

How drug users are avoiding overdoses

Drug users in the city are taking steps to avoid overdosing, according to a new study by the Center for Drug Use and HIV/HCV Research at NYU Meyers College of Nursing and NYU College of Global Public Health.

The study found that drug users are adopting risk-limiting behaviors such as injecting a test dosage and using test strips to check for more dangerous substances, such as fentanyl, mixed into their drugs. They're also mitigating risk by buying from the same sources and carrying naloxone, a medication used to reverse opioid overdoses.

But the study concluded that factors including the stigma of being a drug user, poverty and homelessness contribute to a lack of consistency in deploying such risk-limiting behaviors.

Planned medical staff-supervised injection sites are meant "to facilitate a safer drug-user experience," said researcher Courtney McKnight, clinical assistant professor at NYU College of Global Public Health and the study's lead author. "In some ways, drugs users' adaptations are creating ad hoc public injection spaces out of public restrooms."

Study researchers conducted interviews with 55 users at city syringe-exchange programs, and findings were published in the International Journal of Drug Policy.

The study comes as data show fentanyl accounted for 44% of the city's overdose deaths in 2016, according to NYU, amid an ongoing opioid epidemic and the prevalence of counterfeit and mixed drugs. Before 2015, fentanyl accounted for less than 3% of the city's overdose deaths annually. The research was supported by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and a pilot project award from the research center.