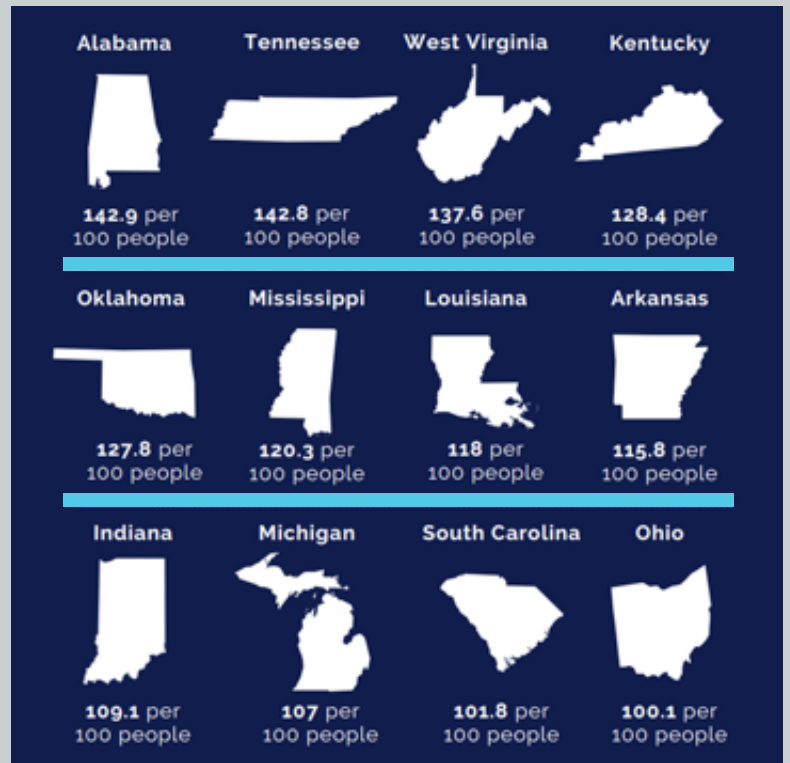


UNDERSTANDING THE OPIOID

CRISIS

BY KATHERINE MILLER

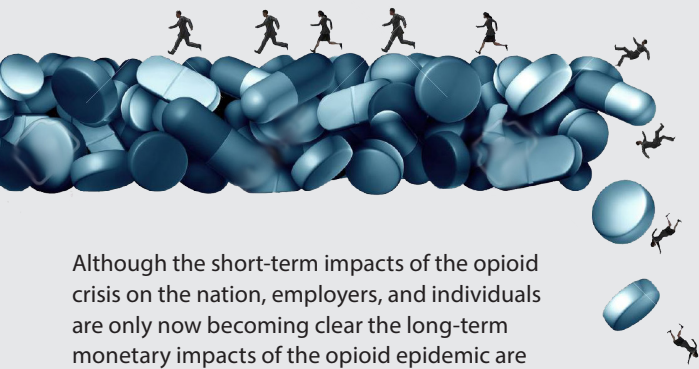
12 states in 2012 had more opioid prescriptions than people. www.ncsc.org/trends



Although today's news primarily covers the ongoing effort to legalize marijuana, the opioid epidemic is still raging on, impacting individuals, workplaces, and families across the United States. Every day, more than 130 Americans die due to an opioid overdose.¹ Although this number has fallen recently due to increased awareness and efforts on behalf of legislators and the healthcare industry, the fact remains that we are still in crisis. In fact, the CDC blamed the increase in drug overdose deaths along with a continuing increase in suicides, for a drop in life expectancy in 2017.² As of July 2012, 12 states had more opioid prescriptions than people.

Every day, more than 130 Americans die due to an opioid overdose.

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Although the short-term impacts of the opioid crisis on the nation, employers, and individuals are only now becoming clear the long-term monetary impacts of the opioid epidemic are still unknown. What we do know, however, is that already opioids are costing the nation billions of dollars, and that number will likely only increase as the epidemic continues. States, companies, and legislators are banding together in an attempt to stop opioid companies in their tracks and win billions of dollars that can be used to combat the impacts of the epidemic. In 2018, a massive federal court case made up of over 600 individually-logged government entities lawsuits against opioid companies was announced in Ohio.³ Since 2018 still more lawsuits have been rolled into the federal suit. Including the large federal suit in Ohio, to date over 300 opioid-related cases have been filed in at least 45 states across the country.⁴

Why are these lawsuits important? Due to the huge economic burden of the opioid crisis, the money that will be won or lost in these suits will determine how employers, workplaces, and individuals are able to act in the future in order to mitigate the financial costs and impacts of the crisis.

