

# Supervised Consumption Sites: Opposition Response Guide

Supervised Consumption Sites (SCSs) are facilities rooted in a **harm reduction** philosophy. SCSs are facilities where people can use drugs under the supervision of trained professionals, preventing overdoses from turning fatal, increasing safe injection hygiene, and improving access to SUD treatment. There are currently more than 100 sites in 11 countries worldwide. Many US cities are considering implementing these facilities to combat the overdose crisis. However, only New York City operates SCSs in the US due largely to community opposition and political roadblocks that are often rooted in stigma. This factsheet was developed from a review aimed to address those concerns through a discussion of the evidence-based support for SCSs. In order to better understand public opposition to SCSs specifically in the Boston community we first conducted a review of comments and social media responses to news media from Boston news outlets about SCSs. We also queried SCS experts for the community concerns they have heard.

## Media Review: Bostonian Perceptions of Supervised Consumption Sites

In order to assess the negative perceptions related to supervised consumption sites in Boston, the Action Lab conducted an online news media search for content posted since 2017 with key terms related to SCSs in November 2020 on the websites of major Boston news outlets. The public comment section, quotes from Boston citizens, and Tweet replies from 63 stories were reviewed to identify the key concerns of Bostonians who oppose supervised consumption sites. Importantly, analyzing these reactions highlights what stigmas and beliefs will need to be overcome by Boston's public health community in order to successfully enact SCSs. The graphic to the right displays the themes about concerns generated from the media review.

### Boston Community Fears About SCSs

- Area safety and cleanliness
- Honey pot effect
- Financial barriers
- Ethical opposition to condoning drug use
- SCSs furthering drug use

## How to Respond to Public SCS Stigmas, Myths, and Concerns

### “Would the ‘honey pot effect’ increase drug use in my area if it implements an SCS?”

**No.** The honey pot effect is the idea that SCSs will lead to increased drug use and drug-related crime by attracting more people who use drugs to the area. But, the scientific [evidence](#) from international SCSs denies this effect's existence.

- ✓ A study in Sydney, Australia saw no evidence that a new SCS led to any changes in theft and robbery incidents or drug offenses in the area near the SCS.
- ✓ A case study [review](#) noted that police in Vancouver, British Columbia found in practice that SCSs increased public safety by reducing public drug use in unsafe locations.
- ✓ The Ontario HIV Treatment Network reviewed the effectiveness of Canadian SCSs in 2014 and every study they examined noted either no increase in crime near the SCS or an increase in public safety, which was attributed to the reduction of public injections.

### “Supervised Consumption Sites work abroad, but would not work in the US.”

**False.** Since New York City opened SCSs in November 2021, the sites [treated](#) 672 overdoses and served 2,100 drug users over 50,000 times. There has never been a death in a supervised consumption site.

### “Will this be expensive for the city or increase my taxes?”

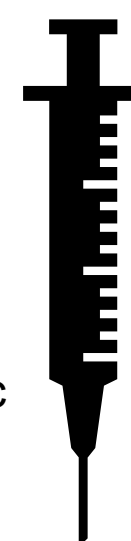
**No.** SCSs have resulted in a cost-savings for cities. In Calgary, Canada their SCS saved the city \$2.3 million in net cost-savings as a result of reduced ambulance and emergency department services. The New England Comparative Effectiveness Public Advisory Council conducted an economic [analysis](#) to determine whether supervised injection sites would reduce municipal costs for a handful of major cities, including Boston. They estimated that Boston would see savings upwards of \$4 million a year, this is including the operation costs of the facility. Much of this calculation is based on the ability to avoid the average, excess 773 ambulance rides, 551 emergency room visits, and 264 hospitalizations related to overdose each year.

### Internationally, SCSs directly [led](#) to:

- Reduction in needling sharing, which can reduce risk of HIV and Hep C
- Reduction of drug-related overdose deaths
- Greater use of substance use disorder treatment

### “Would there be an increase in public injection and disposal of needles?”

**No.** Supervised Consumption Sites will actually reduce this issue by moving drug use from public spaces to supervised facilities. amFAR, an AIDS research foundation, compiled a literature [review](#) on the effectiveness of SCSs and determined that “the absence of private, secure, and hygienic spaces often drives people who inject drugs to do so in public, with discarded syringes posing a health hazard.”



### “Is jail time more effective at curbing drug use?”

**No.** The overdose crisis is worsening in the United States, despite high levels of incarceration for drug-related offenses. Research over the last few decades has clearly [shown](#) that criminal punishment alone is not effective in curbing drug use. The National Institute on Drug Abuse [examined](#) SUD treatment in the criminal justice system in a 2010 study and concluded that: “Punishment alone is a futile and ineffective response to drug abuse, failing as a public safety intervention for offenders whose criminal behavior is directly related to drug use.”

