Background

- Opioid epidemics stem from a number of influential factors that span multiple levels of the social-ecological model. These can include environmental (i.e., drug markets), institutional (i.e., prescription rates), and community (i.e., culture) factors that can significantly differ from one region of a country to another.
- Targeted regional public health responses can often be more effective and successful than national ones.
- This study sought to explore regional differences in current opioid use patterns between Central and Western Canada.

Methods

- Substance abuse treatment programs in Central (Ontario, n=469) or Western Canada (British Columbia/Alberta, n=114) recruited patients entering treatment for an opioid use disorder in 2017.
- Participants were surveyed about substance use patterns in the past month, along with demographic variables, as part of the Opioid Dependence Treatment Program Survey.

Results

- Past month opioid use significantly differed between Western and Central Canada, with the majority of those in Ontario using much more prescription opioids alone (58.5% vs. 28.4%, p<0.001), compared to British Columbia/Alberta in which both prescription opioids AND heroin (65.1% vs. 33.7%, p<0.001) were used.
- Fentanyl use was also much more common in Western Canada (74.3% vs. 39.7%, p<0.001).
- In Western Canada, non-prescription THC (50.9% vs. 29.4%, p<0.001), non-prescription amphetamines (37.7% vs. 7.5%, p<0.001) and benzodiazepines (32.5% vs. 12.4%, p<0.001) were more common.
- Interestingly, there were no significant differences in gender or ethnicity between treatment-seeking opioid users in Western vs. Central Canada, but Western Canada saw a higher prevalence of younger opioid users compared to Central Canada’s older opioid users.

Conclusions

- Prescription opioid use appears to be the dominant form of opioid use in Central Canada.
- Western Canada has higher rates of co-occurring heroin and prescription opioid abuse, fentanyl abuse and abuse of non-opioid drugs.
- These data suggest regional variations in opioid use need to be better understood in order to more effectively allocate and implement targeted policy responses to the Canadian opioid epidemic.