Impacts and Costs to the Nation

As of 2016, the total “economic burden” of prescription opioid misuse in the U.S. was estimated to top \$78.5 billion each year.⁵ Although this estimate includes the costs of healthcare, lost productivity, addiction treatment, and criminal justice, it does not include the costs of non-prescription opioid abuse, which would undoubtedly bring the estimate much higher. The total economic cost of the opioid crisis was estimated to be \$504 billion as of 2015, which was much higher than all previous estimates.⁶

In addition to the economic costs of the crisis are the personal and emotional cost to the people of the nation. In 2017, approximately 1.7 million people in the U.S. suffered from substance use disorders that were related to prescription opioids.⁷ The opioid epidemic leads to more than just increased opioid-related substance abuse issues—it is known that opioid abuse and addiction can lead to the abuse of other drugs, such as heroin, cocaine, and other stimulants. Fentanyl, a highly

potent, cheap synthetic opioid that has been becoming more prevalent across the country, is also leaking its way in to other drugs across the country. A recent report showed that fentanyl and other opioids were involved in nearly 3/4 of all cocaine overdose deaths in the country and are becoming involved in overdoses with other drugs as well.⁸

Impacts and Costs to Employers

Regardless of size, employers across the country have been and will continue to experience the fiscal and workplace impacts of the opioid crisis. Some of the costs to employers are easy to calculate and measure, while others will only be revealed as time goes on.

As of 2017, more than 70% of American employers reported experiencing some impact of prescription drug use.⁹ Among the most commonly reported impacts of prescription drug use in the workplace were absenteeism, missed work, and the use of pain relievers while in the workplace.

INCIDENTS EXPERIENCED DUE TO PRESCRIPTION DRUG USAGE

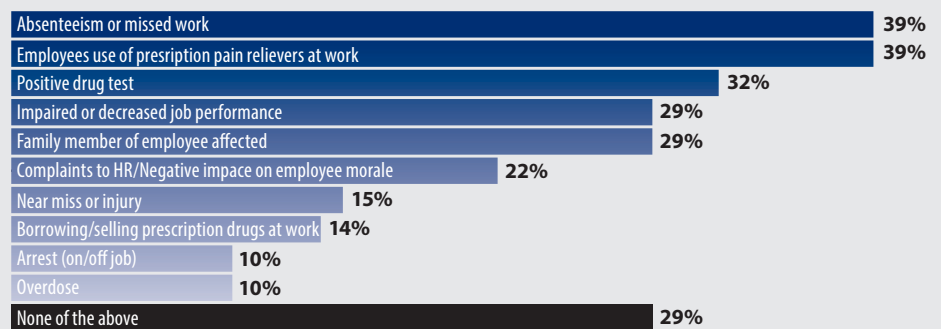


Figure 2 Hersman, Deborah A.P. How the Prescription Drug Crisis is Impacting American Employers. National Safety Council, 2017.

Not only are employers dealing with misused and/or abused prescribed opioids, but they are also dealing with the impacts of illegal opioid use. The costs associated with employee opioid use and abuse add up quickly for employers, regardless of workplace size.

- Substance abusers miss nearly 50% more days than their peers, totaling up to six weeks annually.¹⁰
- The average per capital cost to employers for each worker with an untreated substance use disorder is \$6,643.¹¹
- Additionally, each untreated disorder adds an additional \$1,267 per person to the annual cost of health care coverage for employers.¹²

Many of the costs to employers associated with opioid use and abuse are not easily quantifiable—for example, the average employee without a substance use disorder misses 10.5 days total per year. An individual with an alcohol use disorder misses an average of 14.8 days per year, while an individual with a pain medication use disorder misses an average of 29 days per year, the highest of any substance use disorder.¹³ Of all the types of substance use disorders, opioid or prescription pain medication disorders are generally the most costly to employers across the board.



