PROJECT OVERVIEW

In my policy report, “A city on the front lines of an epidemic: The Opioid Crisis in Las Vegas,” I sought to investigate the causes and consequences of a drug problem this prevalent in my hometown. This undertaking required multiple components including analysis of large datasets, field interviews, legal research, and a semester’s worth of library research.

My choice to investigate this issue stemmed from personal conviction: someone in my life is addicted to prescription opioids. In this metro area, like throughout the U.S., pharmaceutical companies aggressively market pain medications, medical providers overprescribe them, patients become addicted, and many—an estimated 80%[[1]](#footnote-1)—turn to illegal opioids like heroin when prescriptions are too difficult or too expensive to fill.

As a policy analyst, my goal was to examine the state of play in Las Vegas compared to national trends. I was tasked with presenting potential evidence-based solutions and recommending one to propose during the 2021 Nevada Legislative session. Essentially, I needed to package the problem and explain it to individuals with the capacity to implement change: pubic actors like state legislators, officials in health and social services, as well as private sector actors like local healthcare providers, insurers, and treatment centers. My report compared the feasibility and implications of alternative policy solutions. The best solution, I found, starts with increasing not just the number of addiction treatment facilities, as most experts have previously suggested, but also *access* to them.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Before writing my report, the first order of business was to meet with UNLV librarian and my go-to research guide, Susie Skarl. Susie and I met for research consultations and corresponded via e-mail several times throughout the semester. She visited my URST 442 class and shared with us her custom Library Course Guide—which included various resources I later used in my research process. The LibGuide link on how to use citation software programs like Mendeley, for example, was especially useful for creating my research library. Susie’s help was instrumental in this project. If ever I could not gain access to a journal article, for instance, Susie taught me to find alternate databases and similar articles.

In order to ensure a comprehensive literature review, I first conducted a search of peer-reviewed journal articles using the UNLV Libraries Quick Search tool, based on a wide range of key terms including “opioids”, “fentanyl”, “heroin”, and “opioid epidemic”. In order to emphasize recency, relevance, and variety in my investigation, I also searched other databases including Google Scholar and Research Gate. Second, key health and drug policy journals were searched independently and included publications like the Journal of Clinical Medicine, Nature, and National Vital Statistics Reports published by the CDC. Finally, I located sources for contextual evidence. The search process uncovered:

* eight news articles from local papers including the Nevada Independent, the Las Vegas Sun, and the Review Journal;
* seven peer-reviewed journal articles from 2017 to 2019;
* six policy reports and fact sheets;
* five legal briefs filed against pharmaceutical corporations;
* four transcripts of opioid-related policy presentations and legal proceedings;
* three exhibit documents submitted in support of selected state legislation on the NELIS website;
* two opioid-dependence related datasets, including an Excel spreadsheet of national and local prescription rates; and
* one Nevada database I used to gather the lion share of technical evidence. The Nevada Opioid Overdose Surveillance Dashboard[[2]](#footnote-2) provides data from 2011-2018. Using Excel, I analyzed the data and measured trends over time for multiple statistical indicators including rates of opioid prescriptions, emergency room visits, inpatient hospitalizations, and overdose deaths.

Because the Las Vegas metro area was my unit of analysis, I narrowed the geographic scope of the sources, in sequential order by national, state, and county level in order to construct an outline and write an annotated bibliography. I also categorized sources by type and purpose. Ultimately, the research process allowed me to create my own data visualizations, to interview experts and non-profit organizations, and to inform policymakers via my culminating policy report. I presented my findings at multiple research conferences and my work was selected for publication by Brookings Mountain West and The Lincy Institute, where I currently work as a student researcher. All in all, this research changed the course of my collegiate career and allowed me to contribute to the policy debate surrounding the opioid epidemic.

1. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/relationship-between-prescription-drug-heroin-abuse/prescription-opioid-use-risk-factor-heroin-use> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://opioid.snhd.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)