



Substance Use: Destroying Families, Communities, and the Opportunity for Prosperity (3/2/2022)

Substance abuse and addiction continue to ravage our nation at epidemic levels. In the last two years, since COVID-19 was first identified, more Americans have struggled with mental health issues due to isolation, jobs loss, and the lack of community connections. These identified causes have led to increases in substance use and addiction, sadly culminating in record numbers of “deaths of despair”. Meanwhile, a second, more perilous challenge has emerged and is now the leading cause of death among 18–49-year-olds—overdoses from fentanyl and fentanyl-related substances. These individuals are more likely to be recreational substance users, without the warning signs of mental health or addiction, unaware that a pill at party could be laced with a highly potent and extremely lethal substance. Their deaths represent unrealized investments in education and opportunities for economic prosperity.



According to the American Psychological Association, during COVID-19 there has been an increase in demand for mental health services and rising use misuse of substances (from alcohol to opioids and other stimulants). Public health precautions limited access to treatment centers for both mental health and substance use addiction, prolonging their damaging effects. Community lockdowns left fewer treatment workers available to treat overdoses with Narcan or Naloxone, leading to more preventable deaths.

At the same time, overdose deaths accelerated as the quantity of fentanyl within the country increased. For the first time ever, more than 100,000 people died from drug overdoses in a 12-month period from May 2020-April 2021. Fentanyl accounted for nearly two-thirds of overdoses in the same time period. Much of this is due to a rise in the synthetic opioid fentanyl that can kill with as little as 2mg. As much as 15,000 pounds of fentanyl was seized in 2021, enough deadly doses for more than 3 billion people.

Possible Policy Solutions

During the hearing, experts offered the following potential recommendations for the Select Committee to consider:

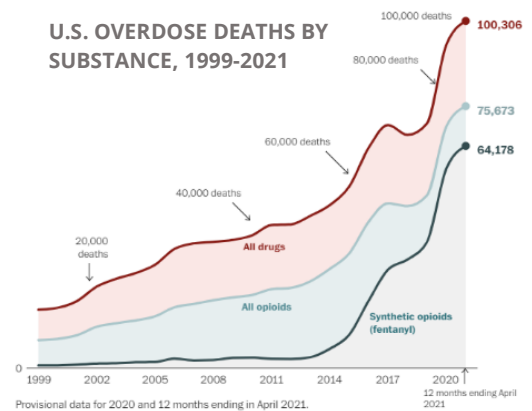
Addressing Ongoing Substance Abuse and Addiction

- Recognize the mental health connection and the desire to self-soothe with substances when mental health support is too costly or inaccessible.
- Address mental health needs upfront before it escalates to a substance abuse situation.

- Accept that substance use addiction treatment works and recognize there are millions in our country living in recovery. For these individuals, it is still a daily fight and relapses are going to happen. Community supports and employment can aid in ongoing recovery.
- Address the “deaths of despair” caused by COVID of isolation, lack of work, and sense of purpose.
- Encourage communities, states, and federal agencies to invest funds in effective evidence-based prevention services.
- Make lists of proven evidence-based prevention services more accessible and widely known-about to better inform policy decisions about what programs to implement.
- Leverage existing federal dollars through the child welfare system to fund effective prevention interventions.
- Expand the use of drug courts as an alternative to incarceration.

Addressing Record Fentanyl and Fentanyl-Related Deaths

- Understand that addressing fentanyl overdoses, while it may overlap with those struggling with addiction, is fundamentally a different challenge needing different solutions.
- Limit the flow of lethal fentanyl and fentanyl analogues into domestic communities from external sources.
- Make the permanent the classification of all fentanyl-like drugs as Schedule 1 controlled substances.
- Undertake an evidence-based public service campaign to educate teens, young adults, and parents about how lethal fentanyl is on first use and how it can be laced into practically anything. The goal should be to change behavior in the moment that a teen or young adult is offered a pill of an unknown source.



Data Source: Dan Keating & Lenny Bernstein. “100,000 Americans died of drug overdoses in 12 months during the pandemic.” *Washington Post*, 11/17/2021

Expert Hearing Panelists

The following experts provided the possible policy recommendations listed above:



- **Dr. Katherine Pannel**, Psychiatrist and Chair of the Mississippi State Medical Assn. Board of Trustees
- **Mr. Michael Gray**, Parent of a daughter who died from a fentanyl overdose and Chairman of the Fentanyl Awareness Coalition
- **Dr. Jevay Grooms**, Assistant Professor, Economics, Howard University; Visiting Professor, Economics, University of Southern California
- **Dr. Willie Prado**, PhD in Public Health and President of the Society for Prevention Research; Lead researcher behind Familias Unidos
- **Dr. Matthew Christiansen**, Director, Office of Drug Control Policy, West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources