



How a National Study Empowered Local Communities to Use Solutions Supported by Science to Address Opioid Overdose Deaths

The Problem ▶

Strategies proven effective at reducing opioid overdose deaths in scientific studies hold the most promise for helping America “heal” from its ongoing crisis. However, even communities with the highest numbers of opioid overdose have not responded to this crisis by effectively implementing “**evidence-based practices**” (EBPs), for reducing overdose deaths.

The Goal ▶

The National Institutes of Health’s [HEALing Communities Study](#) (HCS) aimed to engage local communities across four states in selecting, planning, and applying EBPs with the greatest likelihood of reducing overdose deaths.

What We Did ▶

Researchers and public health workers within the four participating states helped develop a program to promote the uptake of EBPs called the **Communities That HEAL** program, or CTH. They randomly selected 34 of the 67 communities participating in the study to receive the CTH. Those communities formed community coalitions that selected EBPs and worked with local partners to put the EBPs into practice. The study was conducted for 4 years, and researchers compared the number of overdose deaths after 18 months of CTH implementation.

What We Learned ▶

615 Evidence-Based Practices Put into Action

Statisticians calculated whether the CTH program was associated with a reduction in the average number of overdose deaths in study communities. They found no difference in the frequency of opioid overdose deaths that happened in CTH intervention versus control communities. However, the study was successful in spreading EBPs to local communities, with 615 EBPs put into practice in CTH communities during the study period.

Why It Matters ▶

CTH communities benefited from gathering new information to guide overdose response decisions and uniting local people with various experiences, backgrounds, and roles to create lasting local partnerships that will enable continued work against the overdose crisis.

What Now? ▶

HCS shows the importance of engaging and empowering community members to implement EBPs they believe will have the greatest impact in their communities. Communities seeking solutions to reduce overdose deaths should consider the CTH program and its menu of EBPs, the [Overdose-Reduction Continuum of Care Approach \(ORCCA\)](#).

This is an approachable summary of scientific results published by Samet et al. (2024) in [The New England Journal of Medicine](#).