

Issue brief: Reports of increases in opioid- and other drug-related overdose and other concerns during COVID pandemic

***Updated April 15, 2021**

In addition to the ongoing challenges presented by the COVID-19 global pandemic, the nation's opioid epidemic has grown into a much more complicated and deadly drug overdose epidemic. The AMA is greatly concerned that nearly every state has reported an outbreak or sustained increase in opioid- and other drug-related mortality—particularly from illicitly manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogs. The media and other reports below cite data from multiple and varied sources, including national, state and local public health agencies, law enforcement, emergency medical services, hospitals, treatment centers, research journals and others.

Nearly every state has reported an outbreak or sustained increase in drug overdose as well as ongoing concerns for those with a mental illness or substance use disorder. A very limited number of reports highlight the challenges faced by patients with pain. This issue brief underscores the need to remove barriers to evidence-based treatment for those with a substance use disorder as well as for harm reduction services, including sterile needle and syringe services, naloxone and other harm reduction measures.

The AMA is pleased that the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) have provided increased flexibility for providing buprenorphine and methadone to patients with opioid use disorder. The AMA is further pleased at increased flexibility provided by the DEA to help patients with pain obtain necessary medications. **The AMA strongly recommends** that all of the flexibilities that have been put in place by DEA during the COVID-19 PHE be kept in place at a minimum until both the COVID-19 and the opioid public health emergencies come to an end.

The AMA urges governors and state legislatures to take action

- Adopt SAMHSA and DEA rules and guidance in-full for the duration of the national emergency—this includes flexibility for evaluation and prescribing requirements using telemedicine;
- Support the removal of prior authorization, step therapy and other administrative barriers for medications used to treat opioid use disorder; meaningful enforcement of mental health and substance use disorder parity laws is long overdue
- Remove existing barriers for patients with pain to obtain necessary medications. This includes removing arbitrary dose, quantity and refill restrictions on controlled substances; and
- Implement and support harm reduction strategies, including removing barriers to sterile needle and syringe services programs as well as strengthening Good Samaritan laws.

For more information, please contact Daniel Blaney-Koen, JD, Senior Legislative Attorney, AMA Advocacy Resource Center, at daniel.blaney-koen@ama-assn.org

National reports

- **The Health 202: Overdose deaths may have topped 90,000 in 2020.**
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/04/07/health-202-overdose-deaths-may-have-topped-90000-2020/> April 7, 2021
- **The Spike in Drug Overdose Deaths During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Policy Options to Move Forward.** <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/blog/2021/spike-drug-overdose-deaths-during-covid-19-pandemic-and-policy-options-move-forward> March 25, 2021.
- **House reshapes approach to mental health and addiction.**
<https://www.rollcall.com/2021/03/16/house-reshapes-approach-to-mental-health-and-addiction/> March 16, 2021
- **In Birth and Death, Opioid Crisis to Leave Mark Long After Covid.**
<https://news.bloomberglaw.com/health-law-and-business/in-birth-and-death-opioid-crisis-to-leave-mark-long-after-covid> February 25, 2021
- **As the pandemic ushered in isolation and financial hardship, overdose deaths reached new heights.** <https://www.statnews.com/2021/02/16/as-pandemic-ushered-in-isolation-financial-hardship-overdose-deaths-reached-new-heights/> February 16, 2021.
- **As Addiction Deaths Surge, Profit-Driven Rehab Industry Faces ‘Severe Ethical Crisis’**
<https://www.npr.org/2021/02/15/963700736/as-addiction-deaths-surge-profit-driven-rehab-industry-faces-severe-ethical-crisis> February 15, 2021
- **As Overdose Deaths Surge, White House Takes Steps To Build Drug Policy Team.**
<https://www.npr.org/sections/president-biden-takes-office/2021/02/03/963732520/as-overdose-deaths-surge-white-house-takes-steps-to-build-drug-policy-team> February 3, 2021
- **81,230 overdoses set record for such deaths in a 12-month period, CDC says.**
https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/81230-overdoses-set-record-for-such-deaths-in-a-12-month-period-cdc-says/2021/01/22/a8b29e7a-5c06-11eb-a976-bad6431e03e2_story.html January 25, 2021
- **Thousands of Northwest residents are unexpectedly dying from causes other than COVID-19.** <https://www.opb.org/article/2020/11/25/covid-19-oregon-washington-idaho-excess-deaths/> December 4, 2020
- **Overdose-Related Cardiac Arrests Observed by Emergency Medical Services During the US COVID-19 Epidemic.**
<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.4218> December 3, 2020
- **“The stakes are life and death”: Addiction treatment’s Covid-19 challenge.**
<https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/21575602/addiction-treatment-covid-19-coronavirus-opioid-epidemic> December 1, 2020
- **Street Fentanyl Surges in Western U.S., Leading To Thousands of Deaths.**
<https://www.nprillinois.org/post/street-fentanyl-surges-western-us-leading-thousands-deaths#stream/0> November 17, 2020
- **Overdose deaths appear to rise amid coronavirus pandemic in U.S.**
<https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/overdose-deaths-appear-rise-amid-coronavirus-pandemic-u-s-n1244024> October 20, 2020
- **The opioid crisis didn’t disappear amid the pandemic. It still calls for urgent action. Editorial.** https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-opioid-crisis-didnt-disappear-amid-the-pandemic-it-still-calls-for-urgent-action/2020/10/16/7df74fd0-0d7f-11eb-b1e8-16b59b92b36d_story.html October 16, 2020
- **Drug overdose deaths on pace for record year during coronavirus pandemic, CDC says.**
<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/coronavirus/article246469555.html> October 15, 2020

