Author's response to reviews

Title: Structural barriers in access to medical marijuana in the U.S.: A systematic review protocol

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Author’s response to reviews:

Associate Editor Comments: Please attend comprehensively to the comments of Reviewer 1 below.

Please format your abstract using structured headings and the PRISMA-P statement.

Comment: This review appeared to be somewhat confused. You have used terminology and structure as if this were an intervention review, i.e. a PICO question-driven review. But in fact, it would appear that this review is better understood as a scoping review to understand what the systematically searched, screened and appraised literature on medical marijuana programmes say about barriers and inequities. If that is the case, then I would suggest rewriting this protocol as a mixed-methods review with a framework synthesis element, in which you use the structural violence framework you describe to organise the data and findings generated by included studies.

Response: The reviewers are correct. We have determined the review will be better suited as a scoping review with mixed-methods studies included and structural violence used as a framework.

There are several major remaining issues.

Comment: First, you do not provide adequate attention to the role of appraisal in this review. How will you assess studies for quality?

Response: Thank you for your comments. We have provided guidelines that we will use in assessing quality of studies in this preview. Please see manuscript for details.

Comment: Second, the discussion of CFA is confused given your stated goal in this review. Do you mean that you will use a meta-analytic structural equation model, and if so, which studies...
would you include in a CFA and what will you do with the studies that do not fit this framework (e.g. the qualitative studies)?

Response: The study will no longer utilize statistical methods to measure common effects since there might be quantitative and qualitative studies included in the review.

Comment: Third, how will you synthesise the qualitative studies?

Response: The review will incorporate qualitative studies and exclude statistical methods, like the CFA, to allow for a cohesive presentation of results from both quantitative and qualitative studies.

Comment: Fourth, will you assess for publication bias?

Response: We will list publication bias as a limitation in the scoping review. Moreover, since this study will not include a meta-analysis, we do not anticipate the publication bias to serve as a threat to the study’s validity.

Comment: Fifth, what exactly are you planning to meta-analyse, how will you measure exposures and how will you measure outcomes?

Response: This review will not include a meta-analysis. Since we do not anticipate many randomized controlled trial in our study, the study will not consider exposures. However, we will measure outcomes as those predefined sociodemographic characteristics that result in disparities in medical marijuana access and use.

Reviewer #1:

The protocol highlights an interesting piece of research and a gap in the existing knowledge base. It in part establishes a context for the research by discussing a variety of factors which are shown in existing research as potential barriers to access.

Comment 1: You discuss the need to and importance of understanding barriers to medical marijuana access and provide context in the introduction however a more developed concept of why this research is important is needed. currently you state

"This review seeks to generate the necessary science for informing the collective public health discussions on patient access and state medical marijuana programs."

It isn't clear what you mean here, yes you want to understand the structural barriers but why? To what end?

Response: Tackling structural barriers to medical marijuana access encourages equity across all segments of adult patient population aligning with the fundamental pursuit of public health research and practice. The hope is that findings from the study will influence a more inclusive
stance by public health researchers and practitioners. Additionally, this review can serve as the basis for policy recommendations regarding access to treatment encouraging the development of evidence based policies of medical marijuana to best serve patients.

Comment 2: The second paragraph in the Gender and race section of the introduction doesn't seem relevant. The article is centered on medical marijuana and this section discusses it in relation to criminal justice and arrest surely if the marijuana is legally procured this isn't an issue? Also it doesn't speak to the structural barriers that you are exploring in your work.

Response: Thank you for your comment. We have reformatted the introductory section, excluded the paragraph on “gender”, and used a structural framework to further explore racial differences in access to medical marijuana.

Comment 3: In the section on stigma you write: "Physical availability of medical marijuana increased the number of marijuana users and the frequency of use (Freisthler and Gruenewald, 2014)."

Is it possible to include and idea of by how much?

Also you say: "It has been suggested that a 35% general increase in marijuana consumption within a month interval parallels the increasing trend of MML ratification throughout the United States (Chu, 2014)." it wasn't clear what you meant here.

Response: We have reformatted the section and removed the sentences that do not fit into the paragraph.

Comment 4: In the description of intervention section, more detail of why biosocial understanding and structural violence are relevant to the work you will be doing? What do they add?

Response: Thank you for your comment. We have expanded the section to explain structural violence to work.

Comment 5: In the methods section, justification for why you are only including peer -reviewed literature in the review would be interesting.

Also would it be possible to include you search strategy for the literature searching? Often an important tool for people reading your work to understood how you developed and used you search terms.

Response: Thank you for your comment. We have included a search strategy.

Comment 6: In the selection of studies section, you state that the first part of the review is undertaken by 2 reviews however you then state that the full stage review has 3 reviewers. I wondered if this was a mistake? And if not why go from 2 to 3 reviewers?
Response: Thank you for pointing out the discrepancy. The authors meant two reviewers.

Comment 7: Discussion of the quality assessment of the studies is missing from this section. How will this be undertaken? What tools will be employed? By what criteria will you remove studies based on the quality assessments? (I know you discuss the assessment of reporting bias but this needs more detail).

Response: Thank you for your comments. We have provided guidelines in assessing quality of studies included in this review. Please see manuscript for details.

Comment 8: Analysis

You discuss the method of CFA in the synthesis section but this, if I am reading it correctly, is a backup if the studies do not meet the heterogeneity requirements and no discussion is given of the process of the meta analysis, the sequence of events or the tools/software that you will use to perform the meta analysis. Discussion of the method, as it is your primary method is needed.

In the protocol you state that both qualitative and quantitative research is eligible for inclusion in the research. However, there is no discussion of how qualitative research will be analysed, what methods will be employed and how this analysis will be synthesised with data from the qualitative research. If you are planning to include qualitative research then some discussion of how this will be analysed and included in needed.

Response: Thank you for your comment. We have decided to no longer use CFA considering that the review could include qualitative and quantitative research studies.

Comment 9: The written style of the article is overly verbose in place and this can effect the readability and comprehension of the article, for example you say:

"The study does not anticipate to encounter articles in any language other than English because of the geographic scope delineated in the inclusion and exclusion criteria."

The sentence is clunky isn't easy to read. I would suggested that the article be further proofed for clarity and readability

Response: The manuscript has been revised for grammar and readability.