County-level Estimates of Opioid Use Disorder and Treatment Needs in California

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Methodological Appendix

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This memo presents the methodology used to produce county-level estimates of opioid use disorder (OUD) and treatment needs in California counties, for a project funded by the California Health Care Foundation (CHCF). The main objective was to estimate additional buprenorphine-waivered prescribers needed per county to achieve capacity to treat all people with OUD. This analysis is subject to several assumptions and limitations, as described below.

Summary of Methods

To estimate the demand for treatment, we calculated county rates of opioid use disorder (OUD), starting with estimates of past-year abuse or dependence of nonmedical use of prescription pain relievers for 26 substate regions in California from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) (Lipari et al. 2017), and adjusting these estimates for additional NSDUH estimates of heroin use disorder and recent trends in OUD. We then used regression models to predict county-level OUD rates as a function of explanatory variables that have an empirical relationship with OUD (Alzeer et al. 2017; Paulozzi et al. 2017). We tested a variety of models that produced similar patterns of results in predicting OUD rates. County-level estimates of the population from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) were applied to these rates to create county-level counts, which were adjusted to match the NSDUH substate OUD counts. To estimate buprenorphine medication-assisted treatment (MAT) capacity, we drew on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) DATA-waived buprenorphine prescriber data for publicly listed providers. Since about 55% of waivered prescribers are publicly listed (Jones et al. 2015), we adjusted prescriber counts to account for unlisted prescribers, and assumed these unlisted prescribers had a waiver capacity of 30 patients. In counties where the number of prescribers from California’s Controlled Substance Utilization Review and Evaluation System (CURES) data was larger than our estimate based on SAMHSA DATA, we adjusted the estimated number of waivered prescribers, preserving the distribution of waiver limits from the SAMHSA data. We calculated county buprenorphine treatment capacity using a lower bound of estimated average capacity in California of 9 patients per provider (Thomas et al. 2017) and an upper bound equal to half of a prescriber’s estimated maximum patient waiver limit. Small adjustments for patient capacity related to out-of-county buprenorphine prescribers and MAT capacity related to methadone slots at Opioid Treatment Programs (OTPs) in the county were added. To compute the treatment gap, i.e. the number of individuals with OUD who are likely to seek treatment but who do not have access to MAT in their county, we assumed that 20% of individuals with OUD are likely to seek MAT (WHO 2013; Wu, Zhu, and Swartz 2016). We then calculated the treatment gap by subtracting the low and high estimated range of the treatment capacity in each county from the estimated number seeking treatment. We computed the estimated number of additional 30-waivered buprenorphine prescribers needed per county to achieve capacity to fill the estimated
treatment gap. We present strategies to meet demand for treatment, showing a range using lower and upper estimates of the treatment gap and the treatment capacity. In cases where the number of new prescribers needed would be more than double the number of current buprenorphine-waivered prescribers, we present an alternative, more feasible, strategy of doubling the number of prescribers. In these cases, we present the percent of the treatment gap that would be filled.

Data Sources and Key Variables

Our estimates are based on several data sources. For several opioid-related county-level indicators, we used estimates available from the California Opioid Overdose Surveillance Dashboard (CDPH 2017). We used data for 57 counties—all counties except Los Angeles—and seven Los Angeles service planning areas (SPAs), which are sub-county estimates based on census tracts. Staff from the California Department of Public Health provided us with aggregate counts for the relevant Dashboard estimates for Los Angeles SPAs, which are not available publicly.

We drew on the following county-level Dashboard estimates (levels and crude rates for counties and counts for SPAs) for:

- Buprenorphine prescriptions by patient location, 2016, from Controlled Substance Utilization Review and Evaluation System (CURES) 2.0.
- All opioid overdose deaths, 2016, from death certificate data from California Department of Public Health (CDPH) vital statistics Multiple Cause of Death file
- Midyear county populations from CDC WONDER Bridge-Race Population Estimates, produced by the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS).

We used the same 2016 midyear population estimates used in the California Opioid Overdose Surveillance Dashboard for all further estimates of rates. Population estimates are from the Bridged-race Population Estimates published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). We used 2013 Los Angeles SPA population estimates, the most recent available, from the Los Angeles County Office of Planning, Evaluation and Development, to calculate the proportion of the total Los Angeles county population in each SPA. We applied these proportions to the 2016 midyear Los Angeles population estimate from the CDC to estimate the 2016 midyear population in each SPA.

