

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on New Cases of Drug Diversion in the United States

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Introduction

- Most individuals who nonmedically use prescription medications report they acquired a drug by diversion (the transfer of prescription drugs from a lawful to an illegal channel)
- The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on prescription drug diversion remain unknown
- This study examines the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the number of new drug diversion cases recorded by law enforcement agencies in the United States

Methods

- Data from the Researched Abuse, Diversion and Addiction-Related Surveillance (RADARS®) System Drug Diversion Program were used
- Contracted police and regulatory agencies completed a quarterly, cross-sectional, self-administered survey to report the number of new drug diversion cases that occurred within their jurisdiction in the previous quarter
- The number of agencies that participated per quarter ranged from a low of 193 in 2021Q2 to a high of 216 in 2019Q3
- The average number of new drug diversion cases per survey were compared across two periods using a negative binomial regression
 - The periods that were compared represented pre-COVID (2018Q1-2019Q4) and post-COVID (2020Q1-2021Q2)

Results

- The total number of drug diversion cases decreased by 37.9%
 - The average number of drug diversion cases per quarter in the pre-COVID period was 1917.5
 - The average number of drug diversion cases per quarter in the post-COVID period was 1190.3

Results

Figure 1. Average Number of New Drug Diversion Cases in the Pre- and Post-COVID Periods

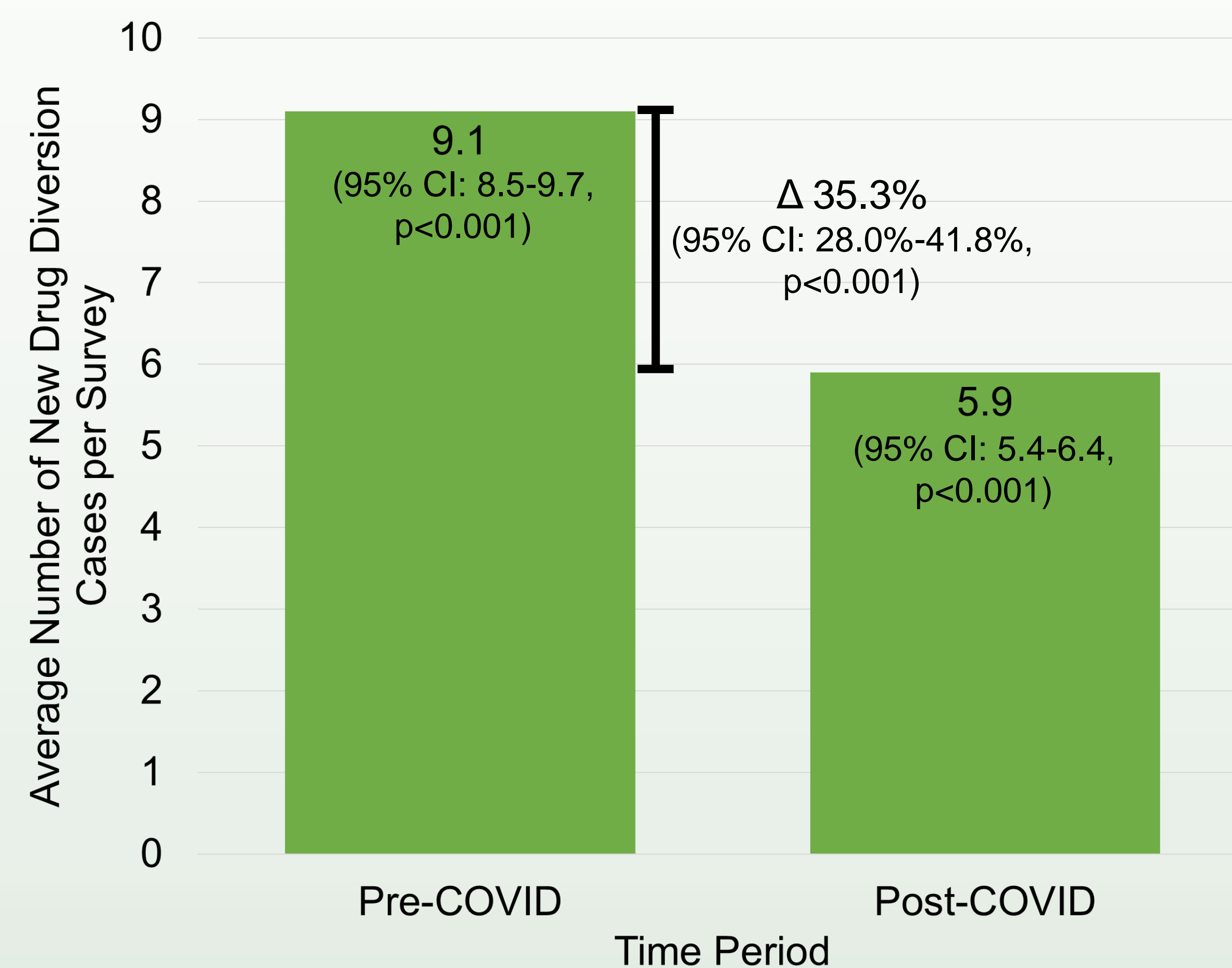


Figure 2. Average Number of Participating Agencies in the Pre- and Post-COVID Periods

