

Substance abuse rose in the pandemic. That may explain our slow to return to work, study shows

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The U.S. workforce has yet to bounce back to pre-pandemic levels, and researchers are shedding light on one factor that may be contributing to

the labor shortage in the U.S.: substance abuse.

A rise in [drug](#) abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic could account for between 9% to 26% of the decline in [labor force participation](#) among people aged 25 to 54 between February 2020 and June 2021, according to a new working paper released by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

"It's a bit of a puzzle right now why labor force participation rates are not recovered to pre-pandemic levels," said Karen Kopecky, co-author of the paper and an economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. "This is one potential reason why. It's definitely not the only reason."

The U.S. labor force participation rate fell sharply after the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 forced shutdowns globally, and many have not rejoined the labor market. Fed officials have cited several reasons for the slow workforce recovery, including shifts in retirement and issues with child and elder care.

The participation rate among 25 to 54 year-olds has increased in recent months, but up to half of those who are still out of the workforce could be due to substance abuse, Kopecky said.

"Once started, drug and [alcohol abuse](#) is difficult to stop for many people," the paper's authors wrote. Therefore, "an increase in substance abuse during the pandemic would mean lower labor-force participation rates even after the pandemic has ended."

By the numbers

Data on the number of people who turned to drugs during the pandemic is not yet available. So to arrive to their conclusions, the researchers used data on deaths attributed to drugs to estimate the increase in substance

abusers and calculate the impact on labor force participation.

They found 25,356 more deaths due to certain drugs between April 2020 and June 2021:

- Opioids: 14,820
- Methamphetamine: 2,702
- Alcohol: 7,835

"Deaths due to substance abuse were elevated during the pandemic," Kopecky said. "This suggests that substance [abuse](#) was elevated."

The study estimated the number of substance abusers increased by more than 5 million in that time period:

- Opioids: 1.9 million
- Methamphetamine: 813,000
- Alcohol: 2.4 million

Substance abuse during the pandemic

Even before the coronavirus arrived, the U.S. found itself in the midst of a drug overdose epidemic.

More than 932,000 people died of drug overdoses in the country from 1999 through 2020, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 2020, the first year of the pandemic, deaths due to overdoses skyrocketed, reaching nearly 92,000.

Pandemic-related factors like isolation and economic stress may have contributed to a rise in [substance abuse](#), addiction experts said.

The disruption in people's routines, including the shift to remote work, factored in new or increased [drug abuse](#) during the pandemic, said Craig James, co-founder of Insight Into Action Therapy and Insight Recovery Centers, based in Virginia.

"For those who had the option to telework, the access alcohol was right there," James said. "Instead of waiting till six o'clock in the afternoon, people are drinking at 11 or 12 in the day. They've gotten the work done and so what was an afternoon affair or action became a daytime process."

James noted that treatments were interrupted early in the pandemic. Though many restrictions around telehealth were lifted, James said, many patients benefit more from in-person interactions.

"Sitting physically in the room was always ideal for many clients, particularly those who are not, I would, say stable," James said.

"It was that human connection that people were missing," he said.

The loss of support systems after the economy shutdown and social distance measures were put into place also contributed to increased [drug use](#), said Dr. Stephen Loyd, chief medical officer at Cedar Recovery, an addiction treatment center in Tennessee.

"When you're sitting with that loneliness, what do you do to change the way you feel?" Loyd said.

Because of COVID-19's impact on the drug supply chain, Loyd saw an influx of new patients who sought out treatment.

"We had people coming in that started to get into recovery because their supply of heroin and painkillers had been disrupted from the [pandemic](#),"

Loyd said.

Loyd said it's encouraging to see patients go back to treatment as restrictions have eased and the economy recovers, but lamented the lives lost in the epidemic.

"We're not going to get those folks back."

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