

How COVID has worsened the opioid epidemic

March 26 2021, by Marissa D. King



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There is another epidemic we cannot lose sight of: the opioid epidemic, which has become only more acute in the United States and elsewhere amidst the disruptions and stress caused by COVID-19. We asked Yale

SOM's Marissa King, who researches opioid use and prescription abuse as well as the functions of social networks, how we should be thinking about these dual healthcare crises.

Q/A: Marissa D. King, professor of organizational behavior

How has the pandemic changed the trajectory of the opioid epidemic?

The pandemic has catalyzed a set of secondary social crises, including an exacerbation of the [opioid epidemic](#). During COVID, more people have died from opioid overdoses than ever before. Overdose deaths from opioids [increased by almost 20% during the early months of the pandemic](#), a trend that has likely continued.

What do we know about the factors affecting opioid use and deaths during COVID?

The pandemic has been a nightmare scenario for people struggling with or at risk for substance abuse disorders. Social isolation, stress, and unemployment—all known risk factors for use and relapse—have been rampant. Meetings of social support groups have been interrupted; many people haven't made the transition to online meetings. Access to medication-assisted treatment became more difficult. The disruption of the opioid supply chain has made illegally manufactured fentanyl, which is particularly deadly, more common. From pretty much every angle, the pandemic has increased risk of opioid overdose.

What should we be doing differently?

As a society, we need to realize that the aftershocks of the pandemic are likely to persist long after people are vaccinated. The record number of [opioid overdoses](#) in the past year is just one indicator of a huge mental health crisis we are going to need to address.

In the short term, making naloxone available and access to treatment easier can help with the opioid crisis. Check in on people you care about—whether they are at risk or not.

In the longer term, we need to strengthen social support networks and make it easier for people who are suffering from the secondary effects of the pandemic to get help.

Provided by Yale University

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