

Opioid-Related News and the Courts

Weekly Review

June 18, 2021



National

[Overdose Deaths Rose During the War On Drugs, But Efforts to Reduce Them Face Backlash](#)

NPR

Some forms of harm reduction are more accepted now in the United States. For example, many communities distribute naloxone among people who use drugs. The medication can reverse overdoses caused by fentanyl and other opioids.

But public health experts say much of the harm reduction happening in the U.S. occurs underground, with services—including clean needles—provided illegally by churches, nonprofits, and activist groups.

Keith Humphreys, an addiction researcher at Stanford University, said it also appears many doctors are quietly keeping patients safe by prescribing opioids to those addicted to pain pills.

“There are plenty of physicians who make the decision that, ‘Well, I wish this person weren’t taking such very high doses, but I know that if I pull them away, they might go out and start using heroin,’” Humphreys said.

National

[Treatment courts in the Cape Fear: Researchers unveil map, New Hanover County rolls out new program](#)

WECT

After nine months of data collection work, the National Drug Court Resource Center unveiled its newest resource: [an interactive map](#).

The group is funded by the Department Of Justice and is housed at University of North Carolina Wilmington and serves as a resource for drug courts, policy makers, and judicial leaders around the country.

Drug courts have been around for decades, as an alternative to jail sentencing, to get people into treatment so they can rejoin society and care for their families.

[The interactive map](#) lays out where recovery courts for drug use, DWIs, and mental health are located, and combines that with data from the Center for Disease Control, the Census, and the FBI about issues like substance use and crime.

“It’s the only place where that data exists together,” said National Drug Court Resource Center program coordinator Savannah Bryson. “It’s something that we’re so proud of. We want to show it off; we want people to use it.”

Researchers say having all the data in one place allows them to see trends, identify vulnerable areas, and see which communities could benefit from additional resources.

National

[NDCRC Launches Updated Interactive Map of Treatment Courts](#)

University of North Carolina Wilmington

For the first time since 2016, court counts across the U.S. and territories have been updated and are available via [NDCRC’s \[National Drug Court Research Center’s\] new interactive map](#). It reflects the number of courts by state and county as of December 2020 and is designed to be utilized by treatment court practitioners, stakeholders, researchers, and others to inform their work.

Visitors can also explore and compare data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, and the Uniform Crime Report. The NDCRC is also in the process of collecting juvenile treatment court numbers with the assistance of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals and the Center for Court Innovation.

National

[New Model Can Help Predict Drug Overdose Deaths in the U.S.](#)

Forbes

The researchers emphasize that during the second and third waves—as the national opioid overdose death rate rose consistently over the past decade, the bulk of deaths have been focused in the Midwest, Appalachia, and New England. But there has also been escalating synthetic opioid overdose death rates out West, likely worsened by “socioeconomic, health care, and drug market disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic,” the authors write. As a result, cities in the West are now showing their vulnerabilities due to such stressors that the pandemic exposed.

With this in mind, it’s vital to understand that all predictive models are limited by the actual data that is entered into the specific algorithm. As a result, it’s critical that information related to deaths, drug markets and seizures, as well as prescription data at both county and state levels be available to enter into the algorithm.

“While our approach can be effective, it also requires that fatal overdose data from all the counties in the U.S. be accessible and available for the current year, which unfortunately is not yet standard practice,” said [senior author Annick Borquez, PhD, Assistant Professor in the Division of Infectious Disease and Global Public Health at UC San Diego School of Medicine]. “Our model will only be useful in predicting and preventing deaths if there is no lag in getting data from local and national agencies.”

“Further model refinement and securing access to restricted data through broad collaborations will be next steps to improve model performance. Imagine if we could develop predictive tools for substance use epidemics, similar to what was developed to predict COVID-19 infections and deaths.”

Maine

[Filling the Gap for Women and Families](#)

Colby Magazine

To fill that void, [Winifred Tate, associate professor of anthropology] founded the [Maine Drug Policy Lab at Colby College](#), which conducts research on drug use, recovery, and policy in Maine, with a particular focus on women and their families.

Established in 2019, the lab produces reports and contributes to the wider discussions on drugs through conferences, community forums, and workshops.

