

The Impact of COVID-19 on People With Substance Use Disorders and People Who Use Drugs

- Many people who use drugs or have substance use disorders have respiratory problems related to current or past substance use. Since COVID-19 attacks the lungs, these people are at high risk.
- Practicing social distancing to prevent getting COVID-19 can make it hard to access essential in-person services. Some addiction treatment has required daily visits to a clinic, although these policies are beginning to be adjusted due to COVID-19.
- Many harm reduction services have been only offered in person, including syringe exchanges. In addition, many recovery supports have been centered on in-person contact. This contact may now be barred by social distancing rules or if allowed, may mean potential exposure to COVID-19. Some harm reduction and recovery services are now being conducted virtually but need more financial and infrastructure support to operate.
- Crises like COVID-19 can worsen individuals' underlying health conditions, including substance use disorders and mental illness.
- Many people with substance use disorders and mental illness also experience homelessness, and are at greater risk of being in crowded environments with limited access to soap and water and other means of protecting themselves from the virus. This includes a large number of young people experiencing homelessness who, due to interpersonal and structural inequity, are disproportionately LGBTQ+ youth and youth of color.
- People are more likely to start or increase their use of substances as a result of COVID-19. Therefore, they will need accessible services that respect all pathways of recovery.
- Although some youth programs and schools are modifying services to reach young people where they are, many services will be inaccessible to youth who rely on them. This increases social isolation and puts young people at greater risk for toxic stress, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and substance use.
- The continued criminalization of substance use and mental illness means more people are crowded into jails or prisons, particularly people of color; these conditions put them at greater risk of the virus.
- Due to continued shame, stigma and discrimination associated with substance use and mental illness, it is already difficult for people to seek help. Once hospitals and health facilities are at capacity because of COVID-19, this could make it even harder to get treatment when needed.