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EXPLAINER

# New York City's OPCs Do Not Pose a Serious Threat to Public Safety

March 2024

## Background

In November 2021, a harm reduction organization called OnPoint NYC began operating the United States' [first publicly recognized](#) overdose prevention centers (OPCs) at two pre-existing syringe services program (SSP) sites in New York City. OPCs are places where people can consume drugs acquired elsewhere under the supervision and care of staff or volunteers trained to recognize and respond to overdoses. Proponents point to [decades of research](#) from other countries suggesting that the facilities [save lives](#), reduce the demand for emergency medical services, and cut public drug use. In fact, in August 2023, OnPoint NYC reported that its staff and volunteers had intervened in and successfully reversed [more than 1,000](#) overdoses. But detractors continue to worry that the centers encourage criminal activity in surrounding areas.

In a [recent study](#), a team of scholars—including a former New York City police officer—evaluated those public safety concerns.

## The Question

Did opening and operating OPCs coincide with changes in crime and disorder nearby?

## The Method and Timeline



The researchers compared crime and disorder reports from neighborhoods around the two SSPs that added an OPC to their existing services against reports from neighborhoods around the city's 17 other state-authorized SSPs that were comparable to the OPC sites—brick-and-mortar, operated three or more days per week—but lacked an OPC. This provided an opportunity to assess relative changes in public safety before and after the introduction of OPCs at locations already frequented by people who use drugs.

The researchers assessed public safety using three types of crime and disorder reports: recorded crimes, law enforcement, and emergency (911) and nuisance (311) calls. The below table outlines the crime and disorder report categories and subcategories.

CRIME AND DISORDER REPORT CATEGORIES AND SUBCATEGORIES		
RECORDED CRIME	LAW ENFORCEMENT	EMERGENCY AND "NUISANCE" CALLS
<p><b>VIOLENT CRIME*</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Murder</li> <li>• Robbery</li> <li>• Aggravated assault</li> <li>• Simple assault</li> </ul> <p><b>PROPERTY CRIME*</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Burglary</li> <li>• Theft</li> <li>• Motor vehicle theft</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drug possession</li> <li>• Weapons possession</li> <li>• Criminal summons</li> </ul>	<p><b>911: EMERGENCY CALLS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crime</li> <li>• Assault</li> <li>• Trespass</li> <li>• Medical</li> </ul> <p><b>311: NUISANCE CALLS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drug-related</li> <li>• Unsanitary conditions</li> <li>• Abandoned vehicle</li> </ul>

\* Because the individual subcategories under Violent Crime and Property Crime were too small to have sufficient "statistical power," primary analyses were conducted with the aggregated larger categories. A [2023 paper](#) defines statistical power as "the probability of a study to make correct decisions or detect an effect when one exists." This minimizes the likelihood that researchers will identify false relationships between variables, and ensures the findings are meaningful for real-world application.

The researchers examined the number of crime and civil disorder reports in each category and subcategory from the immediate vicinity of each facility (about six city blocks) and from a larger area surrounding each site (about 18 city blocks). They used reports from almost two years before and more than one year after the OPCs opened and calculated the monthly average for each subcategory (i.e., trespass 911 calls) and aggregated category (i.e., 911 emergency calls).

## The Results

Relative to their SSP-only counterparts, the OPCs' immediate vicinities and surrounding neighborhoods saw significant reductions in the enforcement of drug-related offenses (82.7 percent and 74.5 percent, respectively). Reductions in weapons arrests and criminal summons were also statistically significant around the OPCs relative to the SSP-only sites. These patterns—likely attributable to the fact that, while the New York Police Department [neither condones nor condemns](#) OPCs, they agreed [not to enforce](#) drug laws around the sites to avoid dissuading people from using them—may lead [some residents](#) to feel that the facilities make their neighborhoods [less safe](#).

**While this feeling of reduced safety is important and may indicate a need for improved outreach, crime report analyses indicate that public safety did not suffer in the wake of the OPCs' opening and the associated reductions in drug-related enforcement. Primary findings include:**



### 911 Emergency or 311 Nuisance Calls (No Significant Change)

There was no significant change in either 911 emergency calls or 311 nuisance calls in the neighborhoods closest to the OPCs relative to those closest to the SSP-only locations.



### Violent/Property Crime (No Significant Change)

Relative to the SSP-only areas, the neighborhoods surrounding OPCs (both immediate and in the wider area) saw no significant change in either violent crime or property crime.



### Crime-Related 911 Calls (Significant Change)

Crime-related 911 calls in the wider area around OPCs fell by 15.9 percent compared to SSP-only areas.



### Medical 911 Calls (Significant Change)

Medical 911 calls fell 33.4 percent in the wider area around OPCs compared to SSP-only areas.

The researchers also identified statistically significant results in several subcategories of the violent crime and property crime categories that warrant discussion:

- Aggravated assault increased by 30.4 percent in the areas closest to OPCs relative to those closest to the SSP-only sites.
- Compared to the wider areas surrounding SSP-only sites, the wider areas surrounding OPCs saw:
  - A 34.9 percent decrease in robberies
  - A 21.8 percent decrease in theft
  - A 69.1 percent increase in motor vehicle theft

Readers must be extremely cautious in drawing conclusions from these subcategory findings, as they rely upon extremely small sample sizes. For example, average monthly aggravated assaults increased from 1.9 before the opening of the OPCs to 2.7 after their opening; however, these increases were offset by a non-statistically significant decrease in average monthly simple assaults in the same area (4.1 to 3.1). In addition to the difficulty in interpreting this type of offset, the small numbers in these subcategories means they lack sufficient power to be conclusive. When sample sizes are too small, the likelihood of detecting a true effect is reduced, which can lead to [overestimating](#) real-world implications.

## Key Takeaways

This study offers very specific findings. OnPoint NYC added OPCs to established SSPs that have provided services in their neighborhoods for many years. While this limits the generalizability of the study to other sites opened in a similar context, its findings are consistent with [research on OPCs](#) in Canada, Australia, and Europe. The New York City OPCs do not pose a serious risk to public safety, even with reduced enforcement of drug-related offenses in their vicinity.

For more information, please contact:

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