

Supervised Injection Sites

AAFP Position

The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) is [committed](#) to preventing the spread of HIV and Hepatitis B and C, as well as combating opioid dependence and other substance use disorders. The AAFP supports the creation of syringe exchange programs, the passage of laws to accommodate those injection equipment programs, and supervised injection sites to reduce the risk of death from opioid overdose and engage individuals in treatment. The AAFP strongly opposes the illicit use of opioids and supports physicians' efforts to educate their patients on the harms of improper drug use and their treatment options.

Needle exchange programs and supervised injection sites

- **reduce** the transmission of disease
- **do not increase** the rate of substance abuse
- **increase** the likelihood that individuals will enter drug treatment programs

The Opioid Epidemic

Opioids, when properly used, can be effective therapies to treat pain, but they also can be dangerously addictive when abused or acquired illegally. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the number of people who died from a drug overdose in 2021 was over **six times** the number in 1999.¹ In 2024, the Biden Administration released their [actions](#) to address the overdose epidemic, though the administration has not fully endorsed safe injection sites.

Over **75%** 

of nearly **107,000** drug overdose deaths in 2022 involved an opioid. Opioid misuse has led some individuals to switch to cheaper or easier-to-obtain alternatives, such as heroin

What are Supervised Injection Sites

Supervised injection sites provide a place for individuals to consume pre-obtained drugs and are equipped with sterile injection supplies, overdose prevention literature, counseling, and referrals to treatment for dependent individuals.² These sites do not provide drugs to individuals; rather, they are equipped with trained staff and resources, including naloxone, to prevent overdoses and, in the unlikely event, death.

In **2024** 

In 2024, the U.S. government announced it will pay for a large study that measures whether overdoses can be prevented by safe injection sites. The grant provides more than **\$5 million** over four years to New York University and Brown University to study one site in New York City and another in Providence, Rhode Island.

¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024). "Understanding the Opioid Overdose Epidemic," <https://www.cdc.gov/overdose-prevention/about/understanding-the-opioid-overdose-epidemic.html>.

²Gostin L, Hodge J, Gulinson C. (2019). "Supervised Injection Facilities: Legal and Policy Reforms." JAMA. Web.

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Effectiveness in Harm Reduction

Harm reduction is a spectrum of strategies that includes safer use, managed use, abstinence, meeting people who use drugs “where they’re at” and addressing conditions of use along with the use itself.³ Harm reduction offers drug users **respect** and **autonomy** and also provides them with **support** and **community**. A supervised injection site is an example of a harm reduction strategy. The effectiveness of supervised injection sites has been proven across the globe. Data on all functioning supervised injection sites indicates decreased overdose-related deaths among opioid users.

After implementation of a site in Sydney, Australia,



there were **no deaths** among 5,925 overdoses from 965,000 supervised injections over 15 years.^{4,5} Sydney’s site has also made over **12,000 referrals** to health and welfare services for users and has seen a reduction in ambulance calls for overdoses.⁶



Barcelona, Spain saw a 50 percent reduction in overdose mortality from 1991-2008 after opening a site.

Monthly averages of unsafely disposed syringes near the site in Barcelona decreased from 13,000 in 2004 to 3,000 in 2012. A facility in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada experienced **no fatal overdoses** between March 2004 and February 2008 and was responsible for **preventing 80 HIV infections annually**; between the opening of the facility in 2003 and 2006, 46 percent of all participants entered addiction treatment.^{7,8} Cities that operate supervised injection sites have also seen a decline in unsafely discarded syringes in their communities.⁹



Supervised Injection Sites in The United States

In 2021, the nation's first injection site opened in New York City. OnPoint NYC strives to address adverse outcomes among people who use drugs or engage in sex work by providing them the resources, tools, and support they need to enhance life quality and live with dignity. In their first-year opening, their **staff intervened 636 times** to prevent overdose death and other associated harms. **Eighty-three percent** of opioid overdoses were resolved without need for naloxone.

In 2024



a state sanctioned safe injection site opened in **Providence, Rhode Island**. The site provides services such as food, showers, access to naloxone, case management, housing support, and HIV testing.

