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## Bridging Training Gaps: Assessing Knowledge and Confidence of Mental Health Interns in Opioid Misuse Intervention for School-Aged Children and Adolescents

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BRIDGING TRAINING GAPS: ASSESSING KNOWLEDGE AND CONFIDENCE  
OF MENTAL HEALTH INTERNS IN OPIOID MISUSE INTERVENTION FOR  
SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Carolina Rodriguez  
Gabriela Gonzalez

May 2024

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## ABSTRACT

The rising threat of opioid misuse among children and adolescents demands urgent attention. Despite documented increases in opioid misuse among school-aged children and adolescents, internship programs in conjunction with educational institutions neglect training of mental health interns in school-based settings, specifically in the areas of opioid education and intervention. To meet the multifaceted needs of children and adolescents who misuse opioids, it is imperative to conduct research and provide thorough training for mental health interns. The purpose of this study is to assess the levels of knowledge and confidence of mental health interns concerning opioid misuse and the perceived benefit of training. It seeks to identify the training gaps mental health interns encounter when providing support services to school-aged children and adolescents in educational settings. Utilizing a cross-sectional quantitative survey, the research will explore the variation of the interns' understanding and capabilities in addressing opioid-related issues. The implications extend beyond academia, as the study will recommend areas for future research and offer insights into practice and policy. By bridging the training gaps, this research will contribute to a more informed, capable, and proactive approach to addressing opioid misuse among children and adolescents in educational settings.

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We extend our appreciation to the Southern California mental health departments for their essential role in administering our research questionnaire. Additionally, we appreciate the participants who generously contributed their time to this study. Their willingness to share their experiences has enhanced the findings of our research and contributed to its overall significance.

## DEDICATION

To my parents, Ruben and Irma Rodriguez, thank you for your unwavering support and encouragement, and for being my source of motivation throughout this journey. *Todo lo que soy y todo lo que aspiro a ser se basa en quién son ustedes.* To my husband Edgar, thank you for reminding me that my best was always good enough. To my Luca, thank you for making my life so much more purposeful and meaningful, *Mamá te ama.*

- Carolina Rodriguez

This study is dedicated to my sisters, Daniela and Victoria Gonzalez, who have been a source of motivation and strength for me throughout my graduate journey and of which continue to be an immense inspiration of resilience, kindness, hard work and determination. To my mom, Karina Negrete, *me puse las pilas.* To all the clients, supervisors, and coworkers I have had the pleasure of working alongside with these last few years that have significantly contributed to my learning and development as a social worker. To my cat, I love you Prince, and most importantly to God, who made all this possible; Jeremiah 29:11.

- Gabriela Gonzalez

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Formulation

The increasing prevalence of opioid misuse among children and adolescents poses a significant challenge to school-based mental health services. With the high demand for mental health services to address opioid misuse in the country, there is a parallel rise in the need for diverse and competent mental health practitioners in school-based settings. To meet this demand, academic programs like school-based social work set the standard for comprehensive multidisciplinary internships that include instruction, supervision, and in-field experience. This necessitates the assessment of mental health interns' knowledge and confidence regarding appropriate education and intervention training on opioid misuse.

Mental health interns can derive benefits from a well-structured internship, potentially leading to academic and career development (Gillespie et al., 2020; Ocampo et al., 2020). Furthermore, Slaughter and Hoefler's (2019) study on the impact of internships on the recruitment and retention of mental health practitioners concluded that interns reported varying degrees of preparation, from being adequately prepared to being well-prepared. This confidence was ascribed to one or all of three elements: age and prior life experience or professional background, academic attainment, and familiarity with the target demographics,

in addition to the initial training and orientation provided by the agency (Slaughter & Hoefler, 2019). Internship placements and educators must develop the intern's competency to meet the diverse and intricate needs of the internship's consumer base. This includes staying current on the conditions of the population they serve to effectively prepare interns for a school-to-in-field transition.

Internships integrated into school districts aim to alleviate the potential adverse mental health effects among school-age youth. Mental health interns engaged in working with school-age youth experiencing opioid misuse focus on understanding and addressing the psychological impacts of opioid misuse on both the youth and their families. The overarching goal is to promote stability and support the journey towards sobriety. Additionally, many of these clients present mental and/or behavioral ailments that affect their person. A significant number of these internships utilize interns to provide counseling to children and adolescents. Therefore, mental health interns may influence the healthy development of these children and adolescents, with an added focus on preventive measures for disorders as highlighted by Warner and colleagues (2009). These mental health interns carry the responsibility of implementing effective interventions and allocating appropriate resources to address the specific needs of each child or adolescent client. They utilize the education and training acquired from academic institutions and internship instruction to fulfill this essential role. However, there is still a lack of training specifically addressing the issue of opioid misuse despite the alarming trends.

Limited literature is available on the education and training related to opioid misuse provided to mental health interns working with school-aged youth. Yet, over the past few years, society has observed this rapidly escalating epidemic affect families and communities. According to Levy (2019), the current opioid epidemic is not only the most severe in the country's history but also the first to impact young people significantly. In a 2016 national survey, school-age youth ages 13 to 17 reported the greatest rates of alcohol use and illicit drug use disorder (Beeber, 2018; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration [SAMHSA], 2017). Among youth ages 14 to 18, the rate of overdose deaths nearly doubled between 2019 and 2020 (Friedman et al., 2022). Additionally, data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed that youth overdose deaths increased by an additional 20 percent at the beginning of 2021 (Friedman et al., 2022).

