

CLIENT PERSPECTIVES ON DRUG CHECKING SERVICES FOR OVERDOSE PREVENTION

Northern California HIV/AIDS Policy Research Center | April 2024

STUDY PURPOSE & METHOD

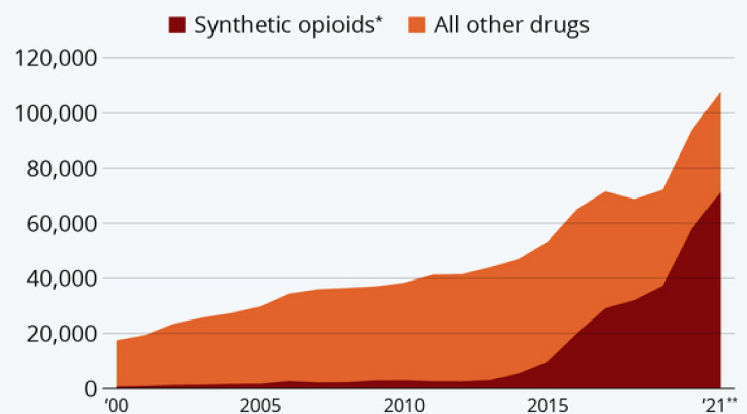
- Drug checking services can prevent overdose by providing people who use drugs (PWUD) with an opportunity to understand the chemical content of their drugs.
- We conducted semi-structured interviews to explore the utility of drug checking and its associated harm-reduction services with 13 clients of drug checking services in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Overdose deaths have risen sharply both nationally and in the San Francisco Bay Area.^{1, 2}

Study participants described how drug checking provided a way of reducing the likelihood of overdose and increased access to harm reduction and other health promoting services.

Fentanyl Fuels Surge in U.S. Drug Overdose Deaths

Number of drug overdose deaths in the U.S., by drug class



* mostly fentanyl, excl. methadone

** estimates for 2021 are based on provisional data.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

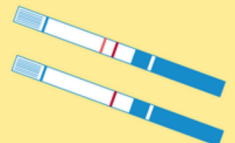


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KEY THEMES

Clients identified 3 main benefits of drug checking services.

- 1 Identifying and monitoring contaminants
- 2 Opportunity for increased access to other harm reduction services and health promotion
- 3 Reduced likelihood of overdose



DRUG CHECKING BENEFITS IDENTIFIED BY CLIENTS

1 A way of identifying and monitoring contaminants

- Confirming the presence or absence of fentanyl, especially in a new product or from a new supplier
- Understanding and communicating drug purity, and identifying other potentially harmful contaminants and new substances of concern
- Informing clients in their decision-making about taking a drug

My brother was one of the 14 statistics to die in this city. When the wave hit and there was groups of people dying, he was one of the first 14 people that died out here from fentanyl.

You can make a better-informed decision about what you are going to take into your system.

2 Entry into other harm reduction services and improved health

- Drug checking can provide an entry point into an array of physical, mental, and social services
- Drug checking encourages personal reflection on health and wellbeing

Getting connection to substance use treatment's a good idea anywhere because not everybody has a roadmap of how they get out of the woods, so to speak.

It makes me feel like I want to make my health better.

3 Reduced likelihood of overdose among the most vulnerable

- Clients described drug checking as an important tool for reducing overdose among inexperienced PWUD.
- Drug checking provides a trusted form of surveillance and early warning for providers, public health agencies, and the drug using community about harmful contaminants in the drug supply.

Overdoses are -- usually people are just getting to know fentanyl, they're just playing with it and they -- that's how it happens.

If somebody doesn't do fentanyl and it's in speed, that can be a dangerous game right there, because somebody can do it, there can be fentanyl in it, too much of it, and that person can OD.

Final Reflections

Drug checking services enable close monitoring of changes in the drug market, warn clients about new dangers, and empower participants to improve their wellbeing without promoting drug use.

"They're not promoting drugs. They're preventing -- they're giving us a free resource. They're giving us a place so we can be more responsible and use drugs in a more healthy manner."

REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1. Drug Overdose Deaths. (2023). CDC. <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/deaths/index.html>
2. Drug Overdose and Treatment Data and Reports. (2024). San Francisco Department of Public Health. <https://www.sf.gov/resource/2023/drug-overdose-and-treatment-data-and-reports>

This work was supported by the California HIV/AIDS Research Program (CHRP) grant #H21PC3238, PI Arnold.

For further reading on this topic, see a paper our policy research center recently published in *the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, a qualitative study documenting best practices in drug checking from service providers.

Ondocsin, J., Ciccarone, D., Moran, L., Outram, S., Werb, D., Thomas, L., & Arnold, E. A. (2023). Insights from drug checking programs: practicing bootstrap public health whilst tailoring to local drug user needs. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 20(11), 5999.



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