An individual with a pain medication use disorder misses an average of 29 days per year

Nationwide, the estimated annual cost of substance abusing employees to U.S. businesses is north of \$400 billion, a large portion of which includes the costs due to opioid use and abuse.¹⁴

Impacts and Costs to Individuals

Undoubtedly, almost every American has been touched in some way by the opioid epidemic, rather from individual use, a family member's use, or an acquaintance's or coworker's use. In 2017, approximately 70,237 Americans overdosed, 67.8% of which were due to opioid use or abuse.¹⁵

The estimated annual cost of the opioid epidemic is \$78.5 billion, over 14% of which is funded by public health insurance programs and almost 25% of which is shouldered by state and local government entities.¹⁶ The remaining cost left uncovered by public programs and government entities is \$57.8 billion, a large portion of which is undoubtedly covered by individuals across the U.S. Divided equally amongst the U.S. population, each resident is stuck footing a bill of \$176.58 annually.

For some residents, costs due to the opioid epidemic will be more. For those with family members that overdose on opioids, the average cost of a funeral is between \$7,000–\$9,000.¹⁷ Additionally, individuals may be burdened paying the cost of a substance abuse counseling or treatment program, the costs of the drugs themselves, and more.

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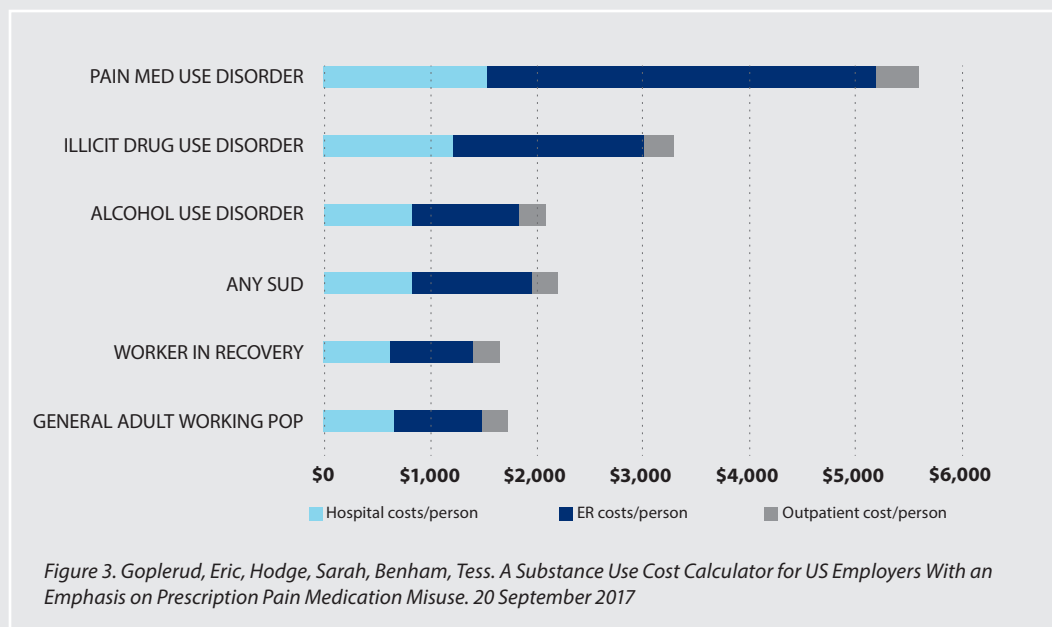


Figure 3. Goplerud, Eric, Hodge, Sarah, Benham, Tess. A Substance Use Cost Calculator for US Employers With an Emphasis on Prescription Pain Medication Misuse. 20 September 2017

Costs Continue Rising

As the opioid epidemic continues, costs will continue rising across the board. Already, legislators are mobilizing across the country with the hope that legislation will help to staunch the flow of money the epidemic is costing the country. For employers, some legislation has been passed that allows economic boons for employers in states hit particularly hard by the opioid crisis. However, it is largely up to individual employers to determine how they will combat the opioid crisis in their workplaces.

Without a doubt, a workplace drug testing program is one of the best deterrents for opioid-abusing employees. Employees and applicants

that know that a drug testing program is in place are less likely to abuse drugs. Additionally, training for supervisors and employees as to the impacts of opioid use, signs and symptoms of abuse, and reasonable suspicion testing is essential.

As the opioid epidemic continues, associated costs will continue rising, and someone will be stuck footing the bill. Each and every person in the U.S. has been impacted in some way because of the opioid crisis, whether they know it or not.

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