

Jaime Arredondo, PhD

“LA SALA” - Verter, A Safe Consumption Site in Mexicali

Innovative Harm Reduction in Latin America

Webinar - Overdose Prevention Sites

Tuesday, August 26th, 2026 - Online

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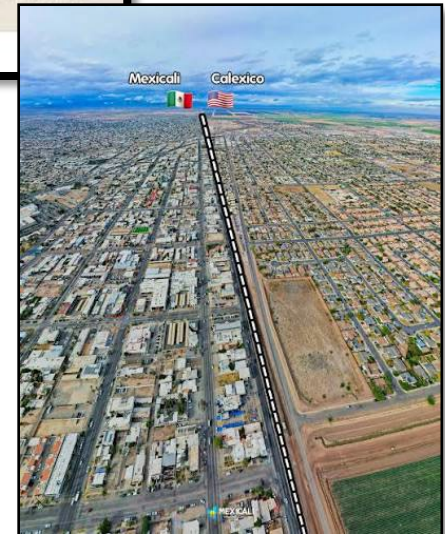
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Background

Drug Use in Mexicali

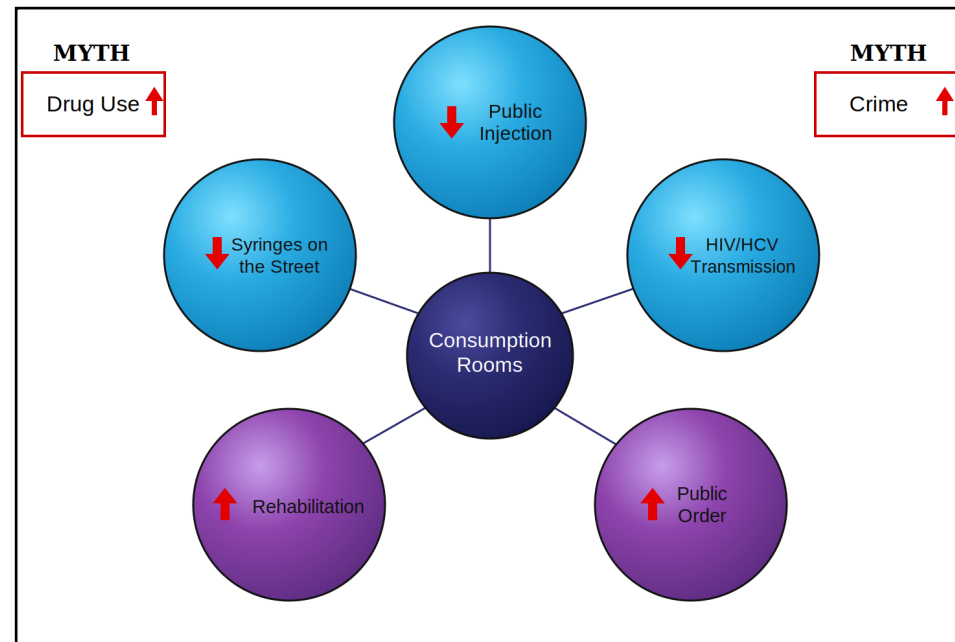
- Baja California has one of the highest rates of substance use in Mexico, with high population mobility, including many deportees
- Mexicali, the state capital, has a long-standing, high prevalence of methamphetamine and opioid use
- The Mexicali Valley sees trafficking and local production of fentanyl-adulterated substances
- No funded state-federal drug policy exists, and forced treatment remains common



Rationale

Why a Supervised Site

- Supervised consumption sites (SCS) reduce fatal overdoses and prevent HIV and Hepatitis C from shared needles
- They reduce public drug use and connect people to health and treatment services
- Offer structural solutions and help address public disorder
- We needed to show that SCS could exist beyond industrialized countries
- Everyone should have the right to life saving interventions



