Pain in the Nation: The Drug, Alcohol and Suicide Crises and Need for a National Resilience Strategy

This report examines the set of epidemics the country is facing as drug overdose, alcohol related and suicide deaths are increasing. The report includes evidence based programs and policies to address these triple crises.

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Executive Summary

The United States is facing a set of epidemics: More than 1 million Americans have died in the past decade from drug overdoses, alcohol and suicides (1999 to 2019). By 2019, life expectancy decreased for the first time in two decades, and these three public health crises have been major contributing factors to this decline.

Drug overdose, alcohol related and suicide rates increased significantly in 2020 and 2021. Accordingly, a new analysis conducted by the Berkman Research Group (BRG) for this report. That's a projection based on that estimate may be conservative, given the growth in the use of fentanyl, fentanyl analogs, and other synthetic stimulants along more vulnerable populations, and disruptive events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2019 alone, 127,195 Americans died from drug- or alcohol-induced causes or by suicide. That's an average of 348 Americans per day, or one every four minutes.

These trends are [unacceptable](#) and a national well-being crisis. In each review, they are signals of serious underlying concerns facing so many Americans – about pain, despair, disconnection and lack of opportunity – and the urgent need to address them.

While these crises have mounted much attention, this report finds that the actions taken to date have been severely inadequate. And, if effective action is not taken, these trends could become significantly worse.

In this report, the Trust for America's Health (TFAH) and Well Being Trust (WBT) call for the development of a national [strategy to improve resilience](#) in the United States. This strategy should include evidence-based and research-informed policies, programs and practices to create a more comprehensive approach to counter these crises.

A nation in pain

For several states, the outlook posed by these threats is even more concerning:

- As of 2019, death rates from drugs, alcohol or suicide were 40 per 100,000 residents or higher in four states. New Mexico had the highest rate, 71.8 per 100,000 residents, followed by Alaska (70.4 per 100,000), West Virginia (48.4 per 100,000) and Ohio (47.7 per 100,000).
- By 2020, 36 states are projected to reach death rates of 20 or more per 100,000, and two states, New Mexico and West Virginia, are projected to reach 100 per 100,000.

Recently, the opioid crisis has gained urgent national attention. Many of the strategies for addressing the opioid epidemic have focused on trying to limit the supply of prescriptions and illicit forms of opioids, along with increasing access to treatment, and attempts to address root gaps in the country's substance use disorder treatment capabilities.

142,000
Drug overdose deaths in 2019

107,000
Projected drug overdose deaths in 2020

7 states
Projected to have drug overdose rates of 100 per 100,000 residents or higher in 2020

26 states
Projected to have drug overdose rates of 20 per 100,000 residents or higher in 2020

However, these efforts alone will not succeed without corresponding efforts to address the broader issues that contribute to overuse and being and underlying pain. The rise of multiple "despair deaths" and related threats to the health of our significant elements that would be addressed.

Many factors contributing to drug and alcohol misuse and suicide, including family and social relationships, economic and personal development, early childhood trauma and "lack of economic opportunity, poor working conditions and eroded social capital in communities hit by economic restructuring and automation. Many of the same risk factors contribute to both distress tolerance, substance misuse and untreated mental health issues and adversely impact health, academic and career attainment, relationships with family and friends and personal connectedness within a community.

Current and Projected Crisis Trends

Drug overdose deaths

Drug overdose deaths tripled since 2000 and were responsible for more than 52,400 deaths in 2015. More than 35,000 of those deaths were from opioids, mainly prescription opioids (pain relievers, heroin and fentanyl.

- **7.7 million Americans** (3.2 percent) have a drug use disorder.
- Fentanyl-related deaths increased 73.3 percent and heroin-related deaths increased 20 percent between 2014 and 2015. In 2016, data indicate that fentanyl-related deaths increased by a large overdoses, of 27,481 overdose deaths, double the number in 2015.

Alcohol-induced deaths

Alcohol induced deaths grew 37 for percent from 2000 to 2014, with 33,200 deaths in 2014 from illness, alcohol poisoning and other diseases and injuries in 2015, a 10 year high. The rate for all alcohol attributable deaths, including alcohol-related motor vehicle, homicide and other fatalities, totaled 88,000.

