

Substance Use and Homelessness in Northeast MN

UNHOUSED MINNESOTANS FACE CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

The Minnesota Drug Overdose and Substance Use Surveillance Activity (**MNDOSA**) is a public health surveillance activity that collects data on victims of overdose or substance misuse and tests clinical samples to confirm what substances were involved in patient hospital visits.

Initial data from five Essentia Health emergency departments in Northeast Minnesota show that, of the 459 patient visits there between November 2017 and October 2021,

29% of patients (134) were experiencing homelessness.



This MNDOSA report includes data from five Essentia Health emergency departments in Northeast Minnesota.

One major insight revealed by an extensive record review is simply that unhooused patients who misuse substances are more likely to be referred to further treatment, but they are also more likely to decline it.

The reasons these patients declined additional treatment are unclear, but **existing treatment options may have strict abstinence only requirements, may not be culturally responsive, or may necessitate leaving community supports behind**, which could make patients' decisions to engage in such treatment more difficult.

Opportunities for Intervention

There are many factors that impact a person's ability to find housing, economic stability, and appropriate medical treatment, which subsequently increase their risk of fatal drug overdose.

In overdose patients experiencing homelessness in this study, such factors were present:

- **100%** had a history of diagnosed substance use disorder.
- **87%** had a history of at least one mental health disorder.
- **25%** had a history of justice system involvement.
- **18%** were living with HIV.

These factors are known as **opportunities for intervention** because they often involve direct consultation between patients and systems of care, during which patients could be referred to treatment and support resources.

Further study is needed to understand access and barriers to treatment in Minnesota's unhooused population.

Toxicology Results

Through **MNDOSA**, substances that patients reported using, or which clinicians believed were used based on the patient's symptoms, were verified with toxicology testing. Regardless of housing status, toxicology testing often detected substances that were not reported.

While only 67% of unhoused patients believed they had used amphetamine, 83% of toxicology tests detected it. **Similarly, while only 25% of unhoused patients believed they had used an opioid, toxicology detected opioids in twice that many patients.**

These findings support concerns that patients may not know what substances they are using.

“These results point to the reality that we need a proactive, trauma-conscious, integrated, and responsive approach in supporting people facing homelessness. We need culturally responsive, integrated teams to build relationships and trust with people living outside and in shelters, and to connect them with housing and other areas of care including harm reduction tools.”

— **Laura Birnbaum, St. Louis County Housing & Homelessness Supervisor**

More Information

- Learn more about the study on the following webpage:
 - [MNDOSA Report: Homelessness and Substance Misuse in Northeast MN \(2017-2021\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/injury/data/mndosanortheast.html) (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/injury/data/mndosanortheast.html>).
- Read the full report here:
 - [Homelessness and Substance Misuse Reported through MNDOSA](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/opioids/documents/mndosaunhousedreport.pdf) (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/opioids/documents/mndosaunhousedreport.pdf>)
- See what else MNDOSA does on the following webpage:
 - [Minnesota Drug Overdose and Substance Use Surveillance Activity \(MNDOSA\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/injury/data/mndosa.html) (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/injury/data/mndosa.html>)

Minnesota Department of Health
Injury and Violence Prevention Section, Epidemiology Unit
health.drugodepi@state.mn.us
www.health.state.mn.us
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