General Objectives Overdose Prevention Site

Safe Consumption

- Use new supplies — don't share
- Prevent overdose



Health Services

- HIV testing and treatment
- Wound care



Population Outreach

- Referrals to rehabilitation services
- Design of comprehensive support plans



Structural Change

- Reorganize public space
- Break the jail / use / street cycle



Approach & Process Building La Sala

May 2018: Strategic planning

June 2018: Focus group

July 2018: Physical space preparation

September 2018: Operations begin

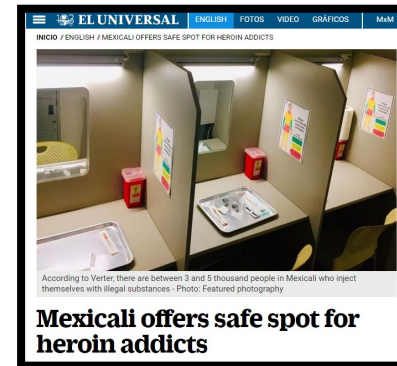
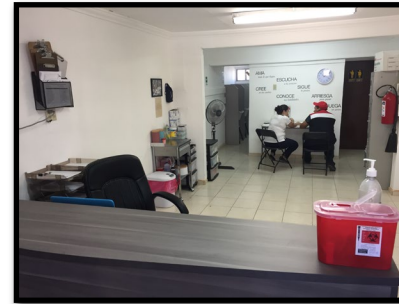
October 2018: Media coverage surge

November 2018: Closure

December: Legal process begins
(CEDH)

May 2019: Reopens as a community
center

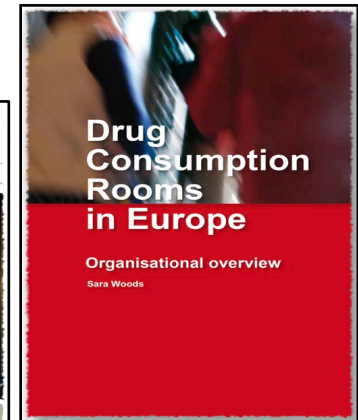
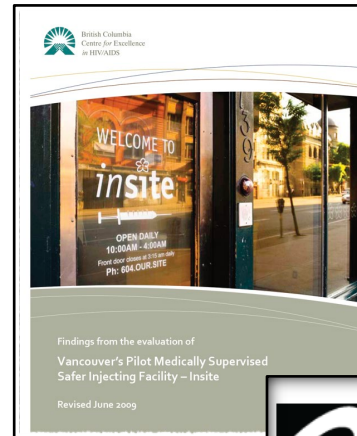
2018-2026: Continues to operate as an
unsanctioned OPS



Approach & Process

Building La Sala

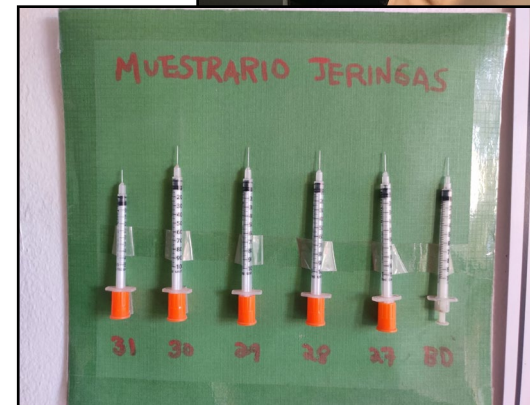
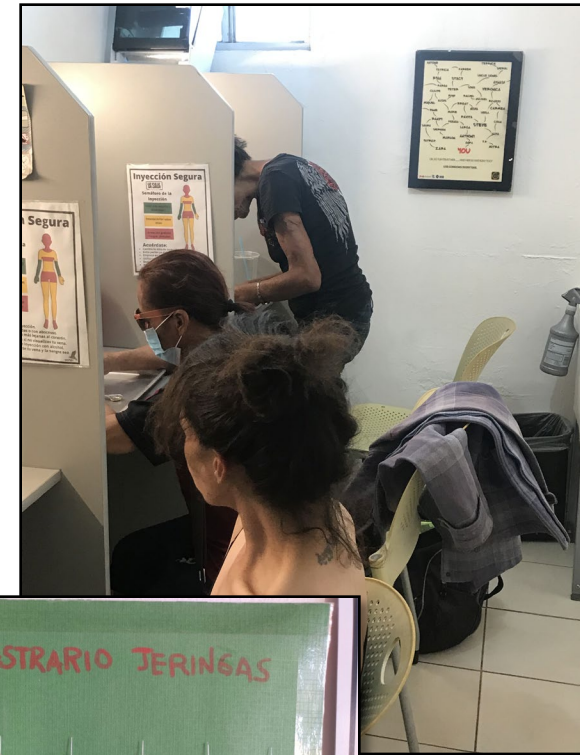
- Identify areas of opportunity
- Fundraising
- Define clear, achievable objectives
- Systematic review of international SC/OPS experiences
- Develop a basic operational manual for SCS in Mexico