Although prescription opioid misuse is still common among youth, the current spike in opioid mortality appears to be caused by illegal opioids, such as heroin and non-prescription fentanyl (Cerdá et al., 2021). Research conducted by Friedman and colleagues (2022) indicated that in 2020, over 950 youth ages 14 to 18 died from an overdose. Nearly 70 percent of these deaths were attributed to illegal fentanyl and other synthetic opiates (Friedman et al., 2022). In the period from January to June 2021, among the approximately 1,150 teenagers who died from an overdose, that percentage increased to 77 percent (Friedman et al., 2022). In response, the Official Journal of the American Academy of

Pediatrics stressed the impact opioids, along with other illicit drugs, have on the youth population (Levy, 2019).

Many professionals advocate for the initiation of substance use interventions during childhood and early adolescence (Levy, 2019). Findings prove that interventions that begin during this stage are more effective when addressing an issue like substance misuse (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2016). Thus, mental health interns have the potential to enable a more effective response to the psychosocial needs of students and their families affected by opioid usage. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (2016), interventions ought to be delivered by school mental health practitioners who have received the necessary training and supervision. To meet the need for early assessment and intervention related to opioid misuse among youth, research should first seek to determine the level of insight and knowledge that mental health interns possess concerning this topic. Emphasizing the education and training mental health interns receive on assessing opioid misuse in children and adolescents, identifying trends, and administering appropriate intervention.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to conduct research and examine the level of knowledge and confidence among mental health interns in conducting comprehensive assessments and implementing appropriate interventions for school-aged children and adolescents experiencing opioid misuse. Rates of drug

overdose-related deaths, documented by state agencies like SAMHSA and federal entities such as the National Institute on Drug Abuse, underscore the dangers that opioids, specifically fentanyl, present for children and adolescents. Researchers agree that interventions should be implemented earlier to address the surge of opioid misuse among school-aged youth to reduce overdose deaths (Blackman, 2002; Liddle et al., 2011; Muramoto & Leshan, 2021; Parry, 1992).

While mental health interns based in school settings receive comprehensive training on issues such as suicide and child abuse, a significant gap exists in the opioid use training curriculum, particularly related to fentanyl. This study is designed to measure the knowledge of mental health interns regarding opioid misuse and evaluate their level of confidence in implementing interventions aimed at addressing the illicit use of opioids in school-age youth. Previous studies with similar themes suggest a need for improved training for mental health interns working with youth. Yet, there is a lack of research focused on evaluating the need for better training in response to the escalating concerns associated with opioids in the school setting. Consequently, mental health interns can be viewed as frontline workers to address this concern. However, before they can effectively contribute, there is a requirement for sufficient evidence to demonstrate the need for training in this specific area.

This study will utilize a cross-sectional, quantitative study model. A specifically designed questionnaire, informed by similar research, will be used to quantify the knowledge and confidence levels of mental health interns in

conducting assessments and implementing interventions for opioid use among school-age youth. The outcomes are expected to provide valuable insights and identify specific focus areas for internship sites, allowing them to offer additional education, intervention training, and resources as required.

### Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

The proposed study is necessary to impact the training curriculum provided to mental health interns in school-based internships. Pending the study's results, internship sites have the opportunity to incorporate training focused on enabling mental health interns to conduct thorough assessments and interventions when addressing opioid use in school-age youth. Subsequent steps can be implemented to plan for more adequate treatment and care for identified individuals. Simultaneously, this would address the educational gap that would significantly benefit mental health interns pursuing a specialization in substance use, working with at-risk populations, or engaging in school-based counseling as part of their academic degree completion process.

Furthermore, the study aims to contribute to the implementation aspect of the generalist intervention process in the context of addressing opioid misuse. If the findings indicate a need for mental health interns to receive adequate training in this area, the research will provide recommendations on how to effectively implement such training. The significance of this research extends beyond the immediate services provided to school-age youth. Nor does it only benefit mental



health interns in developing competency in substance use treatment. It also assists school-based internships in recognizing the ongoing and comprehensive need to educate mental health interns. This education is paramount for them to effectively fulfill their role in influencing healthy development and prevention efforts. Ultimately, the research contributes to advancing social workers' primary responsibility of promoting the well-being of the clients they serve. The central question this research seeks to answer is: How can educating and training school-based mental health interns impact the level of knowledge and confidence to address opioid misuse?

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The misuse of opioids is becoming a rising epidemic threat amongst the youth population. To ensure that mental health interns are sufficiently prepared for navigating multifaceted circumstances, academic instructors and internship placements must stay current on the needs of the communities that they serve. Since many internships in southern California partner with academic institutions, this necessitates teaching mental health interns how to approach and manage the various problems that school-age children and adolescents may present such as opioid misuse.

Academic programs in social work are leading the way in developing internship curriculums that combine instruction, oversight, and practical experience. Although research pertaining to the misuse of opioids exists, there is not sufficient research conducted concerning the implications opioid misuse has on school-aged children and adolescents. The limited research within this specific population obstructs the involvement of school-based placements in areas of opioid misuse education, prevention, and intervention.

Chapter two will examine research conducted in relation to the misuse of opioids among school-aged children and adolescents and the importance of equipping mental health interns with the skills and knowledge to address these

issues. The subsections will include information concerning synthetic opioids, more specifically fentanyl and its prevalence, substance use, factors within school-aged youth, the roles and responsibilities of mental health professionals in school-based settings, and the gaps in training mental health interns encounter when providing support services to youth in school-based placements.

