

Policy Brief

June 11th, 2021

The Opioid Epidemic on the West Side of Chicago: Defining the Crisis and Exploring Harm Reduction Strategies

Study Context:

- The purpose of the CE project was to research the Opioid epidemic on the West Side of Chicago.
- I explored harm reduction philosophies and interventions to reduce the prevalence of Opioid overdose.

Background Information:

- Harm reduction encompasses the policies and practices established to reduce negative health outcomes and social and legal impacts often associated with drug use and drug policy.¹

Introduction:

The Opioid epidemic on the West Side of Chicago has grown exponentially. It is impacting residents, community stakeholders, and the allocation of resources and funding. The Austin and North Lawndale Communities have the highest rates of Opioid overdose in both the State of Illinois and the Chicagoland area.²

Context or Scope of Problem:

According to data from the Cook County Medical Examiner's case archive, there have been more than double the amount of opioid related deaths in 2020 than in 2019.³ The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the opioid epidemic on the West Side of Chicago. Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, is responsible for most opioid related overdose deaths in the Chicagoland area.

Policy Alternatives:

Harm reduction strategies emphasize alternatives to the increasing rate of Opioid overdose. These strategies aim to mitigate the harmful effects of drug use- rather than deter individuals from using drugs altogether.⁴ The implementation of safe use facilities is one promising harm reduction strategy to reduce the incidence of Opioid related overdose. Safe use facilities are legally sanctioned facilities that allow individuals to consume pre-obtained drugs in a safe location with medically trained staff present.⁵ Many other forms of holistic care and services are available at the facility. Other important harm reduction strategies include Naloxone distribution efforts as well as drug-checking services; which allow for the detection of Fentanyl and other dangerous synthetic Opioids.

Policy Recommendations:

Due to the growth of this epidemic and the rate of Opioid deaths associated to Fentanyl, the research findings suggest that it may be wise to consider harm reduction strategies that have been successfully implemented in other countries. Policy makers and legislators are beginning to take heed. The Biden Administration supports the clinical effectiveness of emerging harm reduction practices and hopes to test strategies to implement evidence based practices in the future. The state of Illinois has a bill on the move to legalize safe use facilities. State Representative, Lashawn Ford, recently proposed to amend House Bill 110. The amendment would establish a new license category titled, "Harm Reduction Services" and direct the approval process for agencies applying for licensure.⁶ This amendment has not passed at this time, but the proposed amendment is a step toward implementing safe use facilities.

Important policy considerations include access to other various forms of harm reduction strategies such as Naloxone distribution and Fentanyl testing. It is important to make these resources easier to fund, supply, and distribute to community members and people who are proximate to

individuals who are at-risk. In 2017, the Illinois Department of Public Health issued a standing order to increase access to Narcan and Naloxone. The standing order ensures that pharmacists and participating organizations can distribute the lifesaving prescription drug to anyone who requests it; even without a prescription.⁷ Most insurance providers, including all Medicaid and Medicare plans in the State of Illinois, will cover the cost of Narcan and Naloxone.

Much like Narcan and Naloxone, there is a growing need for access to Fentanyl testing strips. In April of 2021, the CDC and SAMHSA issued a statement federally funding and supporting the use of the testing strips in accordance with state laws.⁸ However, many states still consider Fentanyl testing strips to be classified as illegal drug paraphernalia. With the growing rate of overdose deaths associated with the dangerous synthetic Opioid, it is recommended that all U.S. states decriminalize Fentanyl testing strips. This does not mean that individuals would stop using Opioids due to the presence of Fentanyl. But, it does give individuals who use the opportunity to modify the dose, use with access to Narcan or Naloxone, or use in a supervised environment- perhaps even one day at a legalized safe consumption site.

References:

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