- **Opioid Deaths: America's Other Fatal Health Crisis Hasn't Gone Away.**
<https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2020-10-14/opioid-deaths-americas-other-fatal-health-crisis-continues-during-covid-19> October 14, 2020
- **Sharp Rise In Drug Overdose Deaths Seen During 1st Few Months Of Pandemic.**
<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/10/14/923721544/sharp-rise-in-drug-overdose-deaths-seen-during-1st-few-months-of-pandemic> October 14, 2020
- **The Opioid Crisis, Already Serious, Has Intensified During Coronavirus Pandemic.**
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-opioid-crisis-already-serious-has-intensified-during-coronavirus-pandemic-11599557401> September 8, 2020
- **Opioid overdoses on the rise during COVID-19 pandemic, despite telemedicine care.**
<https://abcnews.go.com/Health/opioid-overdoses-rise-covid-19-pandemic-telemedicine-care/story?id=72442735> August 24, 2020
- **U.S. Sees Deadly Drug Overdose Spike During Pandemic.**
<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/08/13/901627189/u-s-sees-deadly-drug-overdose-spike-during-pandemic> August 13, 2020
- **As overdoses rise during pandemic, 2 moms share their stories of loss.**
<https://www.today.com/health/overdoses-rise-during-coronavirus-pandemic-moms-speak-out-t188420> August 5, 2020
- **AMA Urges Changes After Dramatic Increase in Illicit Opioid Fatalities.**
<https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/934548> July 24, 2020
- **Drug overdose deaths jump in 2019 to nearly 71,000, a record high, CDC says.**
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/15/health/drug-overdose-deaths-2019/index.html> July 16, 2020
- **'Opioid overdoses are skyrocketing': as Covid-19 sweeps across US an old epidemic returns.** <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/09/coronavirus-pandemic-us-opioids-crisis> July 9, 2020
- **High Rate of Stimulant Use in Opioid ED Cases.**
<https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/933527> July 7, 2020
- **Coronavirus Crisis Disrupts Treatment For Another Epidemic: Addiction.**
https://khn.org/news/coronavirus-crisis-disrupts-treatment-for-another-epidemic-addiction/?utm_source=National+Conference+of+State+Legislatures&utm_campaign=e7504bd7d3-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_07_07_03_18&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1716623089-e7504bd7d3-377887712 July 6, 2020
- **'Cries for help': Drug overdoses are soaring during the coronavirus pandemic.**
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/07/01/coronavirus-drug-overdose/> July 1, 2020
- **Expanded Telehealth Helps Communities Address Opioid Use Disorder During Pandemic; Practitioners see benefits for patients and providers, especially in rural areas.*** <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2020/07/01/expanded-telehealth-helps-communities-address-opioid-use-disorder-during-pandemic> July 1, 2020
- **Pandemic unleashes a spike in overdose deaths.**
<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2020/06/pandemic-unleashes-a-spike-in-overdose-deaths-1959428?source=email> June 29, 2020
- **Despite the Challenges, We Must Fight Harder to Address the Nation's Opioid Epidemic; Patrice A. Harris, MD.** <https://morningconsult.com/opinions/despite-the-challenges-we-must-fight-harder-to-address-the-nations-opioid-epidemic/> June 17, 2020.
- **A New Addiction Crisis: Treatment Centers Face Financial Collapse.**
<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/06/15/865006675/a-new-addiction-crisis-treatment-centers-face-financial-collapse> June 15, 2020
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- **Drug overdoses climb during COVID-19 pandemic; Officials nationwide report spikes less than a year after the Trump administration touted progress in battling the crisis.** <https://www.rollcall.com/2020/05/27/drug-overdoses-climb-during-covid-19-pandemic/> May 27, 2020
- **The pandemic is triggering opioid relapses across Appalachia.** <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/14/health/opioids-addiction-appalachia-coronavirus-trnd/index.html> May 14, 2020
- **Don't Forget the Other Pandemic Killing Thousands of Americans.** <https://www.thedailybeast.com/opioid-deaths-surge-during-coronavirus-in-americas-overdose-capitals> May 4, 2020
- **The pandemic may fuel the next wave of the opioid crisis.** <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/coronavirus-pandemic-may-fuel-the-next-wave-of-the-opioid-crisis/> April 21, 2020