### Fentanyl Among School-Age Youth

Opioids are defined as man-made substances that have the same effect as natural opioids in that they produce severe pain relief effects (Drug Enforcement Administration [DEA], 2020). Due to its high potency, fentanyl has emerged as a dominant opioid. According to Safe Landing (n.d.), a rehabilitation center for adolescents, fentanyl is about 100 times more powerful than other opioids like morphine and 50 times stronger than heroin. As a result, a small amount of fentanyl can induce feelings of joy and exhilaration in its users. A sensation that can be particularly enticing to those who are drawn to these temporary feelings, thus harnessing the potential of fostering a substance use disorder.

As a consequence, the use of the opioid fentanyl has become a viable threat to the school-aged youth population. Data collected by SAMHSA (2022) indicated that in 2020, 3.4% of people 12 years of age and older misused opioids in the past year. A different study conducted by Gaither and colleagues (2018) addressed the rising mortality rate within the pediatric population due to an array of opioid poisoning. Through a cross-sectional study, 8,986 children and

adolescents' opioid-related deaths were documented between the year of 1999 and 2016 (Gaither et al., 2018). Additionally, Friedman and colleagues (2022) discovered an alarming rise in overdose mortality among youth aged 14 to 18, where it rose by 94.03% from 2019 to 2020 and by 20.05% from 2020 to 2021. More specifically, fentanyl-involved fatalities increased from 253 in 2019 to 680 in 2020 and to 884 in 2021 (Friedman et al.,2022).

### Factors of School-Age Youth Substance Use

Substance use disorders have been linked to childhood exposure to maltreatment (Brownlie et al., 2018; Chartier et al., 2021; Keyes et al., 2012). Research by Afifi and colleagues (2012) discovered significant findings concerning drug use disorders among adults who had suffered childhood abuse. In the same study, which included 34,653 adult men and women, it was shown that maltreatment as a child was associated with an earlier onset of drug use (Afifi et al., 2012). Moreover, studies that exclusively include people who have been institutionalized for mental illness in psychiatric inpatient facilities have been shown to increase the likelihood of opiate dependence. (Afifi et al., 2012; Lo & Cheng, 2007). Adverse effects are diverse and depend on a range of factors that are unique to each individual, however, they are also typically connected to harmful drug or alcohol use (Trinidad, 2021).

Mental Health Professionals in School-Based Sites Schools are beginning to understand the importance of addressing more than solely the academic needs of their students. There has been a notable shift towards emphasizing the

psychosocial aspects of children and adolescent lives. (Newsome et al., 2008; O'Reilly et al., 2018). Many school districts have introduced mental health professionals to assess and implement adequate interventions addressing school age youth's complex and changing needs (Anderson & Bronstein, 2012). These mental health professionals work to bridge mental health and educational services, implement early interventions for a spectrum of needs, and enhance the academic performance of the student body. These tasks frequently pose unique challenges for mental health professionals in school-based settings.

Mental health professionals often work with particular issues affecting children and adolescents like truancy, bullying, low self-esteem, teenage pregnancy, and opioid misuse. The issues affecting children and adolescents have profound effects on their personal lives and their completion of academic attainment. Therefore, mental health professionals have been instructed on various concepts to achieve proficiency in competencies that meet the needs of the students they service (Mellin & Pertuit, 2011). Mental health professionals are now receiving more instruction and training to target attendance, bullying, and sex education. However, comprehensive training for assessing and implementing interventions related to opioid misuse is still academically limited to individuals in specialized programs or elective courses at colleges and universities (Straussner & Senreich, 2002), leaving a gap in adequate instruction.

School-Based Mental Health Professionals: A Need for Knowledge and Training. For mental health professionals and interns in school sites, the

American School Counselor Association provides courses and material that are comprised of training regarding mental health disorders, community resources, interdisciplinary collaboration, and suicide prevention but lacks substance misuse training (American School Counselor Association, 2019). School officials and professionals are now insisting that a transformative framework be implemented into the curriculum for mental health professionals, specifically when operating within schools and servicing children and adolescents (Matz, 2010). This transformative framework would develop a more complete scope of practice for mental health professionals, requiring that education and support programs be applied in mental health professionals' employment agencies and required in undergraduate and graduate programs. Academic institutions have substantially proven to aid mental health professionals, and other school officials, to gain confidence in an array of topics, learn to identify patterns and trends, benefit intervention practices, and contribute to prevention efforts (Griffin, 2023; Matz, 2010).

Historically, many studies have shown that informed officials lead to successful program implementation in response to needs at micro and macro levels in various domains. Studies have concluded that more successful collaborations, advocacy, and resource services are obtained when the individuals administering them are adequately instructed and trained (Matz, 2010). Many schools of social work, responsible for generating most mental health professionals, are already teaching, training, instructing, and developing

the competencies of many mental health professionals, but the area of opioid misuse has received little attention from these schools and thus, impacted mental health professionals addressing this growing concern in school districts (Matz, 2010; Straussner & Senreich, 2002). Mental health professionals, such as counselors and interns, feel insufficiently prepared which in turn makes them feel inadequate to respond to the needs of individuals who misuse opioids (Bina et al., 2008; Straussner & Senreich, 2002). The implementation proposes opioid misuse education for mental health professionals within their educational curriculum. More research infers the same. Training is needed to better the needs within school districts (Bina et al., 2008; Straussner & Senreich, 2002). Giddings and colleagues (2004) illustrate that training opportunities help enrich the mental health professional and lead to greater overall satisfaction towards the services the professional renders.

### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

The theoretical framework guiding this research is self-efficacy theory. Self-efficacy theory illustrates that when an individual feels capable of achieving a task, they are more likely to be successful in the completion of such task (Ackerman, 2018). The generalization of this concept allows for the application of this theory to serve numerous research designs. In relation to this study, self-efficacy theory may be applied and researchers can propose that when mental health interns receive adequate assessment, education, and intervention training,

working with school-aged children and adolescents who misuse opiates can result in greater success. In applying this principle to the research, it becomes the responsibility of leadership figures to warrant such education and opportunities to individuals.

### Summary

The subsections contained information regarding synthetic opioids, more specifically fentanyl, and its prevalence, the factors of school-aged youth substance use, the roles and responsibilities of mental health professionals in school districts, and the gaps in training mental health professionals and interns encounter when providing support services to youth in school-based settings. Existing research details the unfortunate rise in opioid use among youth, yet placements, partnered through academic institutions, limit or disregard training mental health interns in areas of opioid education, prevention, screening, assessment and intervention. Considering the roles and responsibilities of mental health interns, and other mental health professionals, based in school sites, this lack of adequate training obstructs the involvement to target this pressing issue. Literature urges the need for mental health professionals to receive up-to-date and adequate training to address the multifaceted needs of school-aged children and adolescents. Therefore, it is essential to assess the levels of knowledge and confidence of mental health interns and determine a perceived benefit of training



for effectively addressing opioid misuse among school-aged children and adolescents.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This comprehensive research will be designed to examine how training school-based mental health interns impacts their levels of knowledge and confidence to address opioid use when working with school-age children and adolescents. This study aims to identify the level of knowledge and confidence that mental health interns possess as well as demonstrate gaps in training in the areas of opioid misuse education, prevention, and intervention. This chapter covers the elements of how the study will be completed. The following sections will describe the nature of the study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protections of human subjects, and data analysis

#### Study Design

The focus of this study is to identify the gaps in training provided to mental health interns concerning identifying, screening, and presenting interventions for opioid use among school-aged children and adolescents. Through the use of a cross-sectional quantitative survey design, the researchers will be able to analyze the level of knowledge and confidence that mental health interns have to address the rising use of opioids among school-aged youth and adolescents. Participant's perceived benefits to opioid misuse training will also be collected.

The research will be cross-sectional as the researchers intend to collect data at a single point in time instead of a duration of time. The data the researchers will obtain from this study is quantitative in disposition so that they can acquire a numerical value when measuring the extent to which the participants are knowledgeable about opioid use and the extent to which they feel confident working with clients who use opioids; as well as perceived benefit to receiving training. Therefore, it would be infeasible to use a qualitative research method due to the large, numerical sample that will be collected. This study is additionally exploratory in description as the researchers intend to further investigate the problem areas and where the gaps lie in this population. Given that there lacks sufficient evidence to suggest that mental health interns are provided with adequate opioid misuse training, an exploratory approach will allow the space for researchers to refine their findings and further their research.

The strength of conducting a quantitative study through an online questionnaire is that respondents may feel secure that their participation will be kept confidential as we will be utilizing a private automated link to the surveying website. Additionally, online surveys also have the advantage of limiting in-person encounters, which many people avoid because of the implications of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). This provides a safer and stress-free approach to data collection due to health concerns.

A limitation of quantitative research is that questionnaires are structured with close-ended questions. This limits the participant's responses in that they

are not able to answer in detail conveying unique experiences. Therefore, it is important to provide a wide selection of responses so that participants can choose the answer that aligns best with them. Another limitation is that the researchers are unable to control the environment in which the participants respond to the survey. This can cause participants to inaccurately respond due to being in a disruptive environment, having a hectic schedule, or boredom.

### Sampling

The study will utilize a purposive, non-probability sampling technique in that participants are to be selected because they have the characteristics that are needed in the study sample. The characteristics to meet the criteria for participation is to be a current mental health intern based in select Southern California school districts. Moreover, participants must be 18 years of age and older. The study will vary in demographic factors such as age, gender identity, ethnicity, and level of education. The sample size will be set at 150 participants. Participants will be contacted through email. The email solicitation will detail the study's purpose and remind respondents that participation is entirely voluntary; through informed consent documentation. A formal solicitation will be used to ask for approval from the directors of the corresponding districts for approval to conduct the exemplified research at their sites and recruit their interns prior to the commencement of recruitment and data collection.

## Data Collection and Instruments

The study will utilize a purposive, non-probability sampling technique in that participants are to be selected because they have the characteristics that are needed in the study sample. The characteristics to meet the criteria for participation is to be a mental health intern based in select Southern California school districts. Moreover, participants must be 18 years of age and older. The study will vary in demographic factors such as age, gender identity, ethnicity, and level of education. The sample size will consist of 150 participants. The selection of participants will be recruited from the mental health departments in select Southern California school districts. Student researchers will email the directors of the mental health departments of the respective school districts stated. The email will include the recruitment script and the informed consent flyer with the private automated link to access the survey in Qualtrics. This email will then be sent by the mental health directors to the mental health interns based in select Southern California school districts. The email solicitation will detail the study's purpose, length, and completion date, and remind respondents that participation is entirely voluntary. Additionally, the email will inform participants that the collection of data for the study will be acquired through an online anonymous self-administered questionnaire. A formal document will be used to ask for approval from the mental health directors of select Southern California school districts.

