

Narcotics Arrest Diversion Program

Diverting Drug Arrestees Into Treatment and Away From the Criminal Justice System

The Challenge

More Americans die of opioid overdoses than homicides or car accidents every year. Chicago is not exempt from this national public health and safety crisis; in 2021, over [2,100 people](#) died in Cook County from opioid overdoses -- [twice](#) the number of homicides attributed to gun violence.

Chicago's opioid crisis disproportionately affects communities on the West Side, where open-air drug markets supply the majority of the city's heroin, and the largely low-income and Black residents bear the brunt of drug-related crime and high overdose rates. Indeed, Black residents accounted for over [half](#) of these overdose deaths despite making up less than a quarter of the county's population.

America's traditional response to drug crises has centered on criminal sanctions — such as the use of mandatory minimum sentencing in the late 1980s, or “drug courts” which mandate court-ordered treatment in order to avoid criminal sanctions, which started in the 1990s and continue today. However, these approaches have done little to stem the steep rise in overdose deaths and have exacerbated mass incarceration and other harms associated with the criminal justice system.

The Opportunity

Chicago's Narcotics Arrest Diversion Program (NADP) offers people arrested on non-violent, low-level drug offenses the opportunity to receive substance use treatment, including medication-assisted treatment, instead of a criminal record or jail time. NADP was conceptualized by the Chicago High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area program, and operates as a partnership between the Chicago Police Department (CPD), Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH), local behavioral health provider Thresholds, and the [University of Chicago Crime Lab](#) and Health Lab.

NADP is a treatment-focused approach, which reduces reliance on the criminal justice system to monitor or sanction participants — opening up the possibility of reaching individuals at a much greater scale. As a result, NADP is the country's largest effort of its kind to divert individuals experiencing a substance use disorder before they are formally charged with a crime (and subsequently processed into the criminal justice system).

In 2021, CDPH responded to the success of NADP's West Side pilot by making the program available [citywide](#). In 2022, eligibility criteria were [expanded](#) to nearly double the number of people who qualify for diversion.

How is NADP working in Chicago?

1,516 People diverted by CPD

89% Of participants medically diagnosed with a substance use disorder

72% Less likely to be re-arrested following diversion

The Approach

NADP seeks to address the root causes of the opioid crisis through a supportive, rather than punitive, intervention for individuals arrested by CPD on low-level, non-violent substance use charges.

Under NADP, eligibility is determined at the time of arrest on charges of low-level, nonviolent drug use or possession. The individual must be at least 18 years old and with no recent violent convictions or co-occurring violent charges. Eligible individuals are offered substance use assessment with an on-site Thresholds clinician who can refer in- and out-patient treatment providers in the community for more in-depth assessment and detox, and treatment services. As part of their treatment, participants meet with recovery coaches who have on-the-ground experience and encourage participants to stay in or re-engage with treatment. Further, any person seeking substance use treatment can walk into a CPD district office and request a referral for Thresholds' services.

The goal of the NADP project is to reduce the amount of contact people with substance use disorders have with the criminal justice system. By engaging with the NADP substance use assessment, participants are immediately diverted from the criminal justice process and connected with treatment. They are not formally charged with a crime and are not monitored for compliance with the treatment program.

This model is a key departure from drug courts and other diversion program models in the U.S. For example, in Seattle's [Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion LEAD program](#), police officers can divert individuals arrested for drug possession, but charges are filed, and prosecution is deferred only if the individual begins treatment within 30 days.

Early Findings

Does this treatment-focused, sanction-free approach work? As the opioid crisis continues to loom large in Chicago and across the country, an evaluation of NADP's initial implementation in Chicago's West Side from 2018 to 2020 conducted by the University of Chicago Crime Lab — [Policing Substance Use: Chicago's Treatment Program for Narcotics Arrests](#) — shows that NADP offers a new blueprint for connecting individuals with addiction recovery support where and when they need it.

The first sign of success is that the program is reaching those most in need of support. **89%** of participants were medically diagnosed with a substance use disorder, **69%** were using narcotics on a daily basis prior to diversion, and **42%** were Black men — the population in Chicago most impacted by the opioid crisis and the harms of the criminal justice system.

Second, take-up has been exceptionally high. Unencumbered by bottlenecks of limited criminal justice system resources, the program has connected over **1,500** people with treatment since its launch in 2018. Over **98%** of those offered diversion opted-in and **79%** of diverted participants began treatment.

The program is successfully driving a reduction in future arrests among program participants. NADP participants were **72% less likely** to be re-arrested in the future, driven by a reduction in arrests for drug and violent offenses

These results demonstrate that enabling recovery instead of punishing drug use can simultaneously reduce the unnecessary use of criminal justice system resources and increase public safety.

Chicago's Narcotics Arrest Diversion Program appears to be reaching three goals at once — connecting individuals with substance use disorders to treatment, reducing reliance on the criminal justice system, and improving public safety.

To learn more about these results, please contact Dr. Ashna Arora, Research Director at the University of Chicago Crime Lab at ashnaarora@uchicago.edu.