State reports

1. Alabama

- **Opioid deaths increased in Jefferson County in 2020.** <https://www.wbrc.com/2021/02/25/opioid-deaths-increased-jefferson-county/> February 25, 2021
- **Drug overdoses climbed in Alabama during pandemic.** <https://www.al.com/news/2021/01/drug-overdoses-climbed-in-alabama-during-pandemic.html> January 25, 2021
- **Overdoses on the rise in pandemic.** <https://mountaineagle.com/stories/overdoses-on-the-rise-in-pandemic.28650> September 30, 2020
- **Opioid overdoses on the rise since pandemic began.** <https://www.wbrc.com/2020/08/18/opioid-overdoses-rise-since-pandemic-began/> August 18, 2020
- **Drug Overdoses Increase During the Pandemic.** <https://wbhm.org/feature/2020/drug-overdoses-increase-during-the-pandemic/> July 20, 2020
- **Madison County seeing a spike in overdoses, deaths amid pandemic.** <https://www.rocketcitynow.com/article/news/local/madison-county-seeing-a-spike-in-overdoses-deaths-amid-pandemic/525-021e43d6-44de-4c50-99ee-a326f2394a22> May 13, 2020

2. Alaska

- **Overdose deaths in Alaska have been on the rise since the pandemic began, report says.** <https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/2020/12/23/overdose-deaths-in-alaska-have-been-on-the-rise-since-the-pandemic-began-report-says/> December 23, 2020

3. Arizona

- **'Lost in Phoenix' gives raw glimpse into Phoenix's opioid epidemic.** https://www.azfamily.com/news/investigations/opioid_crisis/lost-in-phoenix-gives-raw-glimpse-into-phoenixs-opioid-epidemic/article_4ebe7b06-8e96-11eb-b810-f7545cc89522.html March 26, 2021
- **Sheriff's Office saw increase in overdose calls in 2020.**

- https://www.nogalesinternational.com/news/sheriff-s-office-saw-increase-in-overdose-calls-in-2020/article_fc562b58-64f0-11eb-b516-9f0d5427fc43.html February 2, 2021
- **Pima County reaches of overdose deaths this year.**
<https://www.kgun9.com/news/coronavirus/pima-county-reaches-record-of-overdose-deaths-this-year> December 4, 2020
 - **1/4 of Arizona voters say the opioid crisis has become less important to them following the pandemic, reveals survey.** <https://prescottnews.com/index.php/2020/10/28/1-4-of-arizona-voters-say-the-oidium-crisis-has-become-less-important-to-them-following-the-pandemic-reveals-survey/> October 28, 2020
 - **Amid COVID-19 pandemic, the opioid epidemic rages on: Here are resources to get help.** <https://www.abc15.com/news/rebound/keeping-you-safe/amid-covid-19-pandemic-the-oidium-epidemic-rages-on-here-are-resources-to-get-help> September 16, 2020
 - **Flagstaff police report spike in fentanyl overdoses, deaths.**
<https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2020/09/01/flagstaff-police-report-spike-fentanyl-overdoses-deaths/5657984002/> September 1, 2020
 - **Tucson's rise in drug overdose deaths could be linked to pandemic.**
https://tucson.com/news/tucson-s-rise-in-drug-overdose-deaths-could-be-linked-to-pandemic/article_ed773af2-5dfc-5fc6-85c1-2ddd0b9cde02.htmlhttps://tucson.com/news/tucson-s-rise-in-drug-overdose-deaths-could-be-linked-to-pandemic/article_ed773af2-5dfc-5fc6-85c1-2ddd0b9cde02.html August 18, 2020
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 - **Suicides, overdoses are up amid COVID-19 pandemic, according to health expert.**
<https://www.fox10phoenix.com/news/suicides-overdoses-are-up-amid-covid-19-pandemic-according-to-health-experts> July 18, 2020
 - **Deaths escalated as opioids flooded tribal lands, report says.** <https://katu.com/news/recover-northwest/report-deaths-skyrocketed-as-oidium-flooded-tribal-lands> June 30, 2020
 - **The battle of addiction during the time of novel coronavirus: Mental anguish, idle hands may be recipe for relapse.** <https://www.yourvalley.net/stories/the-battle-of-addiction-during-the-time-of-novel-coronavirus,154044> April 20, 2020
4. **Arkansas**
- **Drug epidemic claims lives of thousands amid coronavirus pandemic.**
<https://katv.com/news/local/drug-epidemic-claims-lives-of-thousands-amid-coronavirus-pandemic> April 5, 2021.
 - **Substance abuse in Arkansas a worry during pandemic, officials say.**
<https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2020/oct/27/substance-abuse-arkansas-worry-during-pandemic-off/> October 27, 2020
 - **ACHI: Opioid prescriptions fall 29% in three-year period.**
<https://talkbusiness.net/2020/09/achi-oidium-prescriptions-falls-29-in-three-year-period/> September 10, 2020
 - **Drug overdoses skyrocket in Fort Smith during COVID-19.**
<https://www.arkansasnews.com/news/20200809/drug-overdoses-skyrocket-in-fort-smith-during-covid-19> August 9, 2020
 - **Number of overdose saves tops 500 through Arkansas program.**
<https://www.fox16.com/news/local-news/number-of-overdose-saves-tops-500-through-arkansas-program/> June 10, 2020
 - **Number of Narcan 'saves' triple during COVID-19 pandemic.**
<https://www.thv11.com/article/news/health/oidium/saving-a-generation/number-of-narcan-saves-triple-during-covid-19-pandemic/91-20cbe0b2-8cf1-454f-9ac7-493e1e1a7546> April

