

# EXPLORING TREATMENT MODALITIES TO TREAT OPIOID ABUSE DISORDERS IN VETERANS WITHIN FRONTIER COMMUNITIES

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## Introduction:

Substance abuse is defined as, “excessive use of a substance that results in a negative impact on the life of the individual” (Straussner, 2014, p. 4).

Recently, opioid misuse has become especially prevalent in communities, especially rural. Opioids are chemicals that interact specifically with our body's opioid receptors found on nerve cell in the body and brain. In 2019, 70,630 individual died because of an overdose and of that, 49,860 had opioids involved (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2021).

What is even more discouraging is opioid abuse tends to impact some populations more frequently and more severely than other populations. Specifically, VA patients and active-duty personal are at a much greater risk of both an overdose as well as death when compared to civilian populations (Bennett et. al., 2015).

## Cognitive Behavioral Therapy:

Cognitive behavioral therapy enables veterans to better understand and develop awareness of thoughts, behaviors, and feelings that they are experiencing. CBT works to develop skills and new behaviors that will help them reach their goals. The VA specifically developed and implements CBT-SUB at many VA's across the nation. CBT is a very flexible treatment modality and adapts well to substance use. (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2012)

## Medication Assisted Treatment:

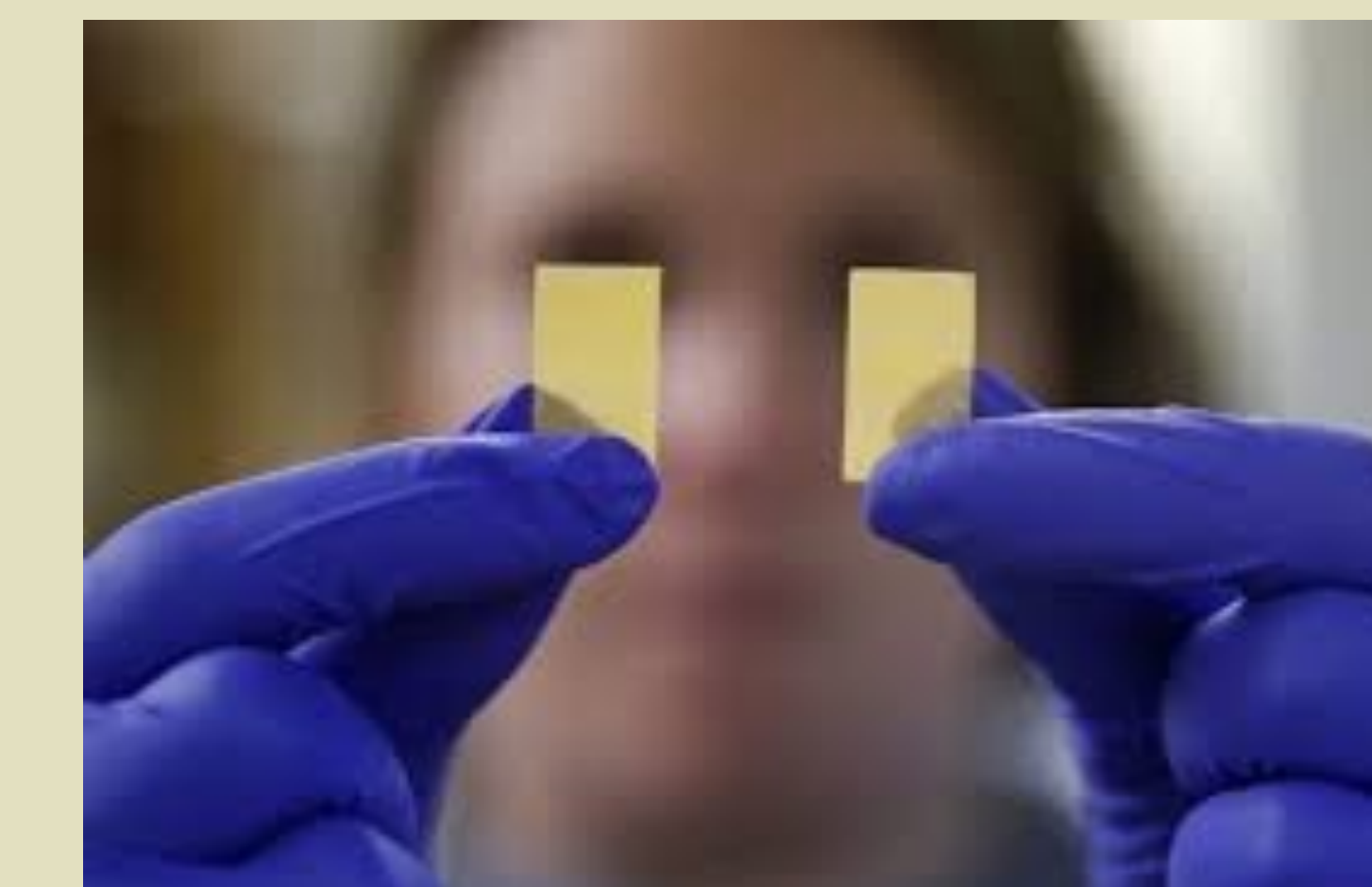
MAT is the utilization of medications approved by the FDA to, in addition to therapy our counseling, to successfully treat opioid use disorders. Recent research within veterans showed that those utilizing medication assisted treatment and therapy together in VA facilities had 43.36 times greater odds of staying in treatment (better retention)and completing treatment when compared to a reference group that solely used therapy alone (Meshberg-Cohen et al., 2019). And no, 43.36 is not a typo.

