



# 'Drug Cutting' Perspectives and Implications on Reducing Harms of Fentanyl Adulterated Stimulants: A Qualitative Study of People who Distribute Drugs

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## Overview

We qualitatively explored how people learn to manufacture stimulant drugs (e.g., cocaine) with illicitly manufactured fentanyl (IMF) from the perspectives of people who distribute drugs (PWDD) who were incarcerated in the Rhode Island Department of Corrections.

## Background

- The contamination of street stimulants (e.g., cocaine) with IMF has contributed to a rise in fatal stimulant and opioid involved overdoses in the U.S.
- Existing efforts to understand how IMF enters the stimulant supply have centered the perspectives of people who use drugs. While informative, these perspectives overlook supply-side factors (e.g., manufacturing of drugs).
- This is the first study to explore how people learn to manufacture (i.e., "cut") drugs including stimulants with IMF from the perspective of PWDD who were incarcerated at time of participation.

## Study Design

- Eligibility:** 30 PWDD ≥ 18 years old sentenced on drug distribution or manufacturing charges.
- Data collection:** A survey assessed demographic information. Audio-recorded in-depth interviews were conducted May-July 2023 using an interview guide. **15 hrs 40 mins** of data were collected.
- Coding:** An existing codebook utilized in a parallel qualitative study was modified by three coders to add deductive (from interview guide) and inductive codes from open coding process of 2 transcripts. The final codebook was used to code all transcripts in Dedoose. 20% (n = 6) of transcripts were independently coded by 2 coders to monitor consistency in application.
- Analysis:** Descriptive statistics are reported. The first author conducted integrated thematic analysis of coded data to identify methods for learning to cut drugs and implications on consistency of the drug supply.

## Results

- Mean age 35 years old (SD = 8) | mostly male (87%)
- 56% White, non-Hispanic, 26% Hispanic, 19% Black, non-Hispanic
- Mean weekly estimated income of \$6,730
- 47% of drug-related offense prior to incarceration involved stimulants & opioids, 40% only involved stimulants, 13% involved other drugs

	Theme	Excerpt
Self-taught	Trial-and-error experimentation	A lot of things that's happening is you get the trial and error but what these kids don't realize is that these <b>trial and errors is causing death because of the fentanyl</b> . Sold stim & OP, high-level, 49 yo
	Utilization of online techniques	A lot of information you could find like on <b>YouTube or other websites</b> on how to make these types of stuff [cuts]. It's not like information that's hidden. I just feel like if you wanna do something there's the internet. Sold stim & OP, mid-level, 28 yo
Learning from social network	Utilization of word-of-mouth or observed techniques from shadowing other PWDD	It's usually by watching. A lot of people pay to learn. <b>If you know how to do what you're doing and still be good, people will pay you to learn the way.</b> Your little science that you do. Sold stim only, lower-level, 48 yo
	Utilization of family-specific techniques	Sad to say, being around, you know, <b>watching your parents do it</b> when you're young and you learn. It's not hard. There is always somebody willin' to show you. Sold stim & OP, mid-level, 44 yo
	Altering drug compositions based on feedback from PWUD and how a wholesale supplier characterizes the product in order to ↑ profit and ↓ negative feedback on drug quality	I'll take one gram, out of whatever amount that I'm buying, and I'll cut it that many times and give it to somebody, and they'll tell me if it needs to be stronger or weaker. And then, I'll just keep going through that process. So, you're gonna lose a little bit but you know, in the long run you'll be -- <b>you'll know the equation so that A, nobody will die, and B, people will like your product.</b> Sold stim & OP, mid-level, 30 yo
	Carelessness and manufacturing while high increases risk of cross-contamination of surfaces with IMF and stimulants	It's <b>on your cutting board like when you're bagging up or you mistake one drug for another.</b> Um, accidental. Um, or just like dust getting into the powder or of the fentanyl 'cause you have it on the same plate [...] Up for days not paying attention. Just, you know, <b>carelessness.</b> Um, <b>smoking too much weed or whatever, any type of drug.</b> Sold stim, mid-level, 44 yo

## Conclusions

- PWDD draw on self-taught methods, peer-based learning, and experimentation to manufacture drugs.
- The absence of systematized manufacturing methods introduces opportunity for inconsistencies in the composition of the drug supply, exacerbating stimulant and opioid – involved overdose risk.
- Unintentional contamination of the stimulant supply with IMF suggest that strategies are needed to reduce errors and experimentation in manufacturing processes.



Scan for more information about these results and associated study findings from the POINTS study

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