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5. California

- **New Research Sends Stark Warning of Rise in Overdose Deaths Among Latino Population in California.** <https://yubanet.com/california/new-research-sends-stark-warning-of-rise-in-overdose-deaths-among-latino-population-in-california/> March 18, 2021
- **Health care challenge: Helping patients suffering chronic pain.** <https://capitolweekly.net/health-care-challenge-helping-patients-suffering-chronic-pain/> February 19, 2021
- **San Francisco struggles to stem ‘horrific’ uptick in opioid overdoses, drug abuse.** <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-12-31/san-francisco-struggles-to-stem-horrific-uptick-in-opioid-overdoses-drug-abuse> December 31, 2020
- **Fentanyl on the Rise Amid Coronavirus Pandemic.** <https://spectrumnews1.com/ca/san-fernando-valley-ventura/public-safety/2020/12/07/fentanyl-on-the-rise-amid-coronavirus-pandemic> December 7, 2020
- **Attorney General Xavier Becerra, law enforcement: 25% spike in opioid overdose deaths amid COVID-19.** <https://fox40.com/news/california-connection/attorney-general-xavier-becerra-law-enforcement-25-spike-in-opioid-overdose-deaths-amid-covid-19/> October 23, 2020
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- **Colliding epidemics: Need for ‘safe consumption sites’ more dire in COVID era, scientists and lawmakers say.** <https://missionlocal.org/2020/07/colliding-epidemics-need-for-safe-consumtion-sites-more-dire-in-covid-era-scientists-and-lawmakers-say/> July 20, 2020
- **A collision of epidemics: Coronavirus disrupts addiction treatment.** <https://calmatters.org/projects/california-coronavirus-treatment-drugs-opioid-addiction/> June 23, 2020
- **Beware of Potentially Fatal Fentanyl Pills Disguised as Xanax.** <https://www.fresnosheriff.org/media-relations/beware-of-potentially-fatal-fentanyl-pills-disguised-as-xanax.html> May 13, 2020
- **Man, woman overdose in car in Redwood Village; woman dies.** <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/public-safety/story/2020-04-30/male-female-car-occupants-die-of-apparent-drug-overdoses> April 30, 2020

6. Colorado

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<https://www.westword.com/news/denver-and-colorado-set-heroin-and-fentanyl-overdose-records-11884234> January 19, 2021
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<https://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/national/overdose-deaths-in-the-us-on-track-to-reach-all-time-high> November 12, 2020
- **Deaths in Colorado rose 20% during first 6 months of pandemic, reflecting COVID-19's broader toll on health.** <https://www.denverpost.com/2020/10/11/colorado-covid-death-toll/> October 11, 2020
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- **Colorado sees drug overdoses rise with coronavirus-related stress.**
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- **Pueblo diversion program showing success.***
<https://www.chieftain.com/news/20200823/pueblo-diversion-program-showing-success> August 23, 2020
- **How the pandemic is impacting another health crisis: opioid addiction.**
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- **Fentanyl And Meth Fuel Record Colorado Overdose Deaths Amid Coronavirus Pandemic.** <https://www.cpr.org/2020/08/07/colorado-fentanyl-meth-overdose-deaths-coronavirus-pandemic/> August 7, 2020
- **Opioid crisis in Colorado could get worse amid pandemic.**
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- **After COVID-