

Drug checking services in Latin America and the United States: comparing program characteristics and barriers to implementation



1. Alpert Medical School, Brown University, Rhode Island 2. Harm Reduction Innovation Lab, Rhode Island
3. Rhode Island Hospital 4. University of Victoria, British Columbia 5. Massachusetts Drug Supply Data Stream 6. Brandeis University, Massachusetts

Background

Drug checking services (DCS) enable harm reduction/risk mitigation for people who use drugs (PWUD) by detecting expected and unexpected drugs like fentanyl and xylazine in tested drug samples.

However, there is limited research on DCS operation and implementation in Latin America (L.A.).

Methods

In 2023, we conducted a survey of 38 DCS across L.A. (n=10) and the U.S. (n=28) and compared program characteristics between these two regions using independent samples t-tests.

We also conducted a focus group discussion (FGD) with service providers and laboratory technicians in Mexico (n=3), Colombia (n=1), Peru (n=1), and Chile (n=1). Emergent FGD themes were mapped to constructs quantitatively assessed in the survey.

Figura 1Figura 2Figura 3

■ L.A. (n=10) ■ USA/EE. UU. (n=28)

"The agency in charge of drugs doesn't belong to the Ministry of Health, it belongs to the Ministry of the Interior [similar to Homeland Security]... that's how the government views it, not like a health problem but like an invasion."

Results

We identified substantial differences between the DCS operating in L.A. and the U.S.

Barriers to DCS implementation cited by FGD participants included lack of funding, uncertainty regarding legality of substances/paraphernalia, lack of government support, and violence in the area.

Program characteristics & client populations varied by geography:

Conclusions

There are significant differences in the characteristics of DCS both within Latin America and between Latin America and the United States. DCS in Latin America would benefit from increased funding, government support, and a more permissive legal environment, thereby strengthening harm reduction efforts and improving safety for PWUD.

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