

# Lake County Illinois Deflection Program Evaluation Finds Reduced Overdoses and Property Arrests: Research Brief

Due to the high number of Americans with substance use disorders and the opioid crisis, many law enforcement departments are rethinking how they address the needs of people with substance use issues. With police-based deflection programs, police officers make referrals to substance use disorder treatment and other services. The research team evaluated A Way Out, a Lake County Illinois deflection program, in which citizens can enter a police station and ask for help obtaining substance use disorder treatment without fear of arrest. Using a synthetic control method, we found Lake County had reduced fatal and non-fatal overdoses, including fatal opioid overdoses, and reduced property crime arrests compared to a control group of other Illinois counties. Study results showed support for police deflection and can contribute knowledge to the growing field of deflection.

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## Introduction

In 2021, more than 46 million Americans aged 12 and older (17% of the population) had a substance use disorder (SUD), with just 6% receiving SUD treatment.<sup>[1]</sup> The past two decades have seen a significant increase in U.S. drug overdose deaths involving opioids. Since 2016, overdose deaths have exceeded other causes of accidental death, including motor vehicles and firearms.<sup>[2]</sup> Since 1999, U.S. authorities recorded almost 1 million overdose deaths with 107,000 overdose deaths in 2021; the majority due to opioids.<sup>[3]</sup>

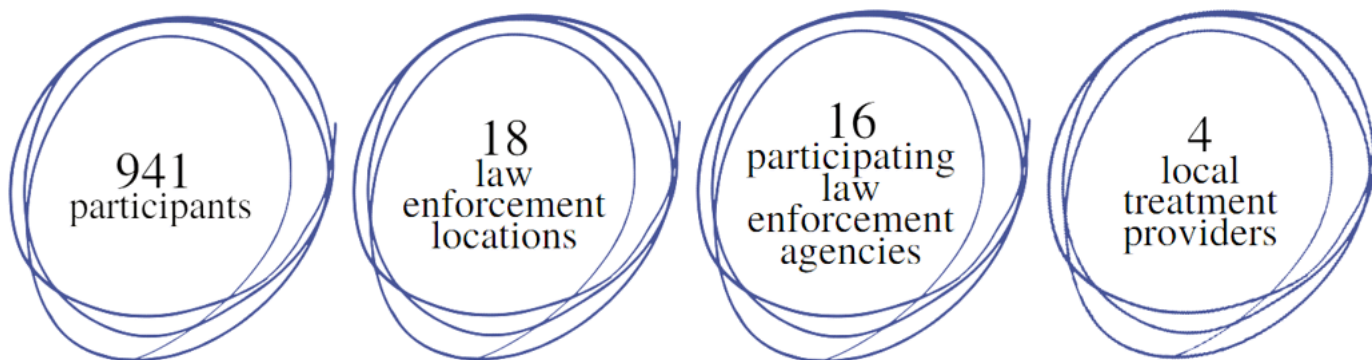
Many law enforcement agencies have adopted deflection as a response to SUDs, overdoses, and mental illness, offering another access point to treatment.<sup>[4]</sup> Police officers often encounter people with behavioral health issues,<sup>[5]</sup> and may become frustrated by frequent interactions with those with chronic SUDs and having few tools to support recovery and limit arrests.<sup>[6]</sup> With self-referral deflection programs, individuals voluntarily enter local police stations and request , who are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to be referred to treatment referrals without fear of arrest.<sup>[7]</sup> This program model alleviates common barriers—SUD treatment waiting lists, cost/lack of health insurance, connection to community resources and services, and transportation to treatment.<sup>[8]</sup> Self-referral programs can operate at a low cost using officers' time assisting participants.

## Lake County Deflection Program: A Way Out

Lake County in Northeastern Illinois has a population of over 700,000.<sup>[9]</sup> The county started its self-referral deflection program, A Way Out program, in 2016 (Figure 1).<sup>[10]</sup> A prior study found a majority of A Way Out program participants were White males, aged in their early 30s, had either no insurance or some form of Medicaid/managed care, and were diagnosed with an alcohol or opioid use disorder.<sup>[11]</sup>

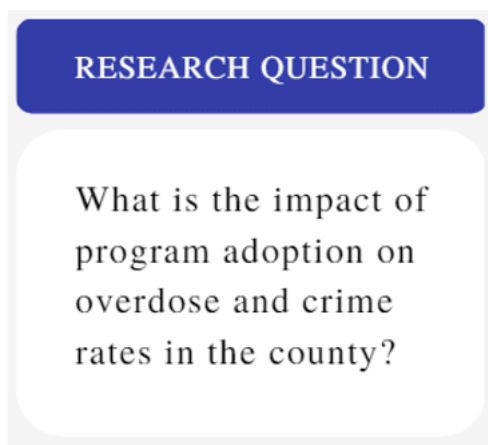
### Figure 1

*A Way Out by the Numbers*



*Note.* As of February 2023. Data source: A. Seidman, personal communication, February 8, 2023. Fifteen police departments and the county sheriff's office participated in the program. Fifteen police stations and three sheriff's office locations accepted walk-ins. In addition to the four local treatment providers, the program also used additional local recovery homes and treatment providers outside the county as needed.

