

The Role of Dealers



"We will bring every tool to bear, and we will continue to hold accountable the dealers who push this poison, exploit addiction, and cause senseless death."

"This is a public health crisis. And it has to stop."

—U.S. Attorney Damian Williams

Study Findings

Study Methods

Conducted 40 semi-structured, qualitative interviews with people with OUD who were incarcerated at the Rhode Island Department of Corrections (RIDOC), the statewide unified jail and prison system.

Conducted 92 semi-structured qualitative interviews with people with OUD in the community in Providence, Rhode Island.

Respect for autonomy	I understand that they're putting people's lives in jeopardy by selling, but the bottom line is if you stick a needle in your arm, you know what you're doing, like you're taking that risk. (36-year-old man)
Prevalence/control over supply	It's everywhere. Like that's like suing a grocery store for having like what is it? The DDTs or whatever on their food, like the bug spray [insecticides] or whatever. Like you can't help, the grocery store can't help what the farmers putting on their food [...] You'd have to lock every dealer up. (30-year-old woman)
Criminalization and mass incarceration as ineffective for addressing substance use disorders	One guy goes to jail, two people are ready to take his spot. Not at all. It's [drug-induced homicide] not going to deter nothing. Look at Reagan and this War on Drugs. I don't want to get into it. [...] I see it going on forever. The War on Drugs is a crock. It's a business. That's all that it is. It keeps you with a job. It keeps [people who work in criminal justice] in a job. It's a crock. (36-year-old man)
Collateral health consequences: violence and reluctance to call 911 during overdose	Honestly, I think it would be worse. Because less people wouldn't want to call it in if someone overdosed because they're afraid of going to jail. So, people are just going to be dying instead of overdosing [non-fatally]. (37-year-old man)

Trusted dealers guard against overdose.

"I know it sounds crazy to you guys, but some of them [dealers] actually care if they serve you that [fentanyl]. They don't want you dead. They need you for that money. And they don't want you dead. So, there are some dealers that actually care."

Not everyone has a trusted dealer.

"A lot of people like to say that they don't have [fentanyl] in there. And you can't go with what they say because they'll sell rat poison if they think you'll buy it anyway. They won't tell you anything. They'll tell you the drug is the bomb when it's garbage."

A fine line of moral culpability. A seller who knowingly gives drugs to someone with a low tolerance and those who knowingly sell fentanyl but market it as heroin without fentanyl contamination should be prosecuted differently than someone who did not know what was in their supply, or who was honest with a person buying from them.

TAKEAWAYS

The impact that drug policy, public health interventions, or law enforcement responses to substance use may have on the protective strategies that people who use drugs have created for themselves remains poorly understood. Without such understanding, good-faith attempts to disrupt macro-level drivers of the opioid-overdose epidemic—things like police sweeps, dealer takedowns, sudden pain clinic closures—may in fact only result in creating more harm among those who are already at risk.

Sources: Carroll, J. J., Rich, J. D., & Green, T. C. (2020). The protective effect of trusted dealers against opioid overdose in the U.S. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 78, 102695. Peterson, M., Rich, J., Macmadu, A., Truong, A. Q., Green, T. C., Beletsky, L., ... & Brinkley-Rubinstein, L. (2019). "One guy goes to jail, two people are ready to take his spot": Perspectives on drug-induced homicide laws among incarcerated individuals. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 70, 47-53. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-60238194>