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1 LA Service Planning Area 2013 Population estimates can be found at:
http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/plan/docs/CHA_CHIP/SPA1Supplement.pdf,
http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/plan/docs/CHA_CHIP/SPA2Supplement.pdf,
http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/plan/docs/CHA_CHIP/SPA3Supplement.pdf,
http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/plan/docs/CHA_CHIP/SPA4Supplement.pdf,
http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/plan/docs/CHA_CHIP/SPA5Supplement.pdf,
http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/plan/docs/CHA_CHIP/SPA6Supplement.pdf,
http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/plan/docs/CHA_CHIP/SPA71Supplement.pdf,
We used past-year estimates of nonmedical use of prescription pain relievers for 26 substate regions in California (Lipari et al. 2017). These estimates were produced by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), combining 2012 to 2014 data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), which provides estimates of the use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs by the US civilian, noninstitutionalized population aged 12 years or older. The substate regions, created in consultation with the California Department of Health Care Services, are defined by aggregations of California’s 58 counties, except Los Angeles, which is split into 7 service planning areas. Additionally, we used the most recent western region measure of past-year prescription pain reliever use and the most recent national measure of dependence and past-year heroin use and dependence, both from the 2015 NSDUH; more detailed geographic data is not available publicly.

As a measure of buprenorphine treatment providers, we used SAMHSA’s database of information on all DATA-waived buprenorphine prescribers across all types (Doctor of Medicine and Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine, Nurse Practitioner, Physician Assistant), certification date, state in which they practice, authorized patient limit (30, 100, 275), for providers that allow their contact information to be listed publicly (SAMHSA 2017). We used the DATA-waived provider information from the program’s inception in 2002 through July 2017. This data was provided to us by CHCF.

We also used aggregate counts of all prescribers and buprenorphine prescribers, by prescriber and patient location, from the Controlled Substance Utilization Review and Evaluation System (CURES). This aggregate data was provided to us by CHCF.

As a measure of methadone treatment providers in the county and an estimate of the number of methadone patients treated, we aggregated data from the 2016 California data from the SAMHSA Opioid Treatment Program (OTP) Directory, which provides the address of each OTP in California (SAMHSA 2016). In December 2016 when the 2016 data was collected, the directory included the number of methadone patients at each OTP in California.

Methods

Prevalence of Opioid Use Disorder (OUD) by County

To estimate treatment need, we calculated estimated rates of past-year opioid abuse or dependence by county. We started with the estimates of past-year abuse or dependence of nonmedical use of prescription pain relievers for people ages 12 and older, i.e. prescription opioid use disorder (Rx OUD), for 26 substate regions in California from the combined 2012 to 2014 NSDUH data. We then adjusted this 2012 to 2014 rate upward to account for the increased prevalence of Rx OUD observed from the 2012 to 2014 period to the most recent period available, 2015 (Hughes et al. 2016). Using these estimates, we multiply each sub-state rate by 1.109 to adjust for increases in the rate of Rx OUD over time. Since the substate estimate includes only Rx OUD and not heroin use disorder (HUD), we make an additional upward adjustment to account for the approximately 9.8% of people with an opioid use disorder who

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2 These 2015 estimates of Rx OUD prevalence are only available for the Western region, which historically has had similar rates of Rx OUD to California.
have HUD but not also Rx OUD. We multiply each sub-state rate by 1.108 (i.e. $1 \div (1 - 0.098)$) to adjust for these individuals with HUD, resulting in estimated substate OUD rates for people ages 12 and over.

Starting with these estimated substate OUD rates\(^3\), we used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to predict county-level OUD rates as a function of explanatory variables that have an empirical relationship with OUD. We used existing research to select independent variables (Alzeer, Jones, and Bair 2017; Paulozzi et al. 2011), presumed to capture variation in counties’ underlying OUD rates, as independent variables in the model. We tested a variety of models which produced similar patterns of results, and very good performance for predicting OUD rates. We chose the following parsimonious model: buprenorphine prescription crude rates by patient location in 2016, opioid overdose ED visit rates by facility location in 2015, and the proportion of the population that was age 20 to 24 in 2016, weighted by 2016 county population (R-squared 0.4046). We used this model to predict county-level OUD rates. County-level estimates of the population from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) were applied to these rates to create county-level counts, which were aggregated to the substate regions and adjusted to match the NSDUH substate OUD counts.

*Estimated Buprenorphine MAT Treatment Capacity by County*

To estimate buprenorphine MAT treatment capacity or treatment “slots”, we calculated county counts of the number of patients who could be treated with buprenorphine MAT. We first counted the number of publicly listed DATA-waivered prescribers from the SAMHSA database. Jones et al. (2015) find that only 55.4% of prescribers with a DATA-waiver to prescribe buprenorphine are publicly listed on the SAMHSA database. To account for this, we inflate counts of the number of prescribers with each waiver limit by county, rounding up to the nearest prescriber. We assume all non-listed prescribers have a waiver limit of 30. We then compare the total number of prescribers per county with the number of prescribers who prescribed buprenorphine in 2016 per county from CURES data. In counties where the number of prescribers from CURES data was larger than our estimate from the SAMHSA database, we inflate counts of the number of prescribers with each waiver limit in the county up to the CURES number. We then calculate the number of prescribers from a different county who prescribed to patients in the county from the CURES data; in other words, we calculate the number of out-of-county prescribers who prescribe to patients in the county. Because there is an average of twice as many out-of-county prescribers who prescribe into the county than there are in-county prescribes, we assume out-of-county prescribers treat fewer patients than in-county prescribers. We make an approximation that out-of-county prescribers treat half as many patients as an in-county prescriber with a 30-waiver limit.

Starting with the counts of DATA-waived providers with a 30-, 100-, or 275-patient limit by county, we used a lower bound of treatment capacity from the literature of 9 patients (specifically, 8.8 patients) per waived prescriber based on a California-specific finding from Thomas et al. (2017). This estimate likely over-estimates actual capacity since it describes the average monthly number of patients per prescriber excluding months during which prescribers had no patients. We assume 4.4 patients per out-of-county

\(^3\) Since age plays a major role in predicting OUD, we use crude rates rather than age-adjusted rates in the regression model so that the effects of age are included in the predictions.
prescriber based on the reasoning explained above. Since literature, e.g. Thomas et al. (2017), shows that most buprenorphine-waivered prescribers have a mean patient count well below their patient limit and have numerous months with no patient episodes, we use an upper bound that is lower than the maximum waiver limit. We use an upper bound that assumes all prescribers treat half of their maximum allowable waiver-limit (i.e. 15 for those with a 30-waiver, 50 for those with a 100-waiver, 137.5 for those with a 275-waiver, and 7.5 for out-of-county prescribers). We examined and tested additional estimates of patients per prescriber from the literature (Huhn and Dunn 2017; Blum et al. 2016; Jones et al. 2015; Arfken et al. 2010; Knudsen et al. 2017; Sigmon 2015) In almost all cases, these two estimates of buprenorphine MAT treatment capacity present a range that comprises all of the estimates we generated based on the literature.

Estimated Buprenorphine MAT Treatment Gap, Assuming 20% of Individuals with OUD Seek Opioid Agonist Medication-Assisted Treatment (OA-MAT)

To compute the number of individuals with OUD who do not have access to treatment in their county, we started with the county-level counts of the number of individuals with OUD. We assume that 20% of people with opioid use disorder will seek treatment. International recommendations from WHO, UNODC, and UNAIDS (2013) suggest that an appropriate target goal for the percent of people with OUD that are in treatment with Opioid Agonist Medication-Assisted Treatment (OA-MAT) should be 20% to 40%. The high target of 40% is based on levels of coverage achieved in countries with well-established OA-MAT programs. In addition, recent literature describing treatment in the U.S. suggests that about one-fifth (19.4%) of individuals with OUD received opioid-related treatment in the past year (Wu, Zhu, and Swartz 2016).