- 137 million Americans (5.3 percent) have an alcohol use disorder.

Suicides

Suicides increased by 24 percent from 2000 to 2015, accounting for more than 44,000 deaths a year. Although suicide rates are higher among men, the highest increases have been among middle-aged women (61 percent increase) and girls aged 10 to 14 (400 percent increase).

- Alcohol use is involved in 11 percent of suicides and 40 percent of suicide attempts. Three-quarters of suicides are from prescribed medications, 51 percent involve firearms.

While overall death rates are higher among Blacks and other people of color, substance misuse and suicide are leading drivers of lowered U.S. life expectancy, for the first time in decades, with an especially unprecedented increase in mortality among middle-aged Whites in the past 15 years.

- Life expectancy rates declined 20 percent among middle-class Whites with less than a college education, with deaths from drug overdoses, alcohol poisoning, liver diseases and suicide all tripling among this cohort. These trends have not been where most social and other groups.

Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders

Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders. In 2015, 44.7 million Americans had a mental health condition, 20 million had a substance use disorder and 8 million had a co-occurring disorder. These numbers are likely to be underestimated due to issues of stigma.

- As many as one in five children and teens has had a serious debilitating mental disorder, with half of mental health disorders beginning by age 14 and three-fifth of cases of mental illness and substance use disorders by age 21.
- Only around one in 10 people (10.4 percent) who needed substance use treatment in the past year received treatment, according to a survey in 2014. Four in six adults with any mental illness received mental health services.

Chronic Pain

Chronic Pain. The National Academy of Medicine (NAM) estimates that 100 million Americans experience chronic pain. Millions more experience acute pain from injury, disease or medical procedures, which millions of others experience annual, recurrent and other prolonged forms of pain.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse Childhood Experiences. Across all socio-economic levels, two-thirds of Americans report having experienced an adverse childhood experience (ACE) within their family or household, and research has found one in four adults experienced three or more ACEs.

- Growing up in an environment where a family member has a mental illness or alcohol or drug use disorder can have long-lasting health consequences and impact stronger on infants and toddlers.
- Children whose parents misuse alcohol and other drugs are three times more likely to be abused and more than four times more likely to be neglected than children in families where parents do not misuse. Children who live in a home where at least one adult is abusing alcohol or illicit drugs, or experiencing mental illness, and witnessing violence and other traumatic events are more likely to experience mental health problems and become alcohol and drugs themselves.
- Parents who misuse alcohol or other drugs are more likely to have multiple sources of stress, including but socio-economic status, lack of social support and social connectedness, and mental health and substance use disorders themselves, such as depression, and have impaired parenting skills, which can have long-lasting and intergenerational effects on their children.

Consequences of Persistent and Prolonged Stress

Consequences of Persistent and Prolonged Stress. One in five Indian and toddlers around 24 months have the criteria for a process long, and 40 percent of income families. Of children who grow up in poverty are more likely to remain poor as adults, and have fewer years of education and employment and have worse mental and physical health.

Maltreatment of Children

Maltreatment of Children. More than 400,000 children experiences severe forms of maltreatment, including sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse and neglect, about, one third of the children under age 4. Around 80,000 are in out of home foster care at any time. Of these children, more than 40 percent of infants and 60 percent of older children live in foster homes with children of other families.

A National Resilience Strategy

The United States has a long history of directly effective approaches for promoting positive mental and behavioral health and managing all forms of pain. The rise of "despair deaths" is directly related to pressure issues with how we solve and manage mental health, pain and despair. In this section, we review a set of evidence-based, research-informed policies promoting positive and providing effective support, solutions and treatment, these trends will only get worse.

We need a comprehensive National Resilience Strategy that focuses on promotion, early identification of issues and effective treatment. Such a strategy should incorporate evidence-based and research-informed policies and programs addressing a mortality and physical health prevention of Public. Focusing on preventing problems and providing support can help Americans thrive, with prime results for improving mental and physical health and school and career achievement. This type of approaches also provide a sound financial investment, with every dollar invested in this strategy providing positive returns on investments ranging from $3.50 to $14 for every dollar invested.

This report offers a critical look at both past and projected impacts and outcomes of the triple crises of drug overdose, alcohol related and suicide deaths, and provides a sort of the extensive review of the Congressional and Federal Government and coordination of existing national policies and programs to address these pressing issues.