MAT can be used for many substances but is primarily used for prescription medications or heroin that contains opiates. Medications like naltrexone, buprenorphine, or methadone are prescribed by licensed medical professionals. These medications help reduce withdrawal symptoms and can curb cravings by “normalizing” brain chemistry and blocking the euphoria or high that opioid cause (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, 2021).

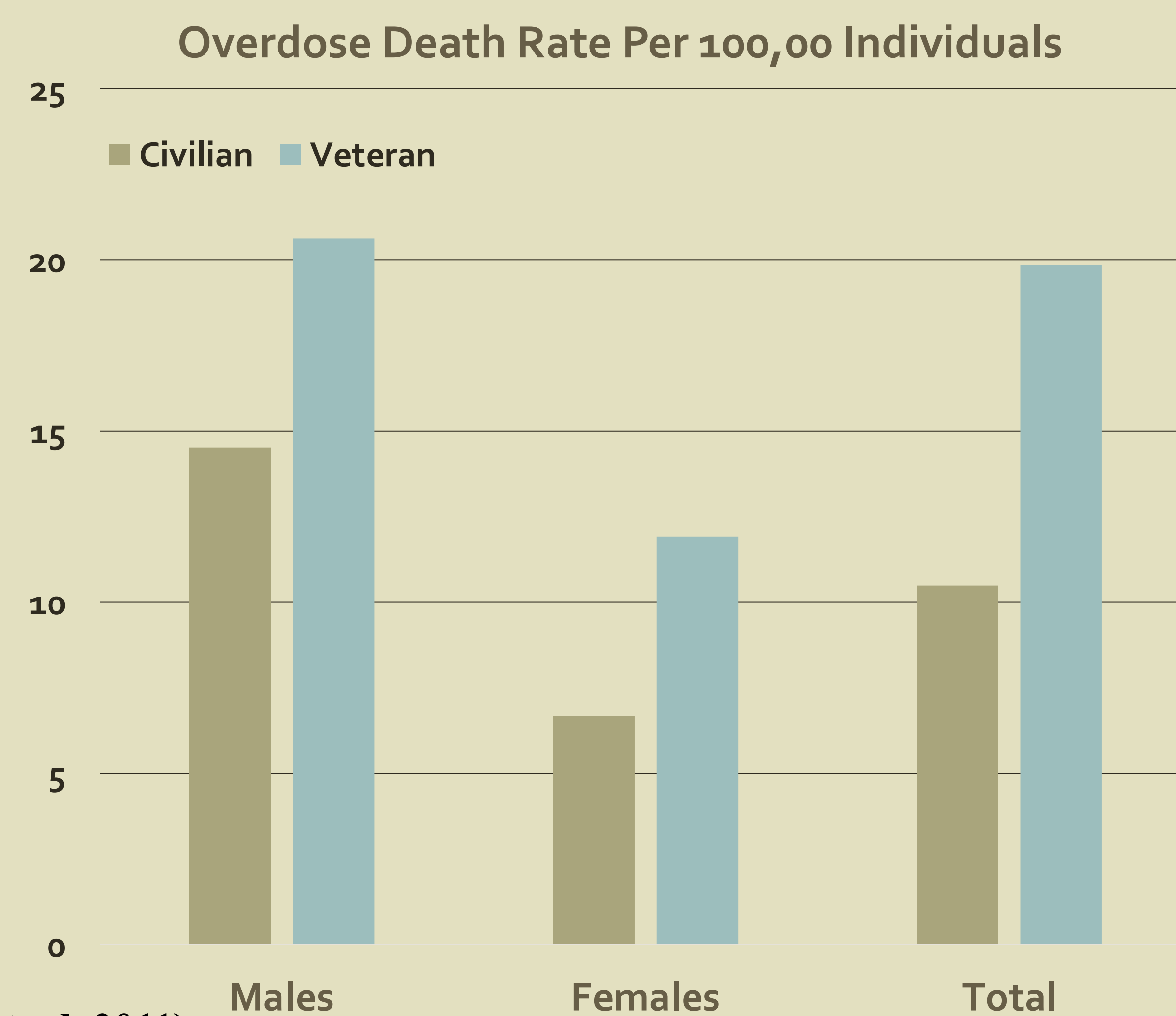
## Harm Reduction:

Harm reduction is a strategy of practice that seeks to limit the harm as well as negative consequences that are often found in substance misuse. Harm reduction is used in line with treatment with the hopes of bettering outcomes. When implemented in inpatient treatment facilities, it has been found to be highly effective in preventing harm in veterans while aiding in treatment (Dvitt-Murphy et. al., 2015)

Clean Syringe Service Programs have shown a dramatic drop in HIV prevalence from 50% to 17% in NYC heroin users (Des Jarlais et. al., 2005). The same research team found that there was 21% drop in hepatitis C transmission in participants who were not HIV positive and utilized SSP's (Des Jarlais et. al., 2005).



Suboxone tablets used for MAT (Meshberg-Cohen et al., 2019)



(Bohnert et. al, 2011)

## Conclusion:

While there are dozens treatment modalities or procedures that can be effective in treating substance misuse, this literature review covers gives us good insight in to some that may be adapted in frontier areas. Through the literature we find the CBT has been a tried-and-true treatment modality that the VA has fully adopted. Many other treatment modalities are not being sponsored or used outside of CBT within many of the veteran serving facilities. This becomes difficult because not all facilities have the staffing, funding, or resources to implement CBT therapies. Practices like harm reduction and medication assisted treatment have helped enable recovery in many veterans, not just those who utilize CBT therapy. While we know much of these modalities work, we must now focus on research regarding development and implementation of these modalities within our communities.

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