



Solidarity and Surveillance in a State-sponsored Drug Checking Program in Maryland, USA

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Background

Over the past decade, the North American drug market has grown increasingly volatile, including the emergence of fentanyl analogues and xylazine. Drug checking programs have emerged as a promising intervention.

Maryland’s RAD program is a state-run drug market surveillance system implemented within existing harm reduction programs, with samples processed by a government laboratory

In this study we examined what contributes to PWUD’s active participation in the RAD program despite previous harms by state surveillance mechanisms?

Methods

SSP staff at programs that had and had not implemented the RAD program were recruited via email and interviewed via Zoom. SSP clients who had and had not participated in the RAD program were recruited with the support of 4 community-based SSP programs. Participants were recruited and interviewed in person.

Interviews were transcribed with participant consent and analyzed using MaxQDA. Analysis was conducted by first author with regular debriefings with senior investigators.

All research activities were approved by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the Maryland Department of Health IRBs.

TRUST

- Prioritization of privacy and anonymity**
RAD rollout begins with clients with existing rapport. Staff turnover undermines trust.
- Ability to leverage existing rapport between clients and staff**
Programs attempt to limit intrusiveness, provide flexibility in detail of info required
- Mutual assumption of criminal-legal risk by clients and staff**
Staff assume criminal-legal risks of transporting samples via service mobilization

“If they want to answer the questions for us like which part of the city? Did you buy it from? I’ll put like east or west side... **But if they don’t want to answer any of those questions they can just drop it and leave.**”

“I love everybody here. **And this is the most non-judgmental place you can come to.** And it’s been like that since day one...it’s a safe place.”

I would go and **tell the drug dealer, especially the ones that are more local, that I can go get their shit tested.** They got a new batch, they would give me some, and I’d go get it tested for them.

“I was like, ‘Yes. **If I could help prevent someone else from overdosing, I definitely’--** if anything, I was helping in the future for everybody else.”

LEGITIMACY

- Community buy-in to SSPs as primary source of drug market information**
RAD program more timely than other surveillance mechanism, e.g., autopsy
- Involvement of government lab promotes confidence in validity**
Confirms clients’ experiences of abnormal reactions; transparency helps overcome hesitation
- State-funded service facilitates criminal-legal protection**
Memorandums of understanding potential mechanism, but undermined by differential compliance

RAD program offers important data about the illicit drug market; differs from other surveillance mechanisms.

SSP dissemination of high-level RAD findings to community stakeholders could promote legitimacy and buy-in to harm reduction, but unintended consequences should be considered

Implementation of RAD at SSPs specifically considers the needs and vulnerabilities of PWUD, distinguishes program as not surveillance of people who use drugs, but surveillance by and for people who use drugs

Key Findings

SOLIDARITY

- Motivation to participate as “act of good faith” towards the program**
Even those not interested in individual results would submit to help the program
- Clients frame participation as a form of “community service”**
Sharing results broadly as “duty to warn”, recognize value of broader monitoring of drug market trends
- Increased sense of agency in making drug supply safer through participation**
Raising critical consciousness re drug supply, generating more informed consumer

Non-instantaneous drug checking findings should emphasize the collective benefits of the program, in addition to individual benefits.

Need for more formalized mechanisms to ensure protection for both SSP clients and staff against criminal-legal sanctions

Participating programs should identify mechanisms of disseminating community-level results in collaboration with participants to identify most effective – state-level investment of resources to fund dissemination activities and development of best practices

Implications for Practice