One thing is clear: There is an immediate need to develop an actionable national response to alcohol and drug misuse and death by suicide.

Not only are these negative health crises across this country, they are indicators of the need to go deeper and look at underlying causes and opportunities for a more integrated approach to well being for all people, and especially for those who are at high risk for experiencing these challenges. The findings of this report are a clarion call to action from leaders across all sectors and implementers to come together to develop, fund and implement a National Resilience Strategy that will help to significantly improve outcomes in well being and health.

There must be a paradigm shift in the response to these challenges, with top priorities that include:

Improving Pain Management and Treatment.

The opioid epidemic demonstrates the need to improve how the country views and approaches pain. Pain is a complex, subjective experience that involves both impacts and a vast within the healthcare system to manage and support people in pain treatment approaches and to provide ongoing training for responsible prescription opioid prescribing practices. People need physical, emotional and mental healing.

Specific Actions to Stem the Opioid Crisis.

A full-width approach must include promoting responsible opioid prescribing practices such as provider education and best practices for prescribers, and monitoring programs, public education about misuse and safe disposal of unused medicines, and ensuring that treatment is available to those who need it. Naloxone, Narcan and other illicit drugs and expanding use and availability of non-drugs, sterile syringes and disease programs.

Specific Actions to Reduce the Alcohol Crisis.

Evidence-based approaches to reduce concerns drinking include increasing alcohol prices, limiting hours and density of alcohol sales and advertising campaigns drinking laws, such as by holding sellers and hosts liable and eclipsing serving size, ensure.

Specific Actions to Reduce the Suicide Crisis.

Support suicide prevention plans in states, schools and health systems, including crisis intervention services, training programs, and implementation of programs for leaders and others to identify and support those at risk, and anti-bullying and social emotional learning and supports in schools.

Focusing on the Impact on Children and the Need for a Multi-Generational Approach to Resilience.

The opioid crisis demonstrates the intergenerational impacts of behavioral health issues and the urgent need to address these effects on children. Solutions must focus on providing support not only for the person with a substance use disorder but also for the children, parents and families who are affected. The epidemic is creating a generation of children who are traumatized by the loss of a parent, or who are orphaned or children's homes. Treatment must an existing of opioid and other addiction substance misuse rules for prescription opioids, heroin and fentanyl mixed with other illicit drugs, and synthetic stimulants, such as methamphetamine. The misuse of alcohol and the hard-to-treat disorder and suicide. Systems, treatments must be adapted to support family needs. Some providing support for prevention and treatment to programs that match to home parenting skills and strategies for strengthen and keep families together when possible.

Putting Prevention First.

A multi-generational system must include a coordinated, effective system for supporting children and families. Experts have identified a broad array of effective policies and programs that reduce substance misuse, suicide and promote resilience and well being. Prevention approaches include programs that strengthen and support secure families, formal and informal connections, and social and economic supports for families.

New models and infrastructure are needed that support better alignment, coordination and management of services and programs for families and communities. Institutions, behavioral health services and other social services. There also needs to be a focus on workforce development to ensure there are the necessary numbers of clinicians and improve training. It will be critical to address barriers to care and ways that effectively use the expertise and resources of local institutions and businesses and community-based organizations. Families need to support mental wellness and behavioral management.

Focus on Early Childhood.

Investing in early childhood policies and programs will have the biggest impact for long-term behavioral health and well being. Research shows that, by providing nurturing, stable caretakers and relationships good nutrition and physical activity, positive childrearing experiences, a safe home, neighborhood and environment, and high quality preschools. Early intervention is important because it can prevent, mitigate or "remediate" of risk, "including the multi-generational impact of adverse childhood experiences, such as trauma and abuse, and ensure that children are on a trajectory available to children and families, and ensure healthy development and avoid future behavior necessary cues. Some impactful early childhood programs and services include home visitation programs, quality childcare, early education and support, high quality child care and early education programs that support the transition from early childhood programs to elementary school. It is also important to provide support to families to improve their stability and resilience, including financial, food, housing and transportation assistance and quality healthcare.

Robust School Community Efforts to Support Trauma and Teens.

