



Substance Use Stigma and Community Drug Checking: A Qualitative Study Examining Barriers and Possible Responses

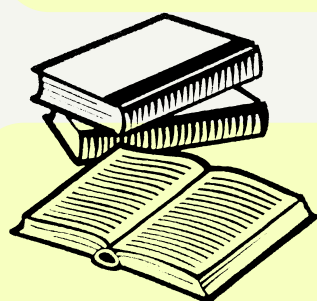
Samantha Davis, Bruce Wallace, Thea Van Roode, and Dennis Hore. 2022.

BACKGROUND

Our community drug checking project conducted qualitative research with people who use drugs, their family, friends, peers, and those who distribute drugs. We wanted to know people's experiences of drug checking, from a variety of backgrounds, and gain an understanding of how to make drug checking widely accessible, safe, and effective for as many people as possible.

QUESTION

The theme of stigma emerged from these qualitative interviews as a critical barrier to engaging with drug checking services. This paper takes a deeper look at this theme of stigma in order to better understand how it is experienced and how it could be operating as a barrier within drug checking services, and what potential strategies could address this.



METHODS

The study sought the perspective of people who use and/or sell substances, and others impacted by the illicit drug market, such as family and friends who might benefit from drug checking services. A total of twenty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed using a Substance Use Stigma Framework, which was developed based on existing literature. This framework considers substance use on three levels: individual, interpersonal, and structural.



FINDINGS



While all sources of stigma presented barriers, participants described the risk of criminalization and the anticipation of being poorly treated as the most significant barriers to engaging with the service.



This research clearly shows that having access to drug checking in spaces that are not currently stigmatized, and that are openly public but still anonymous, is important for de-stigmatization.



Strategies to mitigate stigma within drug checking also include employing people with lived and living experience of substance use from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, the findings call for normalizing drug checking through health campaigns which promote the positive benefits of drug checking instead of the harms and risks of substance use.



Decriminalization was identified as an action that could likely address the bigger root causes of substance use stigma.

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To learn more about our unique drug checking project, visit substance.uvic.ca