Lower Incomes, Incarceration May Play a Role in Opioid Crisis, Study Reveals

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In order to combat the opioid crisis that is killing nearly 130 Americans every day, researchers have worked to identify the various factors that caused and worsened the epidemic. Addressing these factors can go a long way in reducing the number of lives lost to opioid-related overdose until the problem is finally solved. But unraveling these factors fuelling the opioid epidemic is easier said than done.

As studies are published, more fuelling factors are discovered, and the opioid crisis is further revealed as a complex issue that needs to be addressed in multiple ways.

The main factor causing overdose deaths directly is the surge in the distribution of prescription painkillers. A new study suggests that other overlooked factors might be contributors as well, namely, incarceration and lower incomes.

In counties across the United States, when incarceration rates rise and household incomes fall, drug-related deaths increase. The study, published in the medical journal Lancet Public Health, found that from 1983 to 2014 when there was a large decrease in average household income, there was an associated 12.8 percent

increase in drug-related deaths in the county. The large decrease in average household income means a drop of nearly a third.

Averages increases of 7,018 jail admissions per 100,000 people and 255 prison admissions per 100,000 people were similarly associated with a 1.5 percent and a 2.6 percent increase in the county?s death rate from drug use, respectively, according to the study.

?We know that most incarceration is only very loosely related to the crime rate,? said Lawrence King, a professor of economics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, who was the senior author on the study. ?If we're incarcerating people because we don't like the negative effects of drugs, what this study shows is it's counterproductive.?

King added: ?It's a strong argument for the medicalization of hard drugs as opposed to criminalization, which actually makes a lot of sense, given that the definition that we use of addiction is the continued obsessive-compulsive use of drugs despite negative consequences. So imprisoning people?giving them negative consequences to get them to stop using drugs?is not going to work by the very definition we're using of addiction.?

The new study included data for 2,640 counties in the US between 1983 and 2014. Separate research has previously shown that drug-related deaths across counties between 1980 and 2014 climbed by more than 600 percent overall.

The study analyzed mortality data from the US National Vital Statistics System and Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, as well as household income data from the US Census Bureau, and incarceration data by county from the Vera Institute of Justice. Click the link to see Rome's top rehab placement programs.

The researchers obtained county-level data on retail opioid prescription rates between 2006 and 2014 from the CDC as an additional variable. They found that overdose deaths were significantly associated with incarceration rates.

?I think the most surprising thing was that the prescriptions of the opioids do not seem to be the major cause of the opioid crisis. It's contributing for sure but...once we put in our controls, it had no predictive power,? King said. ?The national dialogue on opioid addiction is all focused on the behavior of the pharmaceutical companies?and I don't think they should be left off the hook?but it's all focused on the supply and no focus on the demand?.

The new study was limited by the fact that it only used prescription data only dated back to 2006. ?They really started to prescribe opioids a lot from '95. So there could have been a big effect earlier on and then that

carried forward. So we can't conclusively say they have no effect, and I don't believe they have no effect.?

More research is needed to determine why these associations exist between incarceration rates, lowered incomes, and drug-related deaths.

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid or alcohol addiction, it is important to seek help. A combination of medical detox and behavioral therapy can go a long way in the fight against drug abuse. But because every individual is affected by addiction differently, a comprehensive program tailored to their specific needs is necessary. Look for a nearby addiction treatment facility today and find out how drug treatment programs work.

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