

**Nyal Mirza - University of Alberta**

## **Project: Hidden Heroes: Exploring the Experiences of Those Providing Unpaid Support to People Who Use Drugs in Rural Canada**

### **Background:**



Since 2016, 50,000 lives have been lost in Canada due to an unregulated toxic drug supply, with many more experiencing long-term health harms that require ongoing care and support. While these drug-related harms are often seen as an urban issue, rural communities across

Canada also faces high rates of drug-related morbidity/mortality. Unfortunately, many rural areas lack the essential life-saving interventions needed to prevent deaths and improve health outcomes.

Canada is currently facing two public health crises: the toxic drug crisis and a caregiving crisis, where unpaid labour is increasingly accounting for a fragmented/inaccessible healthcare system, yet the relationship between both is not understood. In rural areas where formal services are often

unavailable, informal caregivers—often family, friends, or chosen family—provide crucial unpaid support to people who use drugs, filling the gap.

This research seeks to understand experiences of people providing unpaid support to those who use drugs in rural Canada through qualitative interviews with caregivers (~30). The study will examine the types of unpaid support provided and how non-traditional caregivers (i.e., non-parental) navigate these roles. It will investigate the physical, mental, social, and financial impact of providing unpaid support. While exploring how stigma, structural vulnerabilities, and political factors shape these experiences – particularly for Indigenous and

racialized individuals. Finally, this research will identify what services are needed to both improve health outcomes for people who use drugs and enhance the well-being of those providing unpaid support in rural areas.

Patient partners, including key advocacy/lived experience groups are represented on our research team, and are being engaged throughout the process. The findings will deepen our understanding of caregiving within the context of a stigmatised/politicised health issue, offering insights into equitable and inclusive public health strategies. Improving outcomes for both people who use drugs, and those providing unpaid support in rural Canada.

**Bio:**

Nyal Mirza (he/him) is an MSc student in Health Policy Research at the University of Alberta's School of Public Health, also completing a certificate in Community-Based Research and Evaluation. Supervised by Dr. Elaine Hyshka and working as a Graduate Research Assistant with the Inner-City Health and Wellness Program, his thesis explores the experiences of informal caregivers supporting individuals who use drugs in rural Canada. His research employs qualitative, community-based methods to inform more equitable health policies.

Beyond his thesis, Nyal is conducting an environmental scan to map access to supervised consumption services in rural areas across Canada, identifying service availability, barriers to access, and feasible alternatives. He is also investigating the sociocultural factors influencing drug use among South Asian communities in Canada, reinforcing his commitment to addressing systemic barriers within his community.

Nyal holds a BSc. (Spec) in Pharmacology from the University of Alberta. Outside of research, he is deeply involved in community health advocacy. Through his work with the Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy (CSSDP) and partnerships with patient-focused advocacy organizations, he is committed to shaping policies that address substance use and broader health inequities.