

Pandemic-consumed US relapses in drug addiction

March 2 2021



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Beverly Veres' two sons are addicted to heroin but can't get the help they need, with US health services consumed by the coronavirus pandemic at a time when overdoses are surging.

"Drugs have just come into this area, and are taking over," says Veres at

her Pennsylvania home. "(But) they're not focusing on anything else but COVID," she adds of the authorities.

Veres, her husband Steve, and their sons Douglas, 24, and Charles, 29, live in a small house in Houtzdale, a town in rural Clearfield County far from the cities of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

Coronavirus has officially killed 114 people in this isolated, forested area, where the epidemic is much less visible than in nearby towns.

Beverly and Steve say they have only had one contact with someone who had the virus, compared to "a dozen interactions" with people with drug problems.

After seeing their sons descend into heroin abuse last summer, the couple is convinced that the [pandemic](#) has exacerbated the drug problem in their area.

Figures for [overdose deaths](#) are not complete for 2020 but the 19 already recorded in the county is higher than in 2018 or 2019.

The upward trend is true across the United States.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that the number of deaths from overdoses—mainly because of opiate drugs that have flooded the United States in recent years—increased by almost 25 percent between July 2019 and July 2020.

'Downward slide'

Beverly says her younger son Douglas had a long history of drug addiction but was "able to function."

He switched to methamphetamines and then last July heroin, resulting in "a downward slide."

Incarcerated in early 2020 for driving under the influence of drugs, Douglas did not receive any addiction treatment in prison because of COVID, says Beverly.

A drug rehabilitation program that he attempted after his release failed to work in part because family visits and therapy sessions were cut due to the pandemic, she said.

"I think if we would have gotten to see him and we would have been able to have some type of family counseling with him, (then) we could have helped him along the way," added the 49-year-old auditor.

A few miles (kilometers) away in the community of Olanta, Savannah Johnson—a 26-year-old former drug addict—explains that she risked relapse at the start of the pandemic.

In early 2020, after a year of treatment and unable to resume her nursing profession, Johnson took a small job in a pizzeria. She lost it with the pandemic.

Suddenly Johnson was isolated at home with no job and unable to hang out with recovering friends.

"Those [little things](#), even though they might seem little to somebody else, to a recovering addict are huge," she told AFP.

Isolated, she began to reminisce about her time on drugs.

"You start thinking, 'I wasn't so depressed. I didn't feel so anxious. I was more sociable.' Once you think about that for so long it really does cause

you to want to go use now," Johnson said.

She suffered six overdoses in 2019 and survived thanks to the Narcan opioid antidote.

Johnson has been clean for 13 months now and credits her recovery to her parents, who she now lives with and who have custody of her two young children.

'Overwhelmed'

The house has become "quite chaotic," said Savannah's mother Bobbie Johnson, who has absolutely no regrets.

"Her being here and seeing her growth and seeing her rebuild that relationship with her kids, it's priceless, best thing ever," Bobbie said.

Bobbie is well aware of the increased difficulties of drug addicts during the pandemic due to her role as local leader of "Parents of Addicted Loved Ones," of which Beverly and Steve Veres are also members.

Kim Humphrey, the association's CEO, says the pandemic has caused a "complete explosion" of [drug](#) addiction in the United States.

"You can't get a job... you can't go anywhere, you can't do this, you can't do that. So you can see how the mind of somebody that's in this would go, 'Well, you know, I'll just use something to take away the pain,'" said Humphrey.

The opioid crisis has caused about half a million deaths in the United States since 1999, including 50,000 in 2019 alone.

But before the pandemic, it appeared to be stabilizing.

"We were starting to make some progress but some of that is being lost," said Marcus Plescia, chief medical officer at the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials.

"The pandemic has become all consuming. Everybody's just kind of overwhelmed," he told AFP.

The pandemic, though, has highlighted some of the "difficult social situations" and "real disparities," which may help the drugs fight in the long run, Plescia added.

"One of the positives maybe that we now have a society that is perhaps better able to begin to address those issues," he said.

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Citation: Pandemic-consumed US relapses in drug addiction (2021, March 2) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-03-pandemic-consumed-relapses-drug-addiction.html>

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