

# “We need to build a better bridge”: Youths’ experiences and needs with opioid treatment services in British Columbia

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## BACKGROUND:

Despite that nearly 20% of opioid-related overdose deaths have occurred in adolescent and young adults, treatment programs and policies have assumed that what works for adults will also work for youth. However, recent research suggests that existing options may not meet the unique needs and preferences of Canadian youth. The Improving Treatment Together (ITT) project is responding to this gap by exploring youths’ experiences with opioid treatment services and preferences for youth-centred services.

## METHODS:

**Sample:** Young people (n=13) in Kelowna and Vancouver, ages 16-24 with lived/living experience with opioid use (other than as prescribed) and experience accessing health services/treatment for opioid use in last 12 months.

**Procedures:** Participants attended a half-day workshop that employed co-design methods (Fig. 1). Through small group discussions, participants and ITT project team established a shared understanding of young peoples’ experiences with opioid use and opioid treatment services. Workshops then explored the needs to be addressed to improve service experiences and outcomes.

**Analysis:** Small group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and read repeatedly. Thematic analyses of small group discussions were undertaken.

Figure 1. Co-design Process Applied in ITT Workshops



Figure 2. Youths’ Shared Experiences Accessing Opioid Treatment Services



“We need to build a better bridge, a better understanding of how to approach people with addictions.” *(Youth in Vancouver, Feb 2020)*



Figure 3. Hierarchy of Needs Identified by Young People

## FINDINGS:

- Figure 2 depicts the major themes from discussions of participants’ experiences accessing opioid treatment services in Vancouver and Kelowna. These discussions showed that participants’ frequently felt “looked down upon” when accessing health and opioid treatment services and that services do not adequately address concurrent mental health and substance use needs.
- Additional themes suggested that opioid treatment services were not youth-centred; clinical environments felt unwelcoming, involved lengthy waits for prescriptions and referrals, and the limited consistency in providers meant that young people told their stories “repeatedly to a stranger”.
- From these experiences, young people defined needs that would help to “build a better bridge” between young people and opioid treatment services (Fig. 3). In both communities, emphasis was directed towards treatment environments and relationships with providers that were built on mutual respect and trust.
- In Vancouver, young people emphasized the importance of having basic needs addressed before being able to engage in services. In Kelowna, young people described the need for services to cultivate positive social relationships and activities, especially as people seek to move away from active substance use.

## CONCLUSION:

**These findings tell the powerful and resilient story of young peoples’ lived/living experience with opioid use. These stories culminated in the need for opioid treatment services that are comprehensive, safe, and empowering. Such services reflect opportunities to make opioid treatment services more accessible and acceptable to young people in British Columbia.**

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