Drug overdoses an unintended consequence of COVID stimulus payments, experts say

County officials in Virginia, Tennessee, Ohio, Minnesota and other states have reported spikes in fatal and non-fatal overdoses

By Audrey Conklin | Fox News

Substance abuse has surged across the U.S. as a result of coronavirus-induced isolation, but there is also a correlation between stimulus payments and overdoses, experts say.

County officials in Virginia, Tennessee, Ohio, Minnesota and other states have reported recent spikes in fatal and non-fatal overdoses, as well as emergency room visits. The third round of stimulus payments was approved March 17.

"We definitely believe that there's a correlation between the recent stimulus checks that were sent out and the overdoses we're seeing right now," Lauren Cummings, executive director of the Northern Shenandoah Valley Substance Abuse Coalition, told Fox News. "We saw an increase in overdoses after the first round of stimulus payouts. We annually see an increase in overdoses following tax returns."

The Northwest Virginia Regional Drug and Gang Task Force on March 23 reported three fatal overdoses and 13 non-fatal overdoses in the prior week.
Please share: Individuals living with addiction are encouraged to seek help as spike in overdoses is reported

As an overdose spike is being reported in the region, the Northern Shenandoah Valley Substance Abuse Coalition is encouraging individuals who are living with addiction to reach out for help, before it’s too late. Since March 16th there have been three fatal overdoses reported and an additional 13 non-fatal overdoses reported in the region, bringing the total number...

someone right now

Reach out to a sponsor, trusted friend, family member, or mental health professional for support.

Call the Peer2Peer Regional Warm Line where local certified peer recovery specialists are on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week: 1-833-262-1490

Attend a virtual support group meeting. You can join online 12 step meetings for Narcotics Anonymous (narcotics.com), Alcoholics Anonymous (aa.org), or SMAI Recovery (smaircovery.org). Many of the 12 step programs also offer phone or support groups.

The Within Reach Peer Resource Center is offering peer-led virtual support group meetings six days a week. Please see the attached flyer for meeting times. Download the "Connect2" app on your smartphone which was launched by the Addiction Policy Forum.

Yourself to save a life

Attend a REVIVE! training and receive free NARCAN. The Northwestern Peer Collaborative is hosting a virtual training on Friday, March 20th from 12:30 - 1:30. To register visit: https://zoom.us/meeting/register/tJDFcpeKQjAtbNH1Ofed98vTv7Qjz7vJ6dA. Register free NARCAN from any of the Lord Fairfax Health District offices. For the office beforehand to schedule a pickup time. A list of the district offices and their contact information can be found here: http://www.valh.org/county-lord-fairfax/offices/

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The stimulus payments, on top of isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, have been a "deadly combination," according to Cummings.

"It's kind of an irony," Gerry Schmidt, chief operating officer at Valley HealthCare System in West Virginia, which serves as a substance abuse counseling center, told Fox News. "I mean, a stimulus check you shouldn't put in the bank, if you think about it. Stimulus checks are supposed to help the economy and help people move forward through a tough time."

Boy, 2, Dies After Eating Fentanyl, Mom Bought With Stimulus Check, Cops Say

The northern Virginia region saw 53 fatal overdoses in 2020 and 202 non-fatal overdoses – a record for the area, despite being one of the few regions in the U.S. that saw a decrease in overdoses between 2017 and 2018.

"We always say that addiction is a disease of isolation, and the opposite of that is connection. Unfortunately, with support group meetings being moved to virtual platforms, people were just not feeling a connection and were forced into isolation, which led many to relapse," Schmidt said.
It’s not just Northern Virginia. Cummings’ coalition is part of the Drug Enforcement Administration’s (DEA’s) Washington-Baltimore High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) program.

Firefighters and paramedics with Anne Arundel County Fire Department wear enhanced PPE, during the coronavirus pandemic, as they treat a patient in cardiac arrest as a result of a drug overdose. (Photo by ALEX EDELMAN/AFP via Getty Images)

“I reached out to the director there as well as some of my other local contacts in the area after we saw the increase this week, and across the board, everybody is seeing the same thing and attributing it to the stimulus checks,” Cummings said.

Emergency room visits for alcohol withdrawals are increasing, too.

Schmidt similarly said the combination of COVID-19 isolation, remote support groups, stimulus payments and increased availability of fentanyl has created an unusual set of circumstances causing an uptick in overdoses.

**INDIANAPOLIS MAN WHO KILLED 4 OVER STIMULUS MONEY ADMITTED TO SLAYINGS IN CHILLING DETAIL: POLICE**

After 50 years of helping people suffering from drug abuse, it’s becoming more and more common for drugs to be laced with unknown substances, which puts people at a greater risk of overdosing, Schmidt added.

Both Schmidt and Cummings called the circumstances “a perfect storm” for increased drug abuse.

“You’ve got an influx of cash and a decrease in the street cost of heroin, an increase in the availability of fentanyl, and so, all of those things coming together just creates a melting pot of possibility,” Schmidt said.
West Virginia has seen a "huge increase" in depression and anxiety, and he doesn't think people's fears will disperse easily, even as COVID-19 cases decrease. People who have been vaccinated "are still afraid to go out," he said.

COVID-19 "has been too politicized, and it's grown along the political lines rather than the medical lines," he said. The politicization, on top of the personal losses associated with COVID-19, whether that be the loss of family and friends or jobs and income, has created a large amount of suffering.

**DEA CHEMIST ON FENTYNAL GETTING INTO THE US: "WHERE DOES IT END?"**

Schmidt added that West Virginia "made a mistake" in paying people "to stay home" rather than only encouraging people with COVID-19 to stay home because of how the state "dealt with unemployment."

"People have turned to alcohol and/or drugs during this time because – well, one, they're either fearful and looking for relief; boredom; social isolation – all those things do factor in," he said.

There are steps people suffering from addiction can take to prevent misuse of their stimulus checks, according to both experts.
In this Monday, March 30, 2020, photo, a line of around fifty people extends from the door of Arkansas Workforce Center in Fayetteville, Ark. (JT Wampler/The Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette via AP)

“We hope that folks can recognize that this money is a trigger for them,” Cummings said, “and if they do recognize that, we recommend that they either have a family member hold the funding for them or put it into an account that they don’t have [direct] access to right away.”

People should put their money toward useful purchases or investments, such as cars, or consider giving it to people who could use financial support, Schmidt said.

He added that despite support groups going virtual and fears of gathering in person, Valley HealthCare Systems has seen an increase in people seeking help for substance addiction.

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“They’re up against some tough odds right now,” Schmidt said of people with substance addiction. “But...we have not seen a decrease in the request for or the demand for services throughout this whole last year. If anything, we’ve seen an increase.”

While an increase in requests for help does not necessarily point to a positive trend, he explained that people “aren’t afraid” to seek help, which is a positive development he’s seen throughout the past year.

“In general, people feel like they’ve been given permission to seek help,” he added.