

Characteristics of Drug Checking Programs in 2022: Findings from the North American Drug Checking Survey

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Overview

We launched the North American Drug Checking Program (NADCP) Survey to characterize and monitor the implementation of drug checking programs across North America and determine facilitators and barriers of these programs.

Background

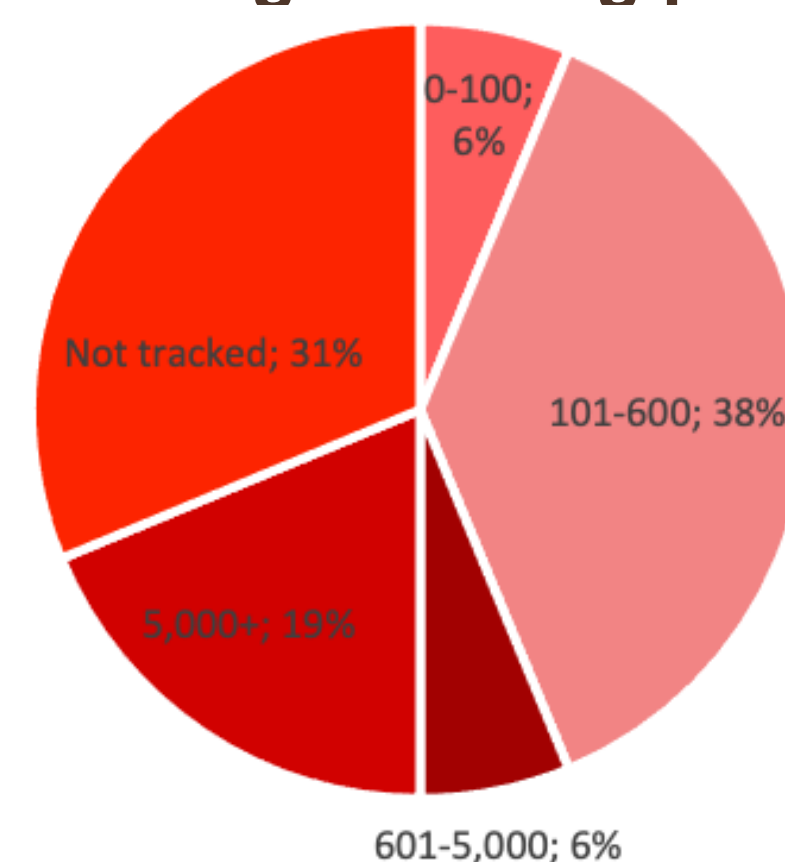
- Drug overdose deaths in the United States continue to increase, claiming over 100,000 lives in 2021.
- People who use drugs (PWUD) were severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Illicit drug supply chains were also impacted, increasing the risk of illicitly manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogues being detected in drugs and increasing risk of overdose death.
- Drug checking programs are an important tool for preventing adverse medical events, and toxicity, including overdose, from contaminated drug samples.
- In 2014, there were only 2 drug checking programs in the US and in 2022, there were more than 10 drug checking programs.
- PWUD feel empowered to make informed decisions about if, when, where, and how they use the substance once they know what is in it.
- They consist of the consensual collection and testing of residual amounts of illicit drug samples, which can directly inform various stakeholders (PWUD, outreach workers, clinicians, researchers, and public health authorities) about the local drug supply to reduce drug-related morbidity and mortality.

