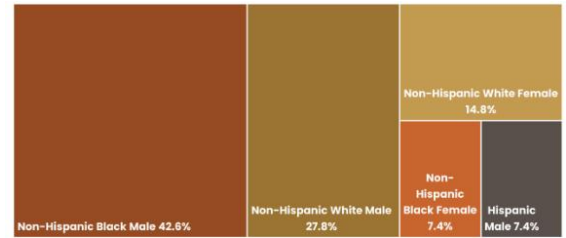


# Potential barriers to use of harm reduction resources by African American men in Cleveland: A focus group study.

Adeweso, O.<sup>1,2</sup>, Flynn, K.<sup>3</sup>, Allensworth-Davies, D.<sup>2</sup>, Lee, A.<sup>4</sup>, and Pohle-Krauza, R.<sup>4</sup>  
 VA Northeast Ohio<sup>1</sup> Cleveland State University<sup>2</sup>. Case Western Reserve University<sup>3</sup>. Northeast Ohio Medical University<sup>4</sup>

**Background:** The opioid epidemic remains a significant problem in Ohio. Non-Hispanic Blacks in Ohio have an overall death rate doubling that of Non-Hispanic Whites and Hispanics from the combination of fentanyl and cocaine.<sup>1</sup> In Cleveland (Cuyahoga County, in northeast Ohio), 45.9% of residents identify as Black.<sup>2,3</sup> **Non-Hispanic Blacks experienced the highest overall overdose death rate involving fentanyl and cocaine.** Males accounted for 77.8% of fatal overdoses in Cleveland (Q1 of 2025), over half of these were Non-Hispanic Black.<sup>4</sup>

**Fatal overdoses in Cleveland by race, ethnicity, and sex (Q1 2025)<sup>4</sup>**



**“Harm reduction is defined as interventions aimed to help people avoid negative effects of drug use.”<sup>5</sup>**  
**Examples include Narcan, fentanyl and xylazine test strips, and syringe exchange.**

**Objective:** To identify barriers in the access and use of harm reduction services experienced by African American men in Cleveland and suggest potential solutions.

**Method:** We designed semi-structured open-ended questions based on Levesque's Conceptual Framework of Access to Health. We adapted questions from a similar study<sup>6</sup> and piloted with two eligible men. We conducted interviews and created transcripts using Zoom (virtual session) and Microsoft Word (in-person sessions). We analyzed data using Quirkos software and identified resulting codes and themes (Cleveland State University IRB #FY2024-259).

 <p><b>Peer Support</b> (3 participants) <small>*access to mobile device</small> 56-70 years</p>	 <p><b>Recovery</b> (8 participants) 28-45 years + 70 year old</p>	 <p><b>Faith-Based</b> (8 participants) 56-83 years</p>
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**Results:** Multiple themes emerged. While most themes were common to the various groups, some were specific to groups or were expressed with different levels of passion (\* indicates unique to group)

Barriers to Use of Harm Reduction Resources among African American Men in Cleveland					
Lack of trust	Lack of Education	Lack of Access	Living Environment	Government	Personal and Social
Included in all categories	Media	Location	Racism	Fear of police	Changed culture
Included in all categories	Mindset	Hours of operation	Double stigma	Forgotten community	Relationship with God
Included in all categories	Information & Outreach	Availability	Corner stores	Double standards for offenses	Need for Blacks in the recovery community

 <p><b>Peer Support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Forgotten community</li> <li>Lazarus parties*</li> </ul>	 <p><b>Recovery</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of identity *</li> <li>Double standards</li> <li>Criminalization of minor offense</li> </ul>	 <p><b>Faith-Based</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Absent fathers *</li> <li>Changed culture</li> <li>Need for spiritual connection</li> </ul>
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“I never knew; nobody told me how to use fentanyl test strips. When I'm in the process of active use, I'm not going to take time to read directions. Because the other thing is, I'm not about to waste any of my drugs on the test. I wish somebody had told me that when they were passing them out or explained to me as a necessity to even get it because I did have to use needle exchanges, and that's a useful service.” **(Recovery group participant)**

## Discussion and Conclusions:

Themes identified in all groups and across different age groups aligned with previous research. Future suggestions include culturally appropriate policies and programs that incorporate peer supporters, faith-based organizations, community members, and law enforcement to promote trust, safety, and confidence in healthcare and criminal systems.

**References.** 1. Ohio Department of Health (n.d.). *2023 Ohio unintentional drug overdose report* 2. United States Census Bureau . *Quick facts Cleveland City, Ohio*. Retrieved March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2026. 3. Cuyahoga County Board of Health. (August 2024). *2023 Cuyahoga County drug overdose integrated epidemiologic profile*. 4. City of Cleveland. Office of Epidemiology and Population Health (n.d.). *Overdose Report Quarter 1 Jan 1- March 31, 2025*. 5. National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) (2021). *What is Harm Reduction*. 6. Forchuk, C., Serrato, J., & Scott, L. (2023). Identifying barriers and facilitators for implementing harm reduction strategies for methamphetamine use into hospital settings. *Frontiers in health services*, 3, 1113891.

**Acknowledgments** – Dr Karen Flynn, Dr Donald Allensworth-Davies, Dr Amy Lee, Dr Rachel Pohle-Krauza, Dr Mamta Singh, Dr Mary Dolansky and The VA Quality Scholar (VAQS) and Health Professionals Education Evaluation and Research (HPEER) Program, faculty and fellows.

**Disclaimer**- Please note this work did not involve Veterans. Dr Adeweso's presentation was supported by the Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration, Office of Academic Affiliations VA Quality Scholars Advanced Fellowship Program. The content of this presentation is solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of VAQS fellowship or the Department of Veterans Affairs. Program Award Number 3Q032019C. **CONTACT: aadeweso@gmail April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2026**