In the study, the independent variable is the assigned training that can be provided to assist in identifying, screening, and presenting interventions for opioid use among school-aged youth and adolescents. The dependent variables for this study are the levels of knowledge, confidence, and perceived benefit that school-based mental health interns have on the use of opioids among school-aged youth and adolescents.

The questionnaire will begin with a brief explanation of the study, followed by a message regarding informed consent. It will then have a screening criterion in which participants will disclose their student status and their age. If participants meet the screening criteria, they will move on to answer demographic questions regarding age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, education, certifications, placement year, and prior substance use training.

The collection of data for the study will be acquired through an online anonymous self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire will be created by the researchers utilizing previously validated instruments that assess for the characteristics intended in this study. The questionnaire will ask participants to indicate their confidence when assessing, screening, and intervening with opioid misuse via an adaptation of Williams and colleagues' (1998) Perceived Competence Scale. Participants will be asked to rate their knowledge (via Likert scale) of opioids, opioid overdose risks, and opioid overdose responses. Knowledge will be assessed using Dunn and colleagues' (2013) Brief Opioid Overdose Knowledge (BOOK) Questionnaire. Lastly, participants will be asked to

indicate their perceived benefit (via Likert scale) from receiving opioid misuse training. The perceived benefit will be measured using an adaptation of Sullivan and Artina (2013) scale. The framework of the questionnaire will center on 24 questions divided into 4 sections; demographics (5 questions), assessing for knowledge (12 questions), assessing for confidence (4 questions), and assessing for perceived benefit to opioid misuse training (3 questions).

Data analysis for our study will be completed using SPSS statistical software. Our data will be cleaned to account for missing responses from participants. Afterwards, we will run descriptive statistics. We will also run regressions using bivariate and multivariate analyses to examine the relationship between confidence, knowledge, and perceived benefit of opioid misuse and training.

## Procedures

To obtain the total of participants needed for the study, a flyer will be created by the student researchers to recruit individuals that meet the criteria. The flyer will contain the primary objective and goals of the study, disclose any potential risk or expected harm to participants if applicable, and the private automated link for access to the questionnaire. The researchers will request permission from school administrators at California State University, San Bernardino, and the directors of select Southern California school districts to

distribute the flyer amongst their interns. The flyer will be distributed in the form of mass emails to mental health interns by their program directors.

### Protection of Human Subjects

The protection of human subjects will be warranted in this study as it was designed to protect the anonymity of the participants. No identifiable information will be collected to link the participants to their responses to protect the participant's privacy. Researchers will collect data utilizing Qualtrics which will only be accessible to the investigators using their university's username and password. Any data downloaded from Qualtrics will be downloaded to a password-encrypted computer in a password-encrypted file. Data will be destroyed after 3 years.

Data collection will include anonymization, encryption through the Qualtrics software, and pseudonymization to reduce the risk of identifying research participants with their data. Any confidential data collected through the study will be pseudonymized to prevent participants from being identified through any demographic information. To ensure participant confidentiality, data will be available only to researchers. Research will not be informed as to the names, emails, or other identifiable information regarding select Southern California school district's mental health interns. Participants will be required to acknowledge an informed consent page before accessing the questionnaire. The informed consent will explain that participation in this research study is voluntary



and by no means will it affect their current or future intern status. They will not be compensated or punished for their decision to participate or not. Furthermore, all questionnaires will be provided electronically through a private automated link to lessen the transmission of COVID-19 and other health concerns.

### Data Analysis

Questionnaires from the participants will be collected, combined, and analyzed. Data analysis for our study will be completed using SPSS statistical software. Data will be cleaned to account for missing responses from participants. Descriptive statistics will be run on the collected data. Researchers will run regressions using bivariate and multivariate analyses to examine the relationship between confidence, knowledge, and perceived benefit of opioid misuse and training.

### Summary

Opioid misuse has become an increasingly prevalent issue among school-aged children and adolescents. This current opioid epidemic, fueled by the synthetic fentanyl, is the most severe in the country's history and the first to impact young people substantially. The demand for mental health interns who have the capacity to provide appropriate support services, however, is not being met by a corresponding increase in access to opioid misuse training by academic institutions and internship placements. The objective of this research study is to

examine the knowledge and confidence levels of mental health interns in assessing, screening, and providing interventions for school-age children and adolescents with regard to opioid misuse. This study will assist in determining whether opioid misuse training impacts the knowledge and confidence levels of mental health interns when providing support services for school-age children and adolescents in school-based settings. This research will examine the knowledge, confidence, and perceived benefit levels of mental health interns in 3 southern California school districts with regard to opioid misuse among school-age children and adolescents. The design of the questionnaire used will provide a numerical measurement of these values through a quantitative analysis.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

This chapter provides the results of the questionnaire administered by the researchers to present findings regarding knowledge, confidence, and perceived benefit of opioid misuse training for mental health interns in school-based sites. After participants completed the questionnaire, a cleaning of data was completed, and corresponding tests were ran to gather results. The description of the results are also illustrated utilizing tables found in this chapter.