Not only is jail time not an effective deterrent to drug use, but the criminal justice system falters greatly in its “treatment” of SUD for the individuals who they physically commit to involuntary treatment. Involuntary commitment is the legal practice of people who use drugs being forced into treatment programs that often fail to meet clinical international standards for SUD treatment. Involuntary commitment is not the result of an arrest related to committing a crime, but rather its legal [basis](#) is rooted in civil commitment under the broad police powers to protect citizens from harm.

### “Legal barriers exist making this illegal, so why condone it?”

Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker objected to the implementation of supervised consumption sites in MA under the concern that there are substantial legal barriers. Legislators often cite the Controlled Substances Act’s “Crackhouse Statue” as including SCSs making them illegal to operate since they would fall under the broad definition of a “crackhouse.” However, legal precedence exists to overcome this objection in other states. Philadelphia’s proposed supervised consumption site, called Safehouse, was [supported](#) under Judge Gerald McHugh’s decision that no argument would place supervised consumption sites under the Controlled Substances Act’s “Crackhouse Statue” definition.

Nonetheless, state legislative approval is not necessary for a supervised consumption site to open, although it would be ideal in preventing future federal legal opposition. They can also be [approved](#) through state administrative action or they can be implemented by local governments under their discretion to protect and promote public health. Historically, state legislatures have approved harm reduction interventions similar to SCSs, like needle exchanges. There is also a concern that supervised consumption sites would be exposed to tort liability because legal precedent holds social hosts accountable for their clients’ actions after leaving an event. In theory, SCSs could be held to the same accountability. However, RAND [researchers](#) note that waivers could mitigate some of the risk of client suits against the SCSs.

### “Should the government assist people who use drugs?”

**Yes.** Drug addiction is often the result of predisposed environmental and genetic factors and can be attributed to socioeconomic biases in policy and policing. Prenatal [exposure](#) to drugs, genetic vulnerability, lack of parental support, and peer drug use push adolescents to drug use. Mental illness is a risk factor for addiction, about [20%](#) of Americans who have depression or an anxiety disorder also have a substance use disorder. Public stigma should not be a factor in determining implementation as it is transient — community stigma related to SCSs [dissipated](#) over time in countries like Switzerland and Canada after SCS implementation.

Importantly, private substance use disorder treatment is difficult to access as an individual because of a host of legislative and socioeconomic barriers.

- ⊕ Of the [estimated](#) 21 million Americans in need of substance use treatment in 2016, only 3.1 million received it.
- ⊕ Health insurance status, poor geographic distribution of treatment centers, and financial barriers all [prevent](#) people from seeking help.
- ⊕ Private substance use disorder treatment in US rehabilitation facilities is also flawed: under [half](#) of the 12,000 addiction rehabilitation facilities in the US offer evidence-based medications for opioid addiction like buprenorphine, despite support for these treatments from the [CDC](#).

### “Will this even work? Is this the best public health response?”

**Yes.** In Canada, overdose mortality [reduced](#) because of the introduction of supervised consumption sites and drug users became more likely to receive on-site nursing services that improved their overall health. SCSs [reduce](#) the spread of infectious disease by combatting needle sharing. The greater Boston area is currently experiencing an HIV outbreak, which the Boston Public Health Commission [states](#) is occurring among people who use drugs and are experiencing homelessness. SCSs are also supported by major organizations including:

- ✔ The American Medical Association
- ✔ The Massachusetts Medical Society
- ✔ The Harm Reduction Coalition

### “Would SCSs discourage people who use drugs from seeking substance use disorder treatment?”

**No.** Research on Vancouver, Canada’s Insite SCS [showed](#) that after the site opened, the area saw a 33% increase in detoxification service use and Insite visitors were 3.7 times more likely to participate in addiction treatment. Of 1,000 Insite visitors over the period from 2003-2005, 18% enrolled in detoxification services. The study ultimately concluded that, “contrary to fears that Insite might be deterring drug users from seeking treatment, these findings strongly suggest that Insite is facilitating entry into detoxification services among its clients.”

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According to the Health in Justice Action Lab’s 2019 research:

- **0 states** require evidence-based treatment be used in involuntary commitment settings
- 16 states allow people with SUD in the justice system to be subjected to this treatment **without their consent**
- In 2018, MA conducted **10,770** involuntary commitments
- Of which, **6,048** individuals for substance use under Section 35



## Overdose Crisis Fast Facts

- Overdose deaths quintupled from 2000 to 2016
- Just under 80,000 Americans died from drug overdose in 2022
- Massachusetts remains saw an 11% increase in overdose deaths from 2020 to 2021
- 2,301 overdose deaths in MA in 2021