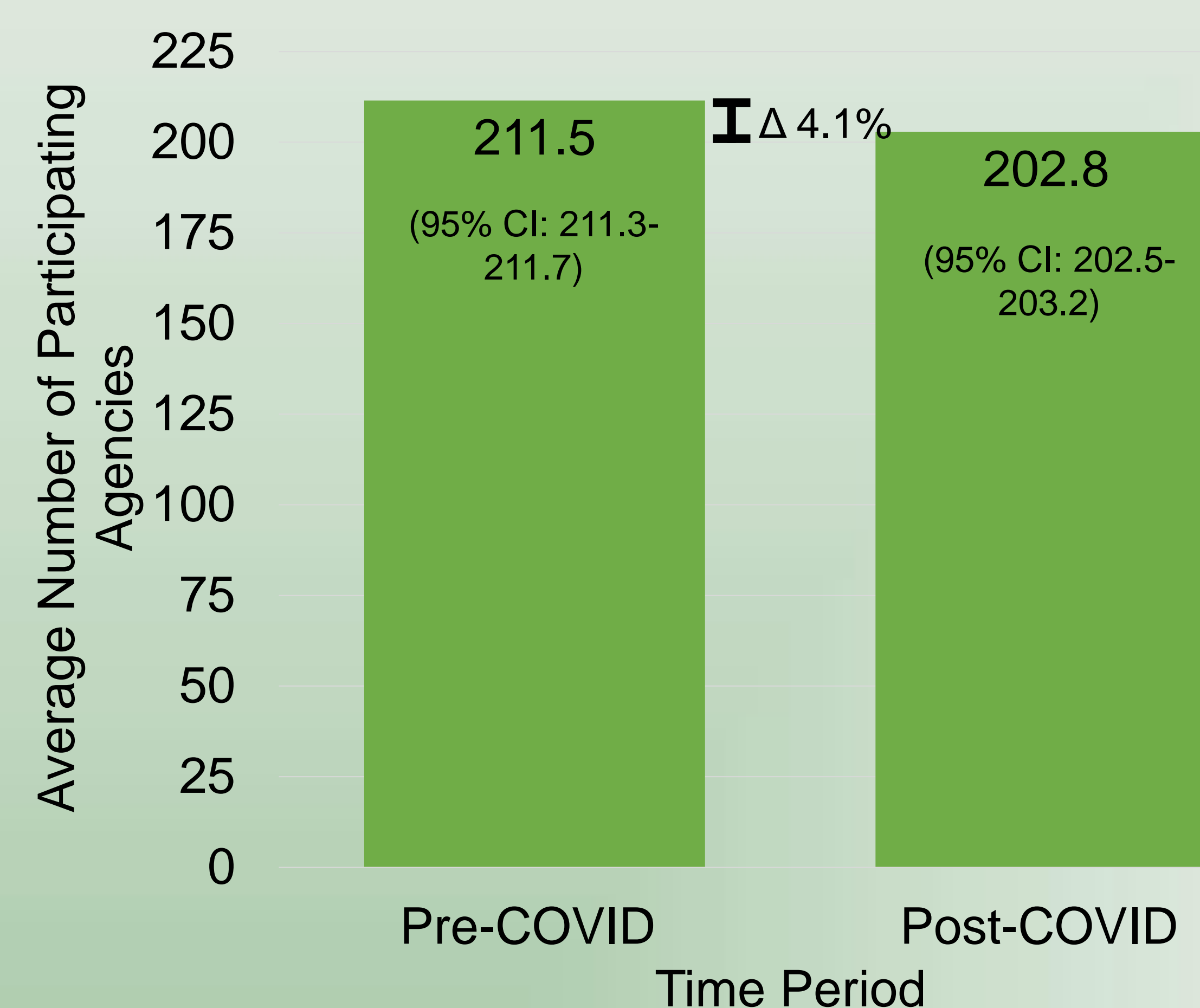
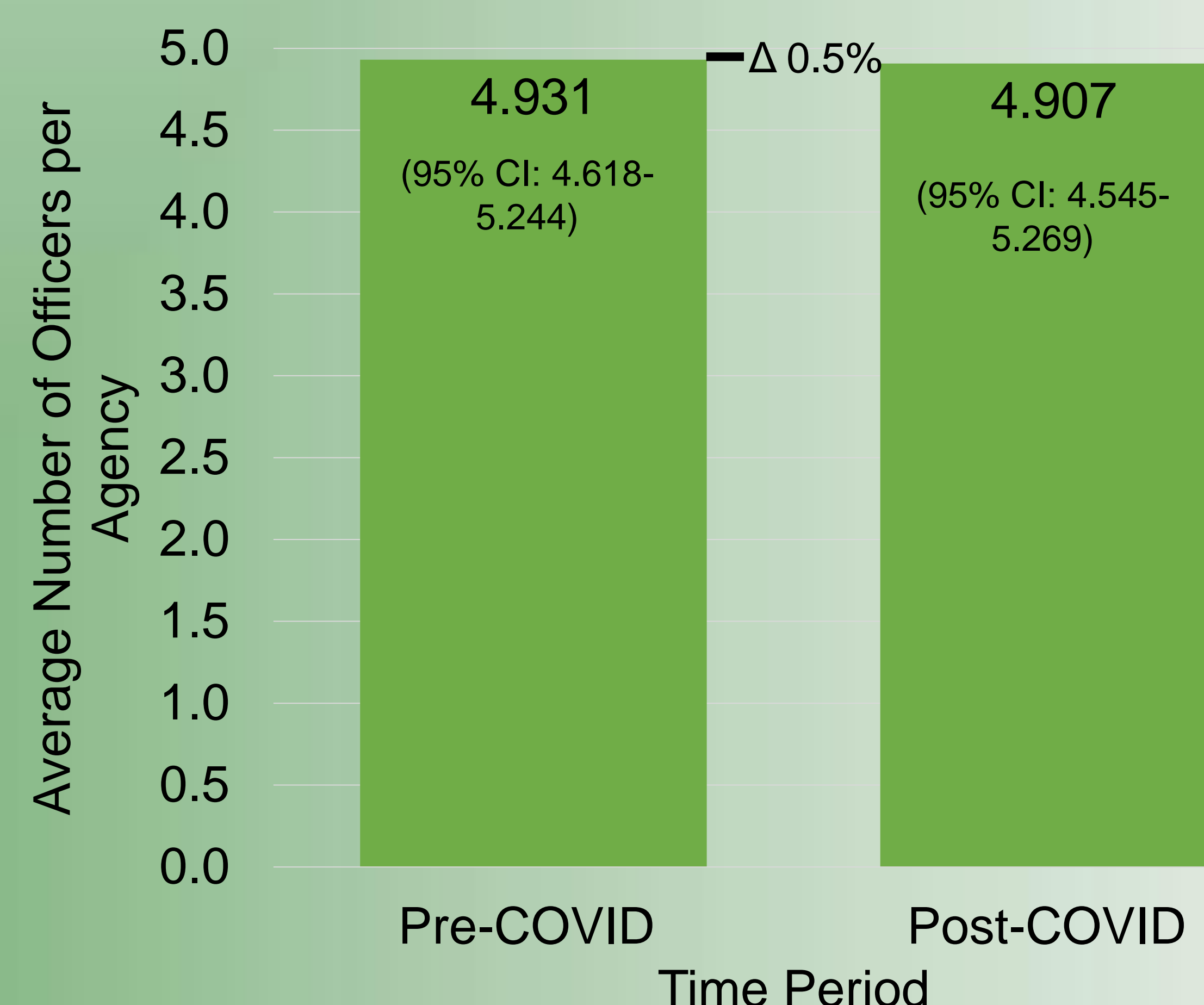


Figure 3. Average Number of Officers per Agency in the Pre- and Post-COVID Periods



Results

- The average number of new drug diversion cases per quarter and agency decreased by 35.3% (Figure 1)
- There was an average of 9.1 new cases per survey in the pre-COVID period
- There was an average of 5.9 new cases per survey in the post-COVID period
- The average number of participating agencies decreased by 4.1% (Figure 2)
- The average number of participating agencies in the pre-COVID period was 211.1
- The average number of participating agencies in the post-COVID period was 202.8
- The average number of officers per agency decreased by 0.05% (Figure 3)
- The average number of officers per agency in both the pre- and post-COVID periods was 4.9
- 49.2% of diversion cases involved prescription opioids and 9.3% involved prescription stimulants

Conclusions

- There was a substantial decline in new drug diversion cases reported by participating agencies post-COVID relative to the pre-COVID period
- Further research is needed to determine whether this finding reflects decreased diversion of prescription medications, changes in law enforcement efforts, or increases in the use of illegal substances during the pandemic

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

- The study is national scope
- Standardized survey instrumentation over the study period

Limitations

- Data were obtained from case reports provided by law enforcement
- May not be a representative sample of all prescription drug diversion investigations