Methods

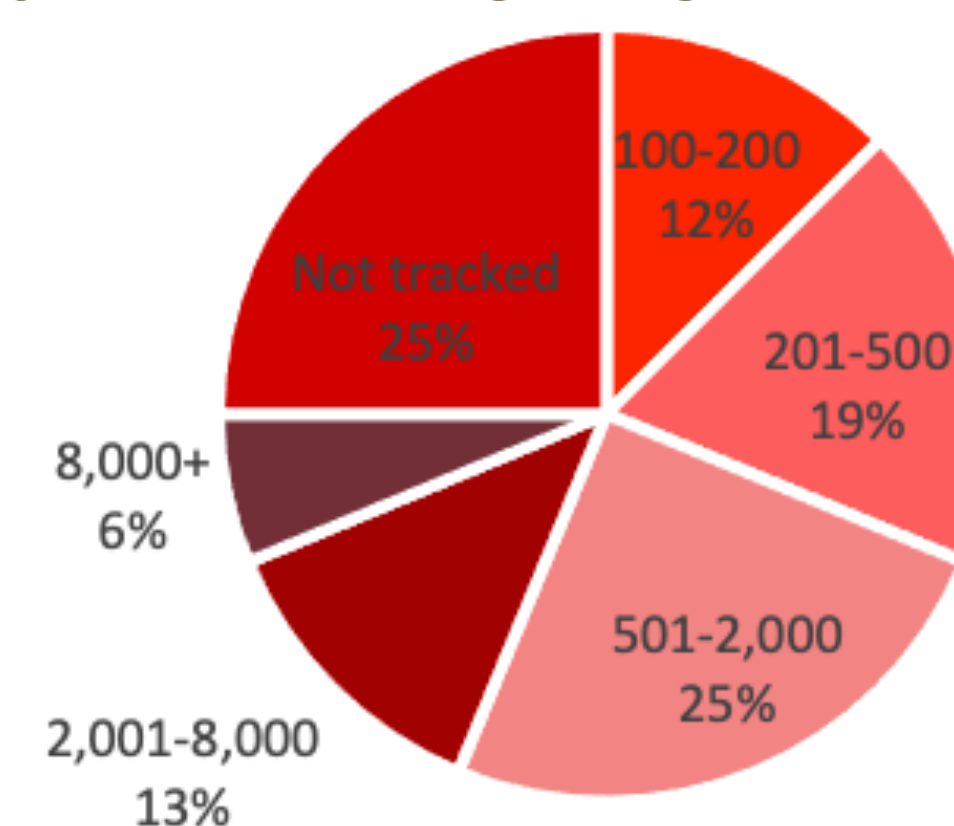
- We collected web survey responses from eligible programs from July 2022 to November 2022.
- Recruitment was primarily through the Alliance for Collaborative Drug Checking, an international coalition of drug-checking implementing partners (excluding law enforcement) and researchers.
- Recruitment was limited to drug checking programs in North America (US, Canada, and Mexico) that conduct on-site or off-site drug testing.
- The survey consisted of 109 fields with questions covering five domains: program location and attributes, operational characteristics, staffing and personnel, preliminary outcomes, and barriers and facilitators to implementation.
- 16 programs from the United States, Canada, and Mexico participated in the survey

Results

A. Total Number of People who used drug checking programs.



B. Total Number of Samples Tested by participating programs.



Facilitators and Barriers to Operating Drug Checking Programs in North America, 2022

Facilitators (Non-Legal)		
	n	%
Interest of clients	11	68.8
Interest of service providers	10	62.5
Technical Assistance from partners or consultants	10	62.5
Trust in drug checking programs	9	56.3
Funding	9	56.3
Interest of public health agencies	8	50.0
Health needs of clients	8	50.0
Staff with background in chemistry / pharmacology	7	43.8
Community Trust	2	12.5
Use of established resources	1	6.3
Facilitators (Legal)		
Decriminalization of possession or distribution of drug checking kits, strips, or devices	2	12.5
Ceased prosecution of personal drug and paraphernalia possession	1	6.3
Decriminalization of personal drug possession	1	6.3
Decriminalization of possession or distribution of drug paraphernalia (e.g. cookers, syringes, pipes)	3	18.8
Barriers (Non-Legal)		
Funding	13	81.3
Staffing	8	50.0
Technical	6	37.5
Time	5	31.3
Trust in drug checking programs	4	25.0
Lack of interest	3	18.8
Other competing priorities	2	12.5
Bureaucracy	1	6.3
Administrative Issues	1	6.3
Barriers (Legal)		
Legal Drug Possession	5	31.3
Legal Possession or Distribution of any drug checking kits, strips or devices	1	6.3
Legal Possession or distribution of any drug paraphernalia (e.g. cookers, syringes, pipes)	1	6.3

Results

Operational Characteristics of Drug Checking Programs in North America, 2022

Types of Drug Checking Services Offered	n	%
A. Self Testing Kits		
Fentanyl Test Strips	10	62.5
Benzodiazepine Test Strips	3	18.8
Colorimetric/Reagent test kits	1	6.3
B. On site testing		
Fentanyl Test Strips	10	87.5
Fourier-Transformed Infrared Spectroscopy (FT-IR)	4	62.5
Reagent Testing	4	25
Benzodiazepine Test Strips	4	25
Raman Spectroscopy	4	25
Paper Spray Mass Spectrometry	1	6.3
C. Off-site Testing		
Gas Chromatography Mass Spectrometry (GCMS)	7	43.8
Liquid Chromatography Mass Spectrometry (LCMS)	5	31.3
Reagent Testing	1	6.3
High Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC)	1	6.3
Paper Spray Mass Spectrometry	1	6.3
Nuclear Magnetic Resonance (NMR)	1	6.3
D. Distributed model with remote technicians		
	1	6.3
E. Event-based testing		
	1	6.3
Expedited testing available for samples of concern	11	68.8
Mobile testing services offered	6	37.5

Conclusion

- Drug checking programs fill a critical gap for public health agencies and service providers to learn more about the local drug supply and enact public health responses centered on reducing drug-related morbidity and mortality.
- Drug checking programs are desired and utilized by PWUD.
- Further research regarding the characteristics and implementation of drug checking programs in North America is necessary to monitor the development of future drug checking programs.
- The second wave of the NADCP survey will be launched in 2023 to continue monitoring the development of drug checking programs in North America and determine new facilitators and barriers of these programs.