

Exploring the Characteristics and Overdose Risk Among People Who Both Sell and Use Drugs in Baltimore, Maryland, US

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Aim

Assess the following characteristics amongst people who sell and use drugs (PWSUD) in Baltimore, MD:

- Structural vulnerability
- Harm reduction engagement
- Overdose risk

Introduction

People who sell drugs are:

- Often inaccurately considered distinct from people who use drugs
- Demonized in their perceived contribution to the US overdose epidemic
- Constantly excluded from drug policy reform
- Targeted by drug-induced homicide laws

There is scarce literature regarding characteristics and overdose risk of the intersecting subgroup of PWSUD or are engaged in market activities.

Methods

Study Details

- Substance Checking Outreach and PrEP Engagement (SCOPE) Study in Baltimore, MD
- Survey data collected from July 2023 and October 2024
- All reported past month drug use

Analysis

- 476 participants reported sources of income
- Compared those who reported selling (n=110) to not selling drugs (n=381)
- Used clustered logistic regressions to examine unadjusted odds ratios¹

Results

Variables (past 6 months unless indicated otherwise)		Reported selling, steering or touting drugs for income		
		OR	95% CI	p
Demographics				
Race/Ethnicity	non-Hispanic Black	REF		
	non-Hispanic white	1.87	(1.07, 3.26)	0.028
	Hispanic/Mixed/Multiracial/Other	4.39	(2.44, 7.93)	<0.001
Overdose Risk				
Experienced an overdose		1.58	(0.87, 2.87)	0.136
Witnessed any overdose		1.87	(1.43, 2.45)	<0.001
Structural Vulnerability				
Unstable housing		1.95	(1.51, 2.53)	<0.001
Experienced hunger at least weekly		2.09	(1.60, 2.74)	<0.001
Arrested at least once		1.92	(1.24, 2.97)	0.003
Engaging in one or more other forms of survival economics*		8.04	(6.33, 10.22)	<0.001
Injected past 30 days		2.16	(1.61, 2.90)	<0.001
Daily use of both opioids & stimulants		4.14	(2.53, 6.76)	<0.001
Harm Reduction Engagement				
Used naloxone on someone at least once		2.84	(2.12, 3.80)	<0.001
Got syringes from SSPs in past 30 days		1.70	(1.61, 1.79)	<0.001
Used fentanyl test strips at least once		1.33	(0.81, 2.19)	0.259
Used other test strips at least once		1.38	(0.94, 2.02)	0.102

* Includes other forms of illegal income (e.g., selling sex, shoplifting, robbery, boosting, etc.)

Discussion

PWSUD were more likely to report:

- Engagement in one or more other forms of survival economics
- Several characteristics of structural vulnerability
- Having witnessed an overdose
- Having been arrested
- More severe drug use practices
- Engagement in several harm reduction practices

Ongoing criminalization of PWSUD via drug-induced homicide laws:

- Perpetuates rates of structural vulnerability²
- Exacerbates community overdose risks³
- Hinders engagement in harm reduction practices⁴
- Compounds arrest-related health risks⁵

Conclusions

Heightened risks for low-level street-based PWSUD should be considered when reforming drug-related policies and tailoring harm reduction services.

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