The limited literature on deflection programs largely focuses on program description, participant description, and program implementation.<sup>[12]</sup> The current study adds to the current body of research and can inform federal and state policies, funding decisions, and local jurisdictions. This research brief summarizes information from a report prepared for the National Institutes of Justice and published on the RAND website.<sup>[13]</sup>



## Methods

The evaluation sought to answer the research question: What is the impact of the program on overdose and crime rates in the county? The evaluation was approved by RAND's Institutional Review Board. A synthetic control method was used to estimate the impact of program adoption.<sup>[14]</sup> This method utilizes a weighted set of corresponding variables to compare the observed results to those you would expect if the intervention had not been implemented. In this case, Lake County data was compared to the same variables in other Illinois counties, which were weighted and aggregated. Program effectiveness was estimated by comparing intervention group (Lake County) data to corresponding values of the synthetic control group (other Illinois counties) from 2005 to 2020 (Figure 2). We examined differences post-implementation of A Way Out from 2016 to 2020.

**Figure 2**

*Outcome Data Sources and Sample*

OVERDOSES	ARREST	TREATMENT ADMISSION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Non-fatal drug</li> <li>✓ Fatal drug</li> <li>✓ Fatal opioid</li> </ul> <hr/> <p><i>N</i> = 3,407 74 comparison counties</p> <p>Data source: Illinois Department of Public Health</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Property</li> <li>✓ Drug</li> <li>✓ DUI</li> </ul> <hr/> <p><i>N</i> = 4,437, 86 comparison counties</p> <p>Data source: Illinois State Police</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Medicaid funded</li> </ul> <hr/> <p><i>N</i> = 1,989 39 comparison counties</p> <p>Data sources: Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services</p>

Standardized mean difference tests assessed the fit of the synthetic control and joint significance tests were used to assess whether the overall effect of the intervention was significant for each outcome over time. We estimated effects using the synth program in STATA version 17.0.

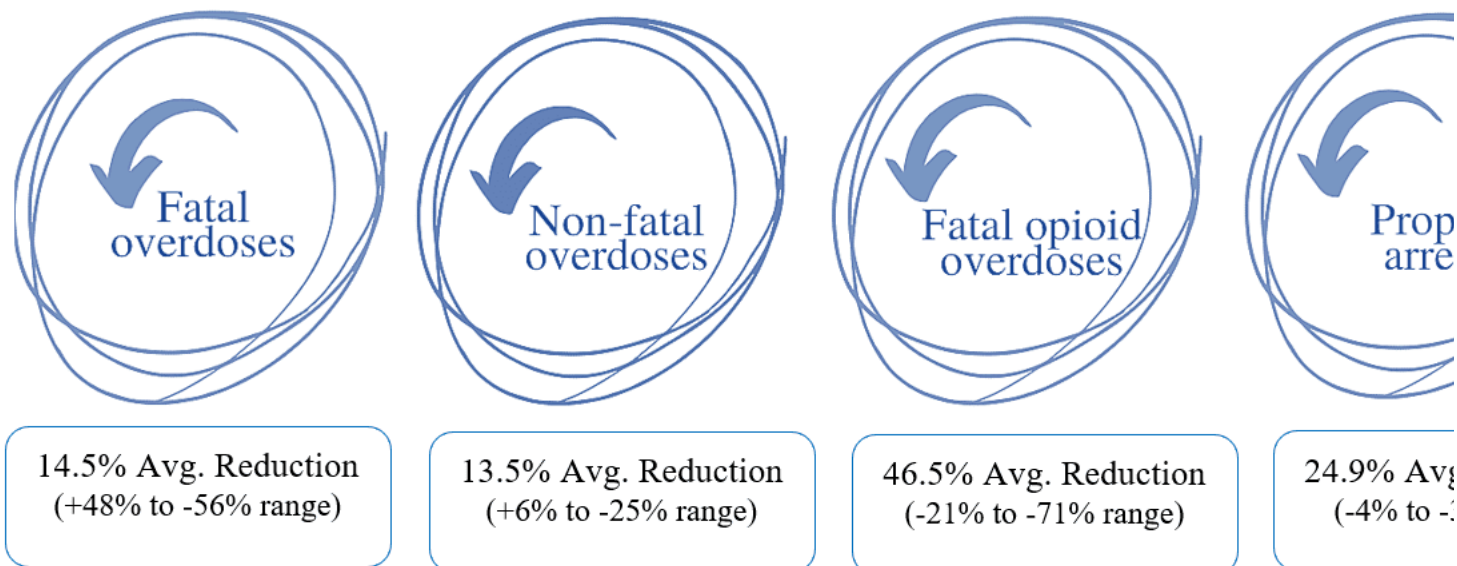
### Study Limitations

One limitation of this study was that concurrent deflection programs or other initiatives within or across counties that may have affected outcomes were not considered in the analysis. Concurrent efforts in control counties would have diminished the ability to observe effects, while concurrent efforts in Lake County would confound any observed effects. Since analyses are county-level, our findings cannot indicate whether program participants were more successful than nonparticipants. Moreover, it was unknown whether the control county programs were large enough for county-level effects to be observed. Finally, some quarterly outcomes at the county level, such as fatal overdose, were rare which can skew results when a rare event occurs.

