

A Snapshot of Medication Diversion Among 6 Jails Expanding Access to Agonist Medications for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) in Pennsylvania



Background

According to the National Institute for Drug Abuse (NIDA)¹, medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD) decrease drug use, risk of fatal overdose, criminal activity, and infectious disease transmission while increasing social functioning and retention in treatment. People released from jails and prisons face a significantly elevated risk of fatal overdose.² Though access has improved somewhat in recent years, too many incarcerated people do not receive this lifesaving treatment. This is due in part to the concerns among correctional stakeholders³ that agonist MOUD will be diverted, abused, or lead to other safety concerns.

In 2020-2021, Vital Strategies supported a large jail MOUD technical assistance initiative as part of a partnership with the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC), and Health Management Associates (HMA). Among a cohort of county jails receiving funding from PCCD as part of the County Jail-Based Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) Program, six jails aimed to increase provision of buprenorphine (commonly known as Suboxone® or Subutex®) to individuals in their custody.

Methods

- This resource summarizes data collected as part of county jail reporting to PCCD within the state's County Jail-Based MAT Program.
- Jails submitted varying data across different reporting quarters.
- County jails ranged in size, geographic region, and their approaches to expansion of buprenorphine access among people in their custody.
- This is self-reported data from jails to PCCD according to each jails' own systems for maintaining information. Different jails may use different criteria for identifying instances of diversion or conduct citations that are reported to the state

Key Take-aways

- PCCD's investment in the program resulted in 1,034 individuals receiving buprenorphine treatment during the 18 months of the first cycle of this grant program.
- Despite somewhat fragmented data during this first cycle, remarkably low rates of medication diversion and conduct citations related to buprenorphine contraband were observed. This contrasts with common concerns about diversion or safety risk when it comes to MOUD in correctional settings.

Purpose

This resource focuses on the experiences of the six Pennsylvania county jails that began implementation in January 2020 and concluded in September 2021. Because individual jails began reporting at different times, the information in this resource is divided into two categories: jails that reported at least 5 quarters of data, and jails that reported at least 3 quarters of data. It offers information that may be useful to corrections leaders, policymakers, and advocates interested in expanding MOUD access in correctional settings.

Results

Diversion of buprenorphine and related assaults were rare

- Among three counties with at least five quarters of reporting, **less than three percent of participants were observed to have diverted their buprenorphine**. This comprises 17 participants from a total of 598 participants. Importantly, [research](#)⁴ from other settings has shown that diverted buprenorphine is often for a therapeutic use, i.e., to meet an unmet need for treatment
- Among three counties with at least three quarters of reporting during the grant period, **just one participant reported an assault** related to the diversion of buprenorphine. This comprises just one instance, among 518 participants.

Conduct citations related to buprenorphine contraband were infrequent

- Among two jails with at least five quarters of reporting during the grant period, 5.9% (18 of 307) of participants received a conduct citation related to buprenorphine contraband.
- Among two jails with at least three reporting periods, 4% (17 of 421) of participants received a conduct citation related to buprenorphine contraband.

Discussion and Summary

The six Pennsylvania county jails that implemented expanded buprenorphine as part of the County Jail-Based Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) Program observed remarkably low rates of medication diversion and conduct citations related to buprenorphine contraband. Though reporting for the entire grant period was incomplete, just one observation of assault potentially related to medication was observed across three jails over a nine-month period.

The experience of these six county jails in Pennsylvania may be encouraging to other correctional institutions in Pennsylvania and nationally considering adoption of similar programs. This resource also spotlights the need for further systematic investigation of medication diversion and other incidents related to agonist medication expansion in jails and prisons.

Limitations

- While this resource describes observations from jails of different sizes and regions, these results cannot be generalized to county jails in Pennsylvania or more broadly.
- There was not uniformity across jails in implementation process/protocols, or standards for identifying and reporting diversion, conduct citations and assaults.
- It was unclear whether the citations described in this resource related to buprenorphine prescribed through a program, or obtained from other sources.

References

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- 3 Grella CE, Ostile E, Scott CK, Dennis M, Carnavale J. A Scoping Review of Barriers and Facilitators to Implementation of Medications for Treatment of Opioid Use Disorder within the Criminal Justice System. *Int J Drug Policy.* 2020;81:102768. doi:10.1016/j.drugpo.2020.102768
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