

HEALing Communities Study's Effect on Opioid Overdose Deaths

*Community-based Cluster Randomized Trial to Reduce
Opioid Overdose Deaths*

The Question:

Can engaging communities in the adoption of evidence-based practices (EBPs) to address the opioid epidemic reduce the number of opioid-related overdose deaths in those communities?

The Details:

In Ohio, there was a 9% lower rate of opioid overdose deaths in intervention communities (where the intervention had been implemented) than comparison communities (where the intervention had not yet been implemented). However, we did not find enough evidence to say the intervention decreased opioid-related overdose deaths.

Adjusted opioid-related overdose death rates per 100,000 during measurement period

	Intervention	Comparison
Ohio	39.3	43.0
Study-wide	47.2	51.7

COVID, timing, and the changing drug supply all impacted the outcomes. The intervention's launch in January 2020 occurred only two months before widespread COVID-19 shutdowns. COVID delayed local engagement and the 10 months between the selection of EBPs and the measurement period did not seem enough time to ensure robust implementation of strategies in all communities in the face of hiring needs, workflow changes, and collaboration development. Further, fentanyl became more prevalent as the changing drug supply impacted outcomes.

Conclusions:

While there was not enough evidence to find an effect on opioid overdose death rates, the intervention did result in the implementation of 615 strategies rooted in evidence-based practices across the participating communities, as well as the launch of five communication campaigns across 33 communities. These efforts need more time to reach a large enough number of people to affect opioid-related overdose deaths at the community level.

In addition, coalitions of individuals and organizations were formed or strengthened across the participating communities, connecting them to each other and partners in higher education and state agencies. These partnerships are expected to enhance the sustainability of the evidence-based practices implemented as part of this effort.

The Takeaway

- Ohio HCS implemented 137 evidence-based practice strategies in the nine intervention counties. The study-wide intervention resulted in the implementation of 615 strategies rooted in evidence-based practices across the participating communities, as well as the launch of five communication campaigns across 33 communities.
- In Ohio, there was a 9% lower rate of opioid overdose deaths in intervention vs. comparison communities. Researchers did not find evidence that the intervention affected opioid-related overdose deaths in the evaluation period.

References & Links:

HEALing Communities Study Consortium (2024 June 16). Community-Based Cluster-Randomized Trial to Reduce Opioid Overdose Deaths. The New England Journal of Medicine.
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38884347/>