



The Cost of the Opioid Epidemic in Virginia: An Analysis of Workforce Productivity Losses

By: Altarum and the Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Society and Health

The use and abuse of both prescription and non-prescription opioids have increased dramatically in recent years, prompting the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to declare a public health emergency in 2017. The human toll of the opioid epidemic is staggering. Approximately 10.3 million people aged 12 or older in 2018 misused opioids in the past year;¹ and in Virginia, the opioid death rate has more than doubled since 2010, claiming 1,230 lives in 2017 alone.²

To better understand the full impact of the opioid epidemic on the Commonwealth of Virginia, the Virginia Department of Health's Division of Prevention and Health Promotion commissioned the Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Society and Health and Altarum to assess and quantify the economic repercussions of this troubling trend. **Beyond the human cost of the opioid epidemic, the economic costs of just the productivity losses in Virginia due to opioid overdose deaths, use disorders, and incarceration topped \$1.5 billion in 2017.** The bulk of that burden (\$1.1 billion) fell on Virginia's households and employers in the form of lower productivity and wages, lost future earnings, and decreased labor force participation. The remaining burden fell on the federal and state governments, which lost \$340 million and \$80 million, respectively, in foregone tax revenues.

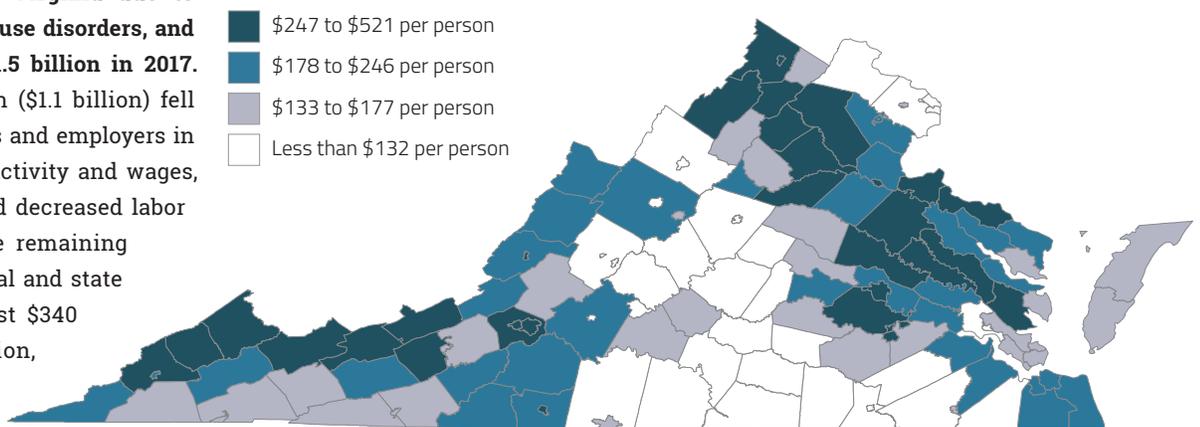
While the economic burden of the opioid epidemic is enormous, it is not felt uniformly across Virginia. Total workforce productivity losses were concentrated in the Commonwealth's most densely-populated areas – including \$142 million in Fairfax County, \$90 million in Chesterfield County, \$85 million in Prince William County, and \$80 million in the city of Virginia Beach. Per-capita losses, however, showed a different geographic pattern, with the highest per-capita losses felt in northern valley, east-central, and southwestern counties (Figure 1). While statewide productivity losses averaged \$185 per-capita, Culpeper County, King George County, Warren County, Hopewell City, and Bland County all saw per-capita productivity losses that topped \$400 (the highest, \$521 per person, was in Culpeper County).

These cost estimates reflect lost workforce productivity alone, and do not include other important direct costs associated with the opioid epidemic, such as criminal justice and incarceration; health care and behavioral health services; public information campaigns; and child, family, and emergency services. This analysis provides a snapshot of the immense costs to Virginia – both human and economic – of the opioid epidemic. Meaningful efforts to address drug addiction and its root causes are needed to not only save lives but also improve the economic vitality of the Commonwealth.

¹ <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018/NSDUHNationalFindings-Report2018.pdf>

² www.vdh.virginia.gov/content/uploads/sites/18/2019/10/Opioids-All.xlsx

Figure 1. Annual per-capita productivity losses, by county, 2017



ABOUT THE CENTER

The Center on Society and Health is an academic research center that studies the connections between social factors and health.

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