Research is significant evidence on the effectiveness of approaches for addressing well-being during the teens and teen years, where many young people face significant challenges and pressures. Schools are a key venue for addressing well being and common because school and clinic for substance misuse as a strategy. Yet many effective programs have been been widely implemented. A real commitment must be made to ensure that every school community has the resources to deal with children and adult, meeting and years of inefficiency or a non-existent of school efforts. Some key strategies include: school community connected efforts, social-emotional learning and skills-group skills, positive and supportive school environments, and bullying efforts. Training for educators and other "gatekeepers" to identify and refer students who are at risk for behavioral health issues, including suicide is a critical component and health and education services, and community connections to appropriate services as needed.

Increasing Access to Expert Advice and Support: Establishing Expert Networks.

Communities struggling with opioid and related epidemics must be able to access experts to better inform their decisions about the most effective, evidence-based and research-informed approaches. Many of the best ideas for effective prevention, treatment and recovery support to ensure that their efforts are well implemented and achieve results. Currently, federal agencies and philanthropies offer some resources. However, most small communities do not have time to spend on expert assistance and support. Creating more level support and advisory centers and networks of expertise would be a significant and cost-effective investment. Federal government experts have been most effective in improving mental and health. Successful models for developing this type of network include Communities That Care and DFW Cares.

Achieving Parity and Integration: Improving and Expanding Behavioral Health Services and Supports for Well-Healthcare to Support "Whole Health" of Individuals and Families.

Substance use disorders and mental health are policies shifted to recognize the need to integrate and treatment to social and physical health. Treatment offer contribute to achieve success in behavioral health or parity with the level of treatment for physical health problems. The prevention of legacy systems, views and approaches, lessons makes achieving parity and integration a challenge. Mental health and substance use disorder treatment, and physical health care, are reimbursed at different rates, effort is needed to expand availability of and access to behavioral health services and coverage, reform payment models and improve service delivery systems and workforce development to ensure the workforce is prepared to provide quality healthcare. It is particularly important to develop the systems for improving care delivery and quality in communities, both rural and urban, where options for behavioral healthcare are limited. Improving the workforce and increasing the availability of quality of services also means supporting new models for delivery, such as telehealth and other approaches to care, and ensuring that there are adequate numbers and greater use of community health workers and peer counselors/support models where appropriate.

Early Identification of Issues and Connection to Supports and Services.

Supporting "whole health" requires supporting systems that identify problems early and connect people to services and supports. Such approaches include screening, management and connection to social services supports that can have a significant impact on health. Several effective tools identify children and families at risk, as well as those who need mental health and alcohol and drug treatment services, mental health, substance use, Medicaid-like Accountable Health Communities and Harms Friendly Screening help support systems for identification, referral, connection to care and follow-up.

Conclusion

The United States is in a state of pain, despair and disconnection. It has been in this state for a long time, and it is getting worse. Drug, alcohol and suicide deaths have increased by more than 1 million in the past 20 years. This report provides evidence and research-informed policies and programs that can help Americans thrive, with prime results for improving mental and physical health and school and career achievement.

Strong, concerted and immediate action is needed to counter rising opioid, alcohol and suicide deaths and to address the underlying issues, such as pain, despair, hopelessness, financial insecurity and other factors contributing to these trends.

This report urges leaders across all sectors, regions and states to come together to develop a National Resilience Strategy, a thoughtful and inclusive framework for systemic change that measurably improves outcomes tied to well-being and health for all people, and especially those at high risk. Such a strategy should prioritize investing in prevention and early identification of problems, promoting healthy behaviors and providing support, treatment and services to those who need them. Focusing on promoting guidelines and providing support can help Americans thrive, with prime results for improving mental and physical health and school and career achievement.

To assist in this effort, a broad range of evidence-based and promising policies and programs are reviewed in this report. Many of these are "tried and true" approaches. These include ways to focus on preventing problems in the first place as well as modernizing and expanding the behavioral health system to focus more broadly on "whole health" and provide services and supports more effectively and to build resilience across communities.

Additional Resources

Pain in the Nation [.pdf]
[.docx]

2019 Pain in the Nation Report
[.pdf]

Pain in the Nation Factsheet
[.docx]

Education-specific Cover Sheet
[.docx]

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