

**Rational Choice and Fentanyl-Laced Opioid Use: Report**  
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The purpose of this study is to better understand the use of opioids in Wilmington, North Carolina by testing the following question. Does the known presence of fentanyl in an opioid affect a user's choice to take the drug? This research attempts to show whether or not a user is more or less likely to use a drug when fentanyl is present. This research question is important to better understand the benefits or non-benefits of providing users with fentanyl test strips. This is a question that interests our community partner, the North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition (NCHRC), and knowing the answer to this question can also provide information concerning rational choice and those who misuse opioids.

**METHODS**

In order to collect data regarding this question, a survey was developed and given to clients of the NCHRC. This research is quantitative and the data was collected through a survey consisting of close-ended questions with some space for elaboration. The survey data was collected from February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018 to March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018 at the NCHRC home office. The sample used to collect the data is a convenience sample. This is the best type of sample to use for this project because the purpose is to study a specific group of people who use services provided by the NCHRC. A limitation to the project is that the results will not be generalizable to any larger population, which limits the scope to which this project could reach. The data, however, is helpful to the community partner because it focuses on a specific population of people that use the NCHRC services. The goal of this component of the research project was to answer the

research question mentioned by asking participants the result of a fentanyl strip that they had used (positive or negative). If the answer was positive, the participant answered a second question, which asked how they then chose to use the drug. These questions were designed to obtain a better understanding of rational choice among opioid users and provide valuable information of the extent of fentanyl strip use and the impact of fentanyl strip use to the NCHRC.

## **RESULTS**

Although there were twenty total respondents (n=20) for the survey as a whole, only six respondents answered 'yes' to the following question, "Have you ever used these fentanyl strips before today?" Of the six who had used fentanyl strips in the past, only three answered that the result of the test was positive. It is necessary for the result of the fentanyl strip test to be positive in order to be able to understand the issue proposed in this study. Since the number of respondents for the question that needed to be answered was only three, I am not able to confirm or reject the hypothesis that a positive fentanyl test result causes a user to take less of a drug or abstain from the drug altogether.

Although the hypothesis cannot be confirmed or rejected, the results of this survey do provide valuable information to both academics and the NCHRC. As seen in figure 1, the data shows that 37.5% of the participants had access to and used fentanyl strips in the past. This means that 62.5% of NCHRC clients either did not have access to fentanyl strips or did have access and chose not to use them.

**Table 1: Used Fentanyl Strips Previously**

| Have used these fentanyl test strips before today? |           |         |               |
|--|-----------|---------|---------------|
|  | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
| NO   | 10        | 50%     | 62.5%         |
| YES  | 6         | 30%     | 37.5%         |

Figure 2 shows the choice made by the user once a fentanyl test strip indicated the drug did contain fentanyl.

**Table 2: Decision Following Test Result**

| What did you do following the test result? |           |               |
|--|-----------|---------------|
|  | Frequency | Valid Percent |
| Threw Away the Drugs                       | 1         | 33.33%        |
| Used less than Originally Intended         | 2         | 66.66%        |

Although the response rate on this question was too low to make any statistically significant statements, it does show that at least some participants chose to use a drug differently due to the known presence of fentanyl. This gets at the research question for this project and I believe that with more participants, the research question could be answered. Another interesting finding was the role that gender played in the use of fentanyl strips. According to the data, 11 respondents were female (55%) and 9 respondents were male (45%) which made up 20 total respondents ( $n = 20$ ). When it came to who had used fentanyl strips in the past, only 1 respondent was female (16.66%) and 5 respondents were

male (83.33%). This is interesting because it shows that a majority of clients that had access to and used fentanyl strips were male.

### **DISCUSSION/IMPLICATIONS**

Although the research question cannot be confirmed or denied, the data has provided the researchers and the NCHRC with valuable information concerning who is using fentanyl strips and what they are doing once a positive result is obtained. This descriptive information will allow the NCHRC make decisions on the distribution of fentanyl strips and how to better reduce harm from opioids in Wilmington, NC.