

Changes in social work practice and support for people who use drugs during the Covid-19 pandemic – a case study of Malmö, Sweden

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Covid-19 in Sweden

- The first confirmed case of SARS-CoV-2 infection in Sweden was identified January 2020 and domestic spread of infection in March.
- Sweden's public health response to the Covid-19 pandemic has been characterized by an open approach with assumed citizen trust and hesitant introduction of hard restrictions.
- High pressure on the healthcare system. Some healthcare and social services reduced their opening hours, most staff used protective equipment, and some switched to only meeting clients via digital forms of communication.

Social work and addiction in Sweden

- In Sweden, the responsibility for organizing addiction treatment is shared between the social services (responsible for prevention, social support, housing as well as non-medical treatment interventions), and the health care service (responsible for medically oriented interventions). This means that social work represents the profession that most help-seeking PWUD meet.

Aims

- The aim of this study was to investigate how the Covid-19 pandemic affected social work with PWUD regarding ways of working, quality of work, accessibility, and staff motivation.

Methods

- A mixed methods approach with Malmö as a case
- Online survey with social workers (n=81), 20th of May 2020 -20th of August 2020.
- Three qualitative focus group sessions with social workers in the field of addiction. (18th of May 2020, 2nd of November 2020, and the 11th of January 2021)

Results

- Most social workers stated that they to a large or very large degree changed their way of working because to the pandemic.
- The demand for physical distancing challenged important principles of social work such as social closeness, trust and accessibility, and led to a difficult work environment and fewer opportunities to conduct high quality social work, as well as a reduced likelihood of vulnerable clients receiving adequate assistance.
- The change of practice and shift to physical distancing and digital ways of meeting was dependent on the type of social work conducted.

Table 1. To what extent do you perceive that the current Covid-19 situation has affected your work? Pairwise comparison and Pearson's chi-square test.

		Not at all, to a small or to some degree	To a large or very large degree	Total	P-value
Type of work	Assessment/screening	21.7% (5)	78.3% (18)	100% (23)	0.004
	Outreach/ low-threshold	66.7% (12)	33.3% (6)	100% (18)	
	Assessment/screening	21.7% (5)	78.3% (18)	100% (23)	0.527
	Treatment work	15.4% (6)	84.6% (33)	100% (39)	
	Outreach/ low-threshold	66.7% (12)	33.3% (6)	100% (18)	<0.001
	Treatment work	15.4% (6)	84.6% (33)	100% (39)	
Total		28.7% (23)	71.3% (57)	100% (80)	

Table 2. To what extent have physical meetings with clients been replaced with meetings by telephone or digital meeting programs? Pairwise comparison and Pearson's chi-square test.

		Not at all, to a small or to some degree	To a large or very large degree	Total	P-value
Type of work	Assessment/screening	21.7% (5)	78.3% (18)	100% (23)	0.010
	Outreach/ low-threshold	61.1% (11)	38.9% (7)	100% (18)	
	Assessment/screening	21.7% (5)	78.3% (18)	100% (23)	0.029
	Treatment work	50.0% (19)	50.0% (19)	100% (38)	
	Outreach/ low-threshold	61.1% (11)	38.9% (7)	100% (18)	0.436
	Treatment work	50.0% (19)	50.0% (19)	100% (38)	
Total		44.3% (35)	55.7% (44)	100% (79)	

Discussion

- Social workers on the frontline became the “last outpost” when other services shut down, and “digital bridges” between clients and other social workers.
- Social workers faced a difficult trade-off between protecting themselves and clients from the risk of infection and providing support to a vulnerable group.
- A shift to digital client meetings negatively affected assessments, decision-making, working alliances as well as motivation and energy in social work practice.
- There were also examples of new practices and lessons learned, for example, the introduction of “walks and talks” with clients and an increased knowledge of how and when to use digital tools for communication.

Conclusions and implications

- The Covid-19 pandemic was not seen as a “window of opportunity” to strengthen interventions or to introduce new harm reduction interventions for PWUD during the early stage of the pandemic
- The results points to the importance of “frontline social work” in crises, and the need of adding additional resources to this type of work
- More research is needed on the effects of increased use of digital client meetings in different social work settings. Such research might focus on how digitalization may affect working alliances, decision-making processes, and emotional energy in day-to-day social work

Thank you!