We subtracted the number of people estimated to have OUD per county by the treatment capacity in each county, assuming that buprenorphine-waivered prescribers treat an average of about 9 patients each as described above. We also subtract the number of people being treated with methadone in OTPs, and inflate the number being treated in an OTP to account for the assumption that OTPs are operating at only 80% capacity. The number of people being treated with methadone in OTPs in 2016 was obtained from SAMHSA’s Opioid Treatment Program Directory, which previously published the approximate number of methadone patients at each OTP, based on federal form SMA-162. The result is an upper estimate of the buprenorphine MAT treatment gap, since the estimated average number of patients per provider is likely to be biased downwards. We also computed a lower bound estimate of the treatment gap. We subtracted the number of people estimated to have OUD per county by the treatment capacity in each county, assuming each waivered prescriber treats half of the maximum number of patients allowable (i.e. their waiver limit), resulting in the minimum buprenorphine MAT treatment gap.

Estimated Additional Buprenorphine Prescribers Needed to Fill the Treatment Gap, Assuming 20% of Individuals with OUD Seek OA-MAT Treatment

To compute the estimated number of additional buprenorphine prescribers needed per county to achieve capacity to treat all people with OUD, we calculated several options. We computed how many additional 30-waiver prescribers would be needed to fill the treatment gap under different assumptions. We computed a maximum estimate of the number of new 30-waivered prescribers needed based on the estimate of 9 patients per prescriber and the upper bound buprenorphine MAT treatment gap. We
computed a minimum estimate of the number of new 30-waivered prescribers needed based on patient limit of 15 patients (half of a newly waivered prescriber’s maximum) and the minimum treatment gap, which assumes all current providers treat half of their waiver limit.

To ensure that the estimates of new providers needed are feasible for counties, we limit the number of new prescribers recommended to the number of current prescribers. This ensures that at a maximum, we recommend that a county double their number of prescribers.

We conducted all analyses with Stata version 14 (StataCorp 2015).

**Limitations and considerations**

This study has several limitations. First, the NSDUH survey data used to estimate rates of OUD are based on self-reported information (and are thus subject to recall and social-desirability biases) and exclude homeless and incarcerated people, populations likely to have relatively higher rates of OUD. As a result, the estimated OUD rates may be high or low.

Second, the substate NSDUH estimates that are used as key inputs to our analyses are model-based small area estimates, with limitations described elsewhere (SAMHSA 2015).

Third, the DATA-waived provider information used in these estimates is limited to only those providers who allow their information to be listed publicly, including on the SAMHSA buprenorphine treatment locator. This is likely to bias the estimate of treatment capacity downwards. An estimated 55.4% of waived physicians between 2002 and 2013 allowed their information to be listed publicly (Jones et al. 2015). Providers who do not want their information posted publicly are likely to treat fewer patients than those who want their information to be posted publicly. Under the main scenario estimated here, i.e. estimating the capacity to treat all people with OUD, the treatment gap in most counties is relatively large compared to the estimated treatment capacity even if additional non-public providers are considered. Still, the main findings are sensitive to various assumptions, although they are more robust under the assumption that 20% of individuals with OUD seek buprenorphine MAT treatment. We plan sensitivity analyses around these assumptions in future work.

Fourth, to predict county-level OUD rates, one of the independent predictors was opioid overdose ED visit rates by facility location because patient location was not available for this measure. This would tend to slightly bias downwards the rate of OUD for counties where residents with an opioid overdose ED visit was treated in a different county.

Fifth, the average treatment duration for buprenorphine MAT treatment is less than one year; thus, a prescriber could potentially use each of their waivered slots to treat multiple patients sequentially over the course of a year.

Sixth, the treatment gap could be filled under alternative scenarios, e.g. by shifting some providers who are already waivered to higher patient limits. These alternatives likely result in lower estimates of
additional providers needed, since research using data from 2011 suggests that providers with higher waiver limits treat more patients, particularly in rural areas (Stein et al. 2015).

Taken together, these limitations related to estimation suggest that the main estimates of additional buprenorphine-waivered prescribers needed per county to achieve capacity to treat all people with OUD may be somewhat high. Further sensitivity analysis is planned, and estimates could be updated to reflect any new information that becomes available.

Lastly, we note that the clinical impact of increasing the number of buprenorphine-waivered prescribers in a county or any particular area has not yet been documented in the literature, although buprenorphine MAT treatment is highly effective. One important consideration is that many individuals with OUD need access to more intensive treatment than outpatient MAT treatment, such as residential or inpatient services. And, many individuals need treatment for substance use disorders that co-occur with OUD and comorbid mental health conditions. Treating those additional conditions may decrease the risk of opioid use relapse.

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Suggested Citation

References