### Key Findings

Overall, the findings in Lake County suggest the deflection program improved fatal and non-fatal overdose outcomes, particularly in the category of fatal opioid overdoses, and decreased property arrests from 2016 to 2020 (Figure 3). The reductions of program outcomes varied by year and quarter, but average reductions are provided.

**Figure 3**  
*Summary of Lake County’s Deflection Program Outcomes*



These effects were consistent over time (Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7). Lake County drug arrests decreased, but the estimates were not statistically significant. In addition, DUI arrests and increases in treatment admissions were not statistically significant.

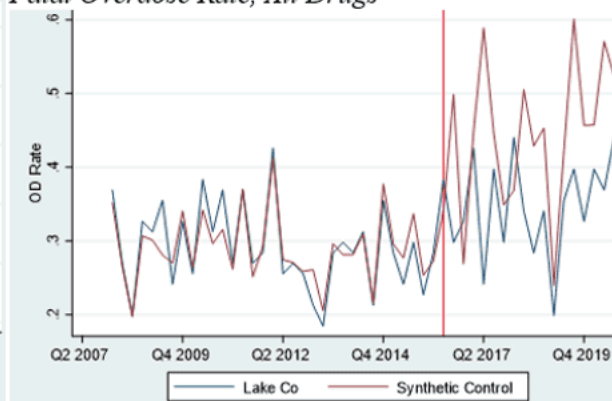
**Figure 4**

*Non-Fatal Overdose Rate per 10,000 All Drugs*



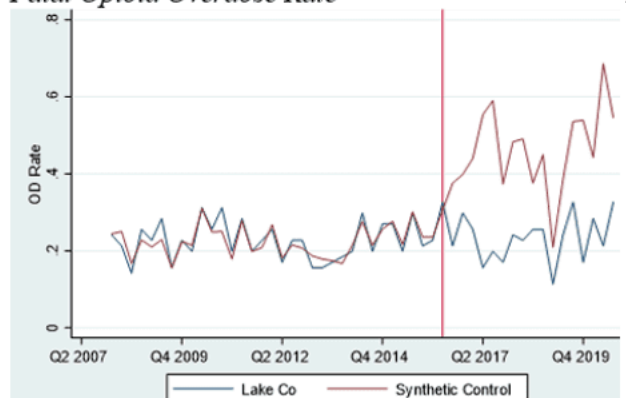
**Figure 5**

*Fatal Overdose Rate, All Drugs*



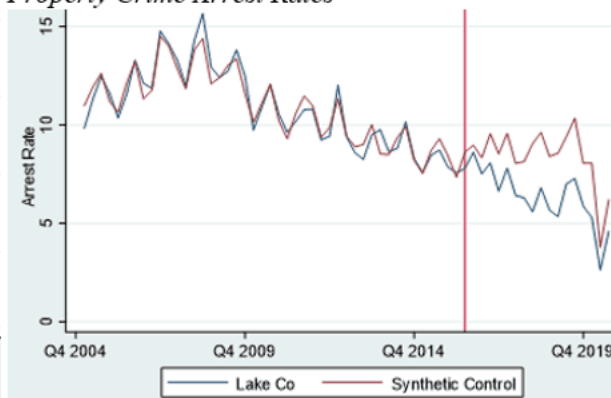
**Figure 6**

*Fatal Opioid Overdose Rate*



**Figure 7**

*Property Crime Arrest Rates*



*Note.* Data sources were Illinois Department of Public Health and Illinois State Police's Criminal History Record Information. The red vertical line indicates the program start date. The  $p$  values in order of figures were  $p = .053$ ,  $p = .046$ ,  $p = .034$ , and  $p = .011$ .

## Conclusion

We conducted an outcome evaluation of A Way Out, a Lake County, Illinois deflection program. A synthetic control method was employed to measure the program's effectiveness of reducing overdose, arrest, and treatment admissions. Findings

showed higher reductions in Lake County non-fatal overdoses, fatal drug and opioid overdoses, and property crime arrests following implementation of the A Way Out program compared to those of a control group. Deflection is a relatively new strategy and limited empirical evidence of effectiveness is available; therefore, these findings contribute to the field and guide policy and practice.

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