Current Services

How La Sala Operates

- A protected, judgment-free space for hygienic drug consumption
 - Immediate response if a client overdoses
- Community-clinical model staffed by peers and health professionals
- Drug Checking
 - FTIR and Test Strips
- Referrals for sexual and reproductive health
 - Support for abortion medication
- Wound care and needle exchange



Focus on Women and Gender

- La Sala launched in September 2018 as a space exclusively for women and transgender people
 - Since 2022, also open to men, but with priority still given to women
- Of more than 5,000 services delivered: 45% women, 3% transgender, 52% men
- More than a consumption site: a safe space for community
- Referrals to gender-based violence services
- Services adapted for women who also do sex work



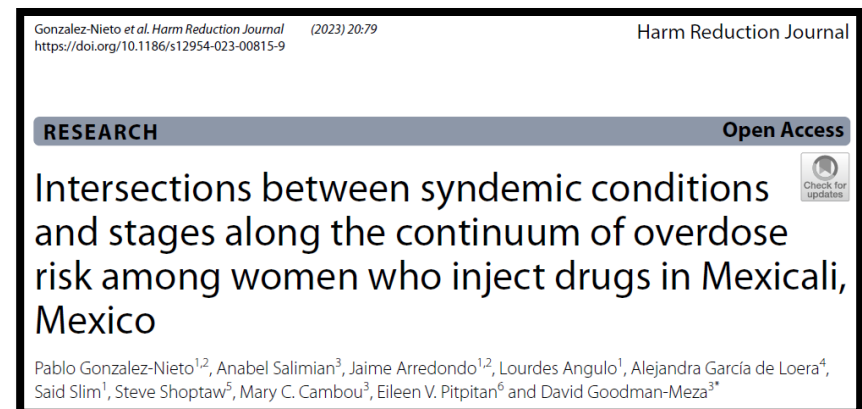
Violence, Rights & Community

- Overdoses have been reversed on-site by staff, community promoters, and peers
 - Almost as same number of lives saved as homicides in the city
- Naloxone/Narcan distribution and training extend overdose response into the wider community
- Baja California's Human Rights Commission issued a 2022 recommendation against arbitrary detention and forced internment in Mexicali treatment centers
- Presented to national policy spaces, including a Senate forum on fentanyl



Successes & Lessons

- First supervised consumption site in Latin America (2018); zero on-site fatalities across thousands of services
- Program impact peer-reviewed and published
- Government has used data from site to drive toxicity alerts in the country
- Key lessons: start as a pilot, document from day one, integrate peers into staff, and include on-site drug checking as a safety feature



Ongoing Challenges

- No legal framework for SCS in Mexico — La Sala operates in a legal gray area, at risk of prosecution
- Violence and homicides in Baja California continue to be a barrier for accessing communities
- Personal drug possession is technically decriminalized, but people are still frequently detained and prosecuted
- Persistent stigma and “tough on drugs” political discourse, with no structural government funding since 2018

HITLER METANFETAMINA
DERVITIN
Los nazis crearon las metanfetaminas

CUÍDATE: EL FENTANILO MATA
A VECES, HASTA CON LA PRIMER Dosis

Fentanilo Muertes por fentanilo
11 abril, 2023

En el mundo
61.3
millones de personas usaron opioides durante el 2020¹

muertes asociadas a consumo de opioides

año	México ¹	EEUU ²
2020	26	68,630
2021	19	80,411

Areas for the Future

- Build a formal legal framework recognizing supervised consumption as part of Mexico's public health response
- Expand harm reduction coverage across the region, currently Baja is state with the most harm reduction programs
 - Sonora state needs services
 - Create cross-border services
- Strengthen drug-checking and community alert systems, and keep publishing evidence to inform policy
- Generate South-South Knowledge Exchange opportunities, and communicate key information with the North (US/Canada/Europe)



Conclusions & Recommendations

- Supervised consumption sites save lives
 - La Sala has recorded zero on-site fatalities across more than 4,000 services since 2018
- A rights-based, peer-driven, non-coercive model can work even without a formal legal framework
- Formal recognition and sustained funding are needed to scale it
- Document all, start small, and center the people who use the service in the program design



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