

Many participants mentioned that their housing situations jeopardized both their security and their health, and that the conditions of their homes add stress rather than offer a respite to alleviate it. The problem is multi-fold, including unsafe conditions, issues acquiring housing, and difficulty finding a home within their communities. Housing challenges impact peer workers' ability to sustain work.

## 5 Constant exposure to death and trauma

Several peer workers mentioned that the constant exposure to trauma and loss of life is emotionally taxing and stressful. Like other first responders, peer workers can get stressed and burnt out from working in overdose response settings. However, unlike most other first responders, peer workers can relate deeply to stories of trauma, which amplifies their stress. They are not supporting mere clients, but often those who are friends and family members. Losing someone is therefore much more difficult.

### Financial insecurity

**72%** of the survey participants indicated "Financial Situation" as one of their top three stressors (ranging from 62.5% to 88.9% across the four cities).

*"Honestly, my biggest hurdle is trying to do my job and then try and scrape up money outside of work to just get by."*

### Lack of respect and recognition at work

**40%** of the survey participants indicated "Work Situation" as one of their top three stressors (ranging from 12.5% to 77.8% across the four cities).

*"I think there's a little bit of stigma from the ambulance people [and] from the first responders. [...] I find that they can come in, take over and kind of push the peer aside. I think that there is a lot of stigma against peers."*

### Inability to access and/or refer someone to resources

*"If you want to help somebody you don't want to turn them away [...] without getting an answer or resolving their enquiry. You want to help them and it bothers you 'cause you've been on that side where nobody's helping you and it's frustrating."*

### Housing challenges

**38%** of the survey participants indicated "Housing Challenges" as one of their top three stressors (ranging from 12.5% to 66.7% across the four cities).

*"When you're able to look after yourself financially and physically and mentally and emotionally, then you're able to do so much more for other people. Because you're together. You're not worried about that. Stressing out, [worrying] about [how] after this, I got to go home to my shithole and try to figure out what I'm going to do for [...] dinner. You're together and you're in a position where you can actually help."*

### Constant exposure to death and trauma

**68%** of the survey participants were at least sometimes "affected by the traumatic stress of those they help" (ranging for 59% to 75% across the four cities).

*"Living through the bad days. Living through our losses. Living through somebody [going] to jail. Living through somebody [getting] beat[en] up down on the corner and [having] their head bashed in, [spending] six months in the hospital. Living through [...] we found a dead body in the garbage. Living through those things together. I think that is a lot. I think that's it, really."*

**Conclusion:** Peer workers are faced with a diversity of stressors in their lives, rooted in deeper systemic issues such as stigma and criminalization of drug use which further marginalize an already structurally vulnerable population. It is critical to identify the stressors faced by peer workers and implement interventions to ease the emotional, physical and financial burden faced by peer workers. However, a broader shift towards systemic harm reduction is also necessary.