

A report to congressional committees

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What GAO Found

The Office of National Drug Control Policy's (ONDCP) Drug-Free Communities (DFC) Support Program provides grants for community-based coalitions focused on drug use prevention efforts for youth 18 and under. In the 2025 evaluation report, it is claimed that the DFC program is meeting its strategic goal of reducing substance use among youth. However, that report states that it is not possible to establish a causal relationship between substance use changes in communities and the DFC program.

Selected statements on the Effectiveness of the Drug-Free Communities Support Program from the June 2025 National Cross-Site Evaluation Report



DFC coalitions met the goal of significantly preventing and reducing youth substance use in their community(ies). This was true for the DFC program collectively (all coalitions ever funded) and for the most recent DFC cohort (awarded in Fiscal Year [FY] 2023).

One limitation to the DFC National Cross-Site Evaluation is that while the evaluation provides evidence of the overall DFC model is effective in preventing and/or reducing youth substance use, it is not possible to establish a causal relationship in core measure changes over time because there is not an appropriate comparison or control group of communities from which the same data are available.

While the overall model is considered effective, given the comprehensive range of strategies coalitions implement, it is not possible to clearly establish their relationship between a single activity and its outcome(s).

Source: GAO illustration from the Drug-Free Communities Support Program's End-of-Year 2024 National Cross-Site Evaluation Report (June 2025); [warmworld/stock.adobe.com](https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/stock-photo/warmworld/stock.adobe.com). | GAO-26-106949

GAO found significant limitations in the program data—inconsistencies and unclear data sources. By law, coalitions have certain flexibility in how they collect data. Moreover, ONDCP's cross-site evaluations have not transparently described its methodologies. Including the complete methodology would allow one to better understand and assess the results of the evaluation. Researchers have long reported on the challenges for documenting causality for community-based programs. However, available data provides insights on coalitions' efforts to reduce substance use among youth.

ONDCP has taken some steps to effectively administer the DFC program, including working to ensure new coalitions meet program requirements and have access to mandatory training. In addition, ONDCP has established an internal controls framework to help ensure grantee compliance. However, ONDCP has not consistently enforced compliance with the statutory requirement that DFC coalitions maintain the involvement of all community sectors. Establishing and maintaining community drug prevention partnerships is a critical factor to the success of the DFC program. Further, ONDCP lacks transparency in its budget process. Enhanced budget disclosures would allow appropriators and program decision-makers to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the DFC program's financial position.

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. faces multiple challenges related to illicit drugs and declared the opioid epidemic as a national public health emergency since 2017. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data indicated 1,413 drug overdose deaths occurred among those age 18 and under in 2023. The DFC program focuses on preventing and reducing youth substance use. In 2020, GAO designated drug misuse a high-risk issue and added it to the 2021 High-Risk Series.

The SUPPORT Act includes a provision for GAO to review ONDCP's programs and operations, including the DFC program, every 4 years. This report examines the extent to which (1) the DFC program has met key program goals; and (2) ONDCP has effectively managed the DFC program.

For this report, GAO conducted a survey and site visits selected by geography and size, and analyzed annual evaluations of the DFC program, management protocols, and budget data for fiscal years 2018 through 2025. GAO also interviewed agency officials and contractors responsible for program evaluations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations to ONDCP to develop a strategy to identify relevant data to better understand program impact, explore ways to standardize coalition data collection, document and report the methodology in its annual evaluations, enforce the community sectors involvement requirement, and increase transparency in its budget process. ONDCP concurred with each of the recommendations.