

CENTERING YOUTH VOICES: UNDERSTANDING OVERDOSE RISK FACTORS ACROSS THE JUVENILE JUSTICE CONTINUUM AND DEVELOPING POLICIES TO REDUCE RISK

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Background:

Youth involved in the justice system experience disproportionately high rates of substance use. The juvenile justice system is also marked by significant racial disparities, with young Black men disproportionately represented at every stage of system involvement. Simultaneously, Black men experienced some of the sharpest increases in overdose mortality. These trends highlight a critical continuum – without early, targeted intervention for justice involved youth, existing disparities in substance use could compound, contributing to the disproportionate burden of overdose among Black men.

Methods:

The City of Philadelphia's Overdose Response Unit (ORU) and Group Violence Intervention (GVI) program held four focus groups consisting of two cohorts of GVI participants, one cohort aged 12-17 and the second aged 18-25. We asked participants about substance use and experiences navigating the justice system.

Results:

Focus groups revealed gaps in participants' understanding of naloxone, drug types, and risk of overdose. They were interested in reducing risk, sharing the methods they use to check their drugs. There was a willingness to use test strips, but participants were consistently uncertain about carrying naloxone. Focus groups described the normalization of substance use in their homes and communities, as well as the social pressure to engage in drug use, drug sales, and carry firearms. Participants reported limited engagement about overdose prevention across the justice continuum but said that they'd prefer resources and information to be delivered by peers and people with lived experience, noting considerable mistrust of government systems.

Conclusion:

Overdose prevention education and resources should be democratized and embedded across the juvenile justice continuum. Self-disclosure presents potential negative consequences while navigating the legal system. Ensuring staff are trained in overdose prevention, resources are distributed through an opt-out model, and credible messengers being employed whenever possible are critical to building sustainable systems to address the needs of young people using drugs.

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