In less than two years, the lab has already made an impact in several key areas. Its most recent [report](#) documented the operation of the [Maine Adult Drug Treatment Courts](#)—an alternative to jail for people experiencing substance use disorder seeking treatment—during the pandemic. Moreover, the lab’s research contributed to bills at the Maine State Legislature. And for students, the lab’s work inspired Tate to develop two new anthropology courses: Illegal Drugs, Law, and the State and Courts, Trials, and the Pursuit of Justice.

Minnesota

[Opioid overdoses spike during COVID-19 pandemic](#)

KEYC

Opioid overdoses have spiked at an alarming rate because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Those on the front lines of the crisis and those who struggle with addiction themselves also say now is the time to act.

“The trends that I am seeing on the street—because I am a recovery advocate—is that we have people overdosing every single day, every single day,” said Kara Richardson, who works for Blue Earth County Drug Court.

New Mexico[Fentanyl Overdoses on the Rise in New Mexico](#)

Associated Press

Little blue pills are becoming more prevalent across New Mexico...while seemingly harmless, they pack a deadly punch.

These blue pills interlope as prescription pills, but they're anything but doctor-approved.

Fentanyl is finding its way into other products, as well. Heroin, cocaine, and even marijuana are being laced with the deadly opioid, the Albuquerque Journal reports.

New York[N.Y. lawmakers pass bill to create opioid settlement fund, protect future payouts](#)

Albany Times-Union

The state Legislature passed a bill this week that will create a dedicated fund for the millions of dollars New York is expected to receive in opioid-related legal settlements. The measure comes weeks after advocates learned an initial payout had been swept into the state's general fund.

The legislation that passed this week would create an advisory board to identify gaps in existing services and recommend to the Legislature where and how to spend the money. In addition to addiction-related programming, eligible expenditures would include treatment programs for those with co-occurring mental illnesses.

North Carolina[OPIOID EPIDEMIC: Steve's Wings seeks to raise awareness of overdoses in Richmond County](#)

Richmond Observer

Since forming Steve's Wings about a year ago, [Melissa] Schoonover said she has connected with family members of other Richmond County residents who have overdosed.

"I know the drugs are never going away," she said, adding that the team has a "long list" of concerns that "need to be addressed."

One is the establishment of a drug court in Richmond County, which would require random drug testing, meetings, and treatment for first-time offenders instead of jail time.

According to a 2008 report from the National Institute of Justice, "researchers in several studies found that drug courts reduced recidivism among program participants in contrast to comparable probationers," as well as lowered costs.

[Melissa] Schoonover said the group also wants to crack down on drug dealers and strengthen the state's death by distribution law.

Tennessee

[Recovery court judge says fentanyl crisis is still prevalent in Nashville](#)

WKRN

The opioid epidemic was center stage for years before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

“It’s been kind of pushed to the back burner, but it’s still there, it’s still rampant, it’s still killing folks every day,” Davidson County Recovery Court Judge Gale Robinson said.

Robinson said 90% of his recovery participants’ drug of choice is opioids, whether in pill form or heroin. But the problem lies in whether that is mixed with fentanyl even at the smallest dose.

“You can’t have quality control over heroin. You might get a shot of heroin that may have one percent fentanyl, you might get a shot that has 20 percent fentanyl, and folks don’t know that they’re taking that,” Robinson said.

Virginia

[Veterans court program graduate ‘is as tough as they come’](#)

13NewsNow

[Spotsylvania County native Rachel] Thornsberry enrolled in a recovery program because she was still on suboxone, a drug used to treat a person’s dependence on opioids. The Rappahannock Veterans Docket won’t allow participants who are still on suboxone, so it took about two years before Thornsberry was eligible for the program.

Since the docket began three years ago, it has developed a reputation as being hard to get into, said Wendy Harris, Spotsylvania's deputy public defender. She worked with Judge Ricardo Rigual, who still rules over the program, and other court and law enforcement officials, as well as the Rappahannock Area Community Services Board, to put the program in place.

Harris said she’s heard public sentiment programs for veterans “coddle” them or give them breaks that others would not receive. She’s said there’s the notion that officials look the other way when rules are violated.