

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/new-normal-opioid-use-criminal-justice-system>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

The United States is experiencing an epidemic of drug overdose deaths that cuts across economic, racial, and geographic boundaries. In the midst of this devastation, people are struggling to find ways to save the lives of their community members. While the war on drugs created tough enforcement policies that resulted in a bloated justice system, there is increasing momentum for a smarter and more compassionate approach to people who use drugs. This report describes how some innovative jurisdictions are implementing harm reduction strategies in order to reduce overdose deaths, improve the wellbeing of justice system-involved people, and advance the health and safety of their communities. It shares perspectives from stakeholders in law enforcement, the court system, corrections agencies, drug policy, and the community about what strategies are being implemented, how they have overcome barriers, and what work remains to be done.

Transforming the criminal justice system from a life-interruption model to an avenue for increased recovery options necessitates that the system is capable of providing evidence-based substance use treatment standard that includes embracing harm reduction.

The widespread stigma around drug use and the risk of facing criminal penalties discourages users from seeking help and promotes risky practices that increase rates of infectious disease and death.

Harm reduction is a public health philosophy and set of practical strategies that seeks to reduce the negative consequences associated with drug use. Such strategies can be incorporated at different points in the community and criminal justice system, from pre-arrest to post-reentry.

Current harm reduction strategies include law enforcement assisted diversion (LEAD), medication-assisted treatment (MAT), distribution of naloxone (an antidote to opioid overdoses), and syringe exchange programs (SEPs).

VIDEO

PUBLICATION

NEWS

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