

Title: Awareness and Perceptions of Fentanyl Criminalization Policies: A Survey Report

Purpose: This study investigates clinicians' awareness and perceptions of recent federal and state laws regarding fentanyl and related analogs (FRA). By exploring how these laws impact patient care, particularly for individuals with substance use disorders (SUDs), and identifying barriers to accessing substance use services, this research aims to provide insights that can inform the development of more effective and compassionate care models. Understanding these perceptions is crucial for addressing the opioid crisis and improving strategies to meet the needs of patients affected by these policies.

Methods: This study utilized a survey-based approach to evaluate clinicians' awareness and perceptions of FRA criminalization policies. The study population included clinicians subscribed to a Midwest online opioid learning community, comprising over 800 members engaged in opioid-related discussions. The survey, administered via Qualtrics, included quantitative and qualitative questions designed to measure the primary endpoint of clinicians' awareness of new FRA criminalization policies and secondary endpoints related to their perceptions of the policies' impact on patient care and public health. The survey was disseminated over the course of four weeks, a total of four initial and reminder emails sent. The study received IRB approval from Southern Illinois University of Edwardsville (SIUE) (IRB #2565). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained during the survey completion process. No personally identifiable information was collected to ensure confidentiality. Descriptive statistical models were used to analyze the data, aiming to provide insight into the alignment or disconnect between policy intentions and clinical outcomes.

Results: The survey yielded 36 responses, primarily from social worker (31%) and peer support specialists (25%) practicing in the Midwest region. Close to half of respondents reported that 81-100% of their work involved individuals with SUDs.

Awareness of recent (within the last two years) legal changes varied from 22% very or extremely familiar with federal and state laws; 58% and 62% moderately or slightly familiar, respectively, and 19% (federal) and 17% (state) not familiar.

Regarding formalized training, 61% had none or were unsure, while 39% had received training on legal changes impacting SUD care. Concerns expressed about FRA criminalization were notable, including 84% feared increased difficulty in seeking help, 71% saw higher risks of overdose and treatment access challenges, and 81% noted reduced access to housing and employment.

Barriers identified for those with a history of incarceration included legal restrictions (77%), reflecting felony disqualifications and insurance limitations. Participants worried about new laws affecting clinical decision-making, with 39% seeing a significant impact on prescribing practices and 33% on their approach to patient care. The majority (74%) believed that criminalization negatively impacts patients' willingness to disclose substance use. Clinicians recommended decriminalization

and a shift from punitive measures to improved treatment and prevention resources.

Conclusion: The findings highlight a significant gap in awareness and preparedness among clinicians regarding recent fentanyl-related legal changes. The results underscore the need for increased education and training on drug policies and their implications for patient care. The study advocates for a more significant shift towards harm reduction and decriminalization approaches to adequately address the substance use barriers and risks associated with access to care.