#### Presentation of Findings

##### Sample Characteristics

Table 1 displays the sample characteristics of the study. There were a total of 30 participants. All participants are at least 18 years old. More than half of the participants in this study were female (96.7%). Most participants were in their first-year MSW placement (56.7%) while others were in their second-year MSW placement (30.0%), or first-year BSW placement (13.3%). Most participants had not received opioid misuse training before participating in this research (53.3%) and those that did receive prior opioid misuse training received it from school (26.7%), work (13.3%), or other (6.7%).

### Correlation Between Knowledge, Confidence, and Perceived Benefit

Table 2 displays correlations between levels of knowledge, confidence, and perceived benefit of opioid misuse training among mental health interns. Confidence in assessing, screening, and intervening with opioid misuse among school-aged children and adolescence is positively correlated with knowledge pertaining to opioid misuse. However, perceived benefit of opioid misuse training is not correlated with knowledge of opioid misuse or confidence in assessing, screening, and intervening with opioid misuse among school-aged children and adolescents

### Comparing Knowledge, Confidence and Perceived Benefit Between Groups

Table 3 displays knowledge, confidence, and perceived benefit using a t-test for equality of means between the two groups: those who received opioid misuse training prior to engaging in this study and those who had not received any training prior to engaging in this study. Participants who received opioid misuse training prior to the study reported higher confidence in addressing opioid misuse, compared to participants who had not received opioid misuse training. However, there were no significant differences between the two groups when assessing for knowledge of opioid misuse or perceived benefit of opioid misuse training.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample

Variables	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M (SD)</i>
Age			29.03 (7.2)
Gender			
Male	1	3.3	
Female	29	96.7	
Year of placement			
First year internship (MSW)	17	56.7	
Second year internship (MSW)	9	30.0	
First year internship (BSW)	4	13.3	
Have you ever received opioid misuse training			
Yes	14	46.7	
No	16	53.3	
Location of Training			
School	8	26.7	
Work	4	13.3	
Other	2	6.7	

*Note.* *N* = 30.

Table 2. Correlation between Knowledge, Confidence, and Perceived Benefit

Variables	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Knowledge of opioid misuse	30	6.63	2.39	1		
2. Confidence in addressing opioid misuse	30	11.63	5.62	0.59*	1	
3. Perceived benefit of opioid misuse training	30	13.93	1.51	0.13	-0.15	1

\* $p < .001$ , two-tailed.

Table 3. Knowledge, Confidence and Perceived Benefit Using t-test for Equality of Means

	Received Training		No Training		<i>t</i> -test
	M	SD	M	SD	
1. Knowledge of opioid misuse	7.36	2.56	6	2.13	1.58
2. Confidence in addressing opioid misuse	14.57	5.84	9.06	4.06	3.03*
3. Perceived benefit of opioid misuse training	13.86	1.75	14	1.32	-0.26

\* $p < .01$

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This research study aimed to examine the levels of knowledge and confidence among mental health interns concerning opioid misuse, as well as their perceived benefits of training. This chapter will discuss the results concerning the pivotal role of education and training in addressing opioid misuse among children and adolescents in school-based settings. It will also discuss the research study's limitations, providing insights into its extent. Furthermore, the chapter will explore the implications of the findings for mental health approaches and research, along with recommendations to improve social work practice in educational institutions and practicum placements.

#### Discussion

This study assesses the levels of knowledge and confidence of mental health interns concerning opioid misuse and the perceived benefit of training. Our results indicate that the more knowledge a participant has pertaining to opioid misuse, the higher their confidence will be in assessing, screening, and intervening with opioid misuse among children and adolescents in school-based settings. These results corroborate the findings of past researchers, which suggest that educational and supportive programs have effectively enhanced the



confidence of mental health counselors (Matz, 2010). These programs have been instrumental in helping mental health counselors acquire proficiency across various topics, recognize patterns and trends, improve intervention strategies, and contribute to preventive measures (Matz, 2010). Therefore, we suspect that adequate education in the area of opioid misuse is essential for mental health interns to effectively respond to the needs of school-aged children and adolescents who misuse opioids.

Additionally, this study recognizes the training gaps mental health interns encounter when attempting to provide opioid misuse support services. Our findings showed that the more opioid misuse training participants receive, the higher their confidence will be in addressing opioid misuse compared to participants who do not receive opioid misuse training. This aligns with observations from Bina and colleagues (2008) and Straussner & Senreich (2009), who found that mental health care providers often express feelings of inadequacy and insufficient preparedness when working with individuals suffering from substance use disorders. There is an urgency for training developed to equip mental health interns with the skills to navigate the complexities of opioid misuse among children and adolescents in school-based settings. Our study's findings resonate with these concerns and emphasize the critical importance of integrating opioid misuse education into the curriculum for mental health interns. Our research not only reinforces the need for enhanced training, as recommended by prior studies by Bina and colleagues (2008) and Straussner &

Senreich (2009) but also emphasizes the immediate necessity to bridge this gap to effectively confront the increasing challenges presented by opioid misuse in school-based settings.

Results from our study also revealed that there is no significant difference between groups that receive training and those that do not when it comes to knowledge of opioid misuse and their perceived benefit of undergoing such training. However, confidence in assessing, screening, and intervening with opioid misuse is higher when participants receive training. This suggests that participants who have some familiarity with the topic of opioid misuse, either through personal or professional experiences, may feel confident in their abilities to address it. However, this familiarity does not necessarily equate to comprehensive knowledge about opioid misuse. Furthermore, participants interning in schools might not be particularly interested in the topic of substance misuse, therefore not seeing it as a benefit for their professional development.

