Whereas, The number of opioid-related overdose deaths in the United States has been steadily increasing since 1999, reaching 80,816 deaths in 2021; and

Whereas, The media has the capacity to condition people’s perceptions of and attitudes towards disease severity; and

Whereas, By selectively including or excluding content, perspectives, and material, media platforms have a powerful capacity to frame issues, shape community attitudes, and impact political decision making; and

Whereas, Media coverage of the opioid overdose crisis has impacted public attitudes regarding the crisis and the subsequent response; and

Whereas, The Herald Sun newspaper in Australia effectively put heroin at the forefront of the public agenda by consistently highlighting heroin-related overdose deaths in the 1990s; and

Whereas, In the United States from 2008-2013, the news media used an increasing amount of stigmatizing language, such as referring to victims of addiction as “substance abusers” or “addicts” (appeared in 49% of stories) in lieu of less stigmatizing substitutes such as “person with a substance use disorder” (appeared in 2% of stories), potentially leading to increased stigma regarding opioid addiction among the American public; and

Whereas, In the United States from 1998-2012, coverage of the opioid epidemic focused on criminal justice solutions for the opioid epidemic; this coverage shifted to increasingly emphasize treatment, harm reduction, and prevention from 2013-2017, largely mirroring increased public acceptance that the War on Drugs had failed; and

Whereas, Despite increased coverage of the opioid epidemic in the United States occurring through the framework of prevention and treatment from 2013-2017, many evidence-based solutions were rarely mentioned, including the use of medication for treatment (9% of stories), syringe service programs (5% of stories), and safe injection sites (2% of stories); and

Whereas, The lack of mention of these evidence-based interventions in the news media is correlated with reduced public acceptance of these approaches for treatment of the opioid epidemic; and

Whereas, The stigma surrounding opioid addiction and strategies for harm reduction have significantly hindered the public health response to the opioid epidemic in the United States; and
Whereas, Increased stigma associated with media coverage of the opioid epidemic adversely impacts the ability of patients to seek and receive treatment for opioid addiction, as 25% of individuals report negative impacts on their job or fear of a negative opinion of community members as reasons for not seeking treatment; and

Whereas, News media framing of the opioid epidemic in the context of race has contributed to the differentiation of “white from black (and brown) suffering, white from black culpability, and white from black deservingness” in the public discourse; and

Whereas, Coded language used by the media can also contribute to the framing of issues, for example by establishing “urban” as code for Black or Latino and “suburban”/“rural” as code for White, effectively creating perceived separate spaces for white and Black drug users; and

Whereas, This difference in framing leads to a system where Black and Brown people who use drugs are more likely to be incarcerated and less likely to be offered access to healthcare providers, addiction treatment, and tools to prevent overdose and infection; and

Whereas, News media framing of White victims of the opioid epidemic as innocent and their deaths as shocking or out of the ordinary contrasts with persistent framing of the opioid epidemic in Black or Brown communities as normal, contributing to increased stigma; and

Whereas, Stigmatization and marginalization of victims of opioid addiction are associated with greater support for punitive policies instead of investment in prevention and treatment programs; and

Whereas, Ecological studies have shown a significant tendency for increases in fatal overdoses to follow increased media coverage of opioid-related deaths; and

Whereas, Our AMA supports the development of standards for media coverage of mass shootings to help address the gun violence public health crisis in Policy H-145.971, showing that the precedent exists for the AMA to encourage more thoughtful public engagement with health-related issues; therefore be it

RESOLVED, That our American Medical Association encourage the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in collaboration with other public and private organizations, to develop recommendations or best practices for media coverage and portrayal of opioid overdoses. (New HOD Policy)

Fiscal Note: Not yet determined

Received: 10/05/22
REFERENCES:


RELEVANT AMA POLICY

**Development and Implementation of Recommendations for Responsible Media Coverage of Mass Shootings H-145.971**

Our AMA encourages the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in collaboration with other public and private organizations, to develop recommendations and/or best practices for media coverage of mass shootings, including informed discussion of the limited data on the relationship between mental illness and gun violence, recognizing the potential for exacerbating stigma against individuals with mental illness. Citation: *Res*. 212, I-18; Modified: Res. 934, I-19