³National Harm Reduction Coalition. (2020). “Principles of Harm Reduction” https://harmreduction.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/NHRC-PDF-Principles_Of_Harm_Reduction.pdf.

⁴Ibid

⁵“Medically supervised injecting centres.” (2017). Alcohol and Drug Foundation. Retrieved from <https://adf.org.au/insights/medically-supervised-injecting-centres/>

⁶Ibid

⁷Gostin L, Hodge J, Gulinson C. (2019). “Supervised Injection Facilities: Legal and Policy Reforms.” JAMA. Web.

⁸Larson S, Padron N, Mason J, Bogaczky T. “Supervised consumption facilities: review of the evidence.” Main Line Health System. Web.

⁹Cicero TJ, Ellis MS, Kasper ZA. (2017). “Increased use of heroin as an initiating opioid of abuse.” Addictive Behaviors. Web.

¹⁰ONPOINT.NYC (2023). “Baseline Annual Report 2023” https://onpointnyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ONPOINTNYC_OPCREPORT_small-web1.pdf.

¹¹Nicole Leonard. (2024). “First state-sanctioned safe injection site in Rhode Island” <https://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2024-02-02/providence-approves-first-state-sanctioned-safe-injection-site-in-rhode-island>.

Supervised Injection Sites

Legal Obstacles

Despite significant public health research in support of safe injection sites, they remain controversial and mostly illegal in the United States. Opponents of safe injection sites question whether the federal government should provide funding for these sites, suggesting that such support would incentivize harmful and unlawful behavior of opioid use.



The Controlled Substance Act

(CSA) prohibits individuals from possessing illegal drugs and facilities that allow the use of these drugs.¹²

The nonprofit organization Safehouse

has been fighting for a federal legal right to open and operate a supervised injection site for drug users in Philadelphia since 2019.¹³ In June, Safehouse filed an appeal in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 3rd Circuit. The appeal challenges a district court judge's decision that the safe injection site would violate federal drug laws. **Safehouse contends their right is protected by religious grounds and the First Amendment.**

Looking Ahead

On a positive note, the CDC presented data that reflects **a decrease in overdose deaths in 2023**.¹⁴ Overdose deaths involving opioids decreased from an estimated 84,181 in 2022 to 81,083 in 2023. While some states across the nation saw a **decrease of 15 percent** (NE, KS, ID, and ME), others experienced increases (AK, WA, OR) of at least 27 percent compared to the same period in 2022. To ensure that the number of deaths decreases across the entire nation, more attention and resources are needed.

Several states and cities are proposing legislation to legalize these sites.

Massachusetts and San Francisco lawmakers have respective legislation to allow cities and towns operate overdose prevention centers approved by the local board of health and board of city council. In June 2024, lawmakers in Vermont overrode Gov. Phil Scott's veto of a safe injection site.



Several states and cities are proposing legislation to legalize these sites.

Legal challenges and misinformation are the main barriers to establishing supervised injection sites in the United States despite public health research in support of these sites. Public health agencies and officials have taken steps to introduce harm reduction strategies to combat the opioid crisis including drug courts that screen for health needs and place individuals on pathways to treatment and rehabilitation, expanding syringe exchange programs, and expanding the availability of naloxone to reverse the effects of an overdose. The effectiveness of public health interventions, including safe injection sites, underscores the importance of treatment and recovery of, rather than punitive action against, individuals with substance use disorders.

Updated September 2024

¹²Ibid

¹³Nicole Leonard. (2024). "U.S. District Court Judge Dismisses Philadelphia Safehouse Supervised Injection Case." <https://why.org/articles/philadelphia-safehouse-case-supervised-injection-judge-dismisses/#:~:text=A%20United%20States%20District%20Court%20judge%20in%20Philadelphia,supervised%20injection%20sites%20for%20people%20who%20use%20drugs>.

¹⁴Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024). "U.S. Overdose Deaths Decrease in 2023, First Time since 2018." https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2024/20240515.htm.

¹⁵Barry C, Sherman S, Stone E, Kennedy-Hendricks A, Niederdeppe J, Linden S, McGinty E. (2019). "Arguments supporting and opposing legalization of safe consumption sites in the U.S." International Journal of Drug Policy. Web.