### Limitations

Our study is subject to certain limitations. For example, it is cross-sectional. This poses a challenge to our findings because participants were asked about their knowledge of opioid misuse and confidence statuses at the time of our study. Since cross-sectional studies lack longitudinal data, we are unable to follow changes in confidence levels over time in response to opioid

misuse education and training. Consequently, we cannot assess the potential impacts of training on confidence levels and perceived benefits.

Additionally, the sample size and representation of our study pose limitations. The study's representation is restricted with only 30 participants, of which 96.7% were female, and varied distributions across different years of MSW and BSW placements. Therefore, future research with larger and more diverse samples would be beneficial to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

### Implications for Social Work Practice

Despite these limitations, our findings provide evidence of the necessity of revising training curricula offered to mental health interns in school-based internships. Schools of social work and internship sites have the opportunity to integrate specialized training aimed at equipping mental health interns to conduct thorough assessments and interventions for addressing opioid misuse. By including such training, internships may enhance the preparedness of mental health interns to identify and respond to opioid misuse effectively. Social workers can urge policymakers to prioritize funding to support opioid misuse education and training. Through social work regulatory organizations, an allocated amount of hours can be required to incorporate prevention, screening, evaluation, and intervention of opioid usage. This proactive approach could lead to earlier support for those struggling with opioid misuse, ultimately improving outcomes and reducing potential harm.

Furthermore, this study's findings present opportunities for collaboration and support within the community. Another significant implication is the potential for partnerships with local nonprofit organizations and county agencies that specialize in addressing opioid misuse. By partnering with these organizations, educational institutions and internship sites can access additional resources, including professional expertise. This collaboration could facilitate the implementation of targeted training programs aimed at equipping mental health interns with the necessary knowledge and skills to address opioid misuse effectively among school-age youth.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, our study underscores the critical need for comprehensive training to equip mental health interns with the skills to address opioid misuse among school-aged children and adolescents effectively. While our findings highlight the positive impact of training on confidence levels, we recognize the limitations posed by the study's cross-sectional design and sample size and representation. Despite these constraints, our research emphasizes the need to revise training curricula for mental health interns to bridge existing gaps and confront the increasing challenges posed by opioid misuse. Social work policy may encourage collaborative efforts with local organizations, targeting training programs that can be implemented to empower mental health interns and ultimately improve outcomes for youth in school-based settings.

APPENDIX A  
QUESTIONNAIRE

## Carolina Rodriguez & Gabriela Gonzalez Research Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions as they pertain to you:

### Demographics

Age:

- 18-24
- 25-31
- 32-38
- 39-45
- 45+

Gender (or Gender Identity):

- Male
- Female
- Gender Nonconforming/ Non-binary/ Genderqueer
- Prefer not to answer
- Other

Placement Year:

- Foundation Year
- Advanced Year

Previous Opioid Misuse Training (i.e. informationals or workshops):

- Yes
- No

If 'Yes,' through what agency?

- School
  - Internship
  - Other
- >> Please fill.

### **Please answer the following questions with either 'True,' 'False,' or 'I don't know' regarding opioid knowledge:**

1. Long-acting opioids are used to treat chronic "round-the-clock" pain.  
1. True      2. False      3. I Don't Know
2. Methadone is a long-acting opioid.  
1. True      2. False      3. I Don't Know
3. Restlessness, muscle and bone pain, and insomnia are symptoms of opioid withdrawal.  
1. True      2. False      3. I Don't Know
4. Heroin, OxyContin, and fentanyl are all examples of opioids.  
1. True      2. False      3. I Don't Know
5. Trouble breathing is NOT related to opioid overdose.  
1. True      2. False      3. I Don't Know

6. Clammy and cool skin is NOT a sign of an opioid overdose.  
 1. True      2. False      3. I Don't Know
7. All overdoses are fatal (deadly).  
 1. True      2. False      3. I Don't Know
8. Using a short-acting opioid and a long-acting opioid at the same time does NOT increase your risk of an opioid overdose.  
 1. True      2. False      3. I Don't Know
9. If you see a person overdosing on opioids, you can begin rescue breathing until a health worker arrives.  
 1. True      2. False      3. I Don't Know
10. A sternal rub helps you evaluate whether someone is unconscious.  
 1. True      2. False      3. I Don't Know
11. Once you confirm an individual is breathing, you can place him/her into the recovery position.  
 1. True      2. False      3. I Don't Know
12. Narcan (naloxone) will reverse the effects of an opioid overdose.  
 1. True      2. False      3. I Don't Know

**Please respond to each of the following items in terms of how true it is for you with respect to addressing opioid misuse among school-age children and adolescents. Use the scale:**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all true			Somewhat true			Very true

1. I feel confident in my ability to assess, screen, and provide interventions for opioid misuse among school-age children and adolescents.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all true			Somewhat true			Very true

1. I am capable of assessing, screening, and providing interventions for opioid misuse among school-age children now.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all true			Somewhat true			Very true

1. I am able to do my own assessments, screens, and interventions for opioid misuse among school-age children and adolescents.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all true			Somewhat true			Very true

1. I feel able to meet the challenge of working with school-age children and adolescents who misuse opioids.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all true			Somewhat true			Very true

**Please respond to the following prompts with your level of agreement. Use the scale:**

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree

1. Opioid and fentanyl misuse training would benefit my education:

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree



1. Opioid and fentanyl misuse training would benefit my internship placement:

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Completely Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Completely Agree</b>

1. Opioid and fentanyl misuse training would benefit my career:

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Completely Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Completely Agree</b>

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT

### Informed Consent

The study in which you are asked to participate in is designed to evaluate the levels of knowledge and confidence of mental health interns have to assess, screen, and implement appropriate interventions for school-aged children and adolescents regarding misuse of opioids. The study is being conducted by Carolina Rodriguez and Gabriela Gonzalez, graduate students under the supervision of Erick Schott, assistant professor and research supervisor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CSUSB.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of the study is to evaluate the levels of knowledge and confidence of mental health interns with regard to assessing, screening, and implementing interventions in school-based settings for school-age and adolescent opioid misuse.

**DESCRIPTION:** Participants will be asked questions on the topic of opioid misuse and asked to gauge their knowledge and confidence levels to assess, screen, and intervene for opioid misuse for school-age children and adolescents.

**PARTICIPATION:** Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without penalty.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Your responses will remain confidential and data will be reported anonymously only.

**DURATION:** It will take approximately 15 minutes to complete the indicated survey.

**RISKS:** Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your voluntary participation.

**BENEFITS:** There will be no direct benefits to the participants. However, findings from the study will contribute to our knowledge in this area of research.

**CONTACT:** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Erik Schott at (909) 537-7480 or [ErikSchott@csusb.edu](mailto:ErikSchott@csusb.edu).

**RESULTS:** Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2024.

.....  
Link to survey: [https://csusb.az1.qualtrics.com/fe/form/SV\\_0M1VexrXPZqzkJB](https://csusb.az1.qualtrics.com/fe/form/SV_0M1VexrXPZqzkJB)

*I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older and a mental health intern to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document, and agree to participate in this study.*

APPENDIX C  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW APPROVAL LETTER

December 17, 2023

**CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

Protocol Change/Modification  
IRB-FY2023-261  
Status: Exempt

Erik Schott, Carolina Rodriguez, Gabriela Gonzalez  
CSBS - Social Work  
California State University, San Bernardino  
5500 University Parkway  
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Erik Schott, Carolina Rodriguez, Gabriela Gonzalez:

The protocol change/modification to your application to use human subjects, titled "A need for support services and intervention education on substance use for mental health interns " has been reviewed and approved by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). A change in your informed consent requires resubmission of your protocol as amended. Please ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study. A lapse in your approval may result in your not being able to use the data collected during the lapse in your approval.

This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses. Investigators should consider the changing COVID-19 circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites should follow CDC, California Department of Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's [COVID-19 Prevention Plan](#) for more information regarding campus requirements.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following by submitting the appropriate form (modification, unanticipated/adverse event, renewal, study closure) through the online Cayuse IRB Submission System.

- 1. If you need to make any changes/modifications to your protocol submit a modification form as the IRB must review all changes before implementing them in your study to ensure the degree of risk has not changed.**
- 2. If any unanticipated adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research study or project.**
- 3. If your study has not been completed submit a renewal to the IRB.**
- 4. If you are no longer conducting the study or project submit a study closure.**

You are required to keep copies of the informed consent forms and data for at least three years.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at [mgillesp@csusb.edu](mailto:mgillesp@csusb.edu). Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2023-261 in all correspondence.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

*King-To Yeung*

King-To Yeung, Ph.D., IRB Chair  
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

KY/MG

APPENDIX D  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

The objective of this research study is to examine the knowledge and confidence levels of mental health interns in assessing, screening, and providing interventions for school-age children and adolescents with regard to opioid misuse. This study will assist in determining whether opioid misuse training impacts the knowledge and confidence levels of mental health interns when providing support services for school-age children and adolescents in school-based settings. Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. Particularly questions asked when gathering participants' demographics. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your voluntary participation at any time. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please contact Erik Schott, research supervisor at California State University, San Bernardino at (909) 537-7480 (ext. 7-7580).

If you have experienced any distress by the questions of this study additional information is provided below for a crisis counselor hotline service:

Suicide and Crisis Hotline: Call or Text 988, to connect with a crisis counselor 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

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## ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

Carolina Rodriguez assisted in the completion of the Problem Formulation, Literature Review, and Discussion portion of this research. At the initial stages of the research, Ms. Rodriguez reached out to the necessary parties to ensure consent from the various sites where participants were recruited. Ms. Rodriguez maintained proper communication with districts identified in the study to ensure that the necessary material was distributed for effective data completion. Ms. Rodriguez informed her contributions by reading and analyzing existing literature on the topic. Ms. Rodriguez along with Ms. Gonzalez, completed the quantitative data collection, interpreted the data, and formulated findings. Ms. Rodriguez assessed findings to infer further implications for the social work field. Ms. Rodriguez ensured the quality and completion of this proposal.

Gabriela Gonzalez introduced the subject matter in this research proposal. Ms. Gonzalez assisted with the completion of the Problem Formulation, Literature Review Methods, and Results sections. Ms. Gonzalez and Ms. Rodriguez scheduled advisory meetings with faculty supervisor Erik Schott, research professor Armando Barragan Jr, and Peer Research Consultant, Christian Koeu to assist with the advancement and formatting of the research findings. Ms. Gonzalez collaborated with Ms. Rodriguez, completing the quantitative data collection, and organizing and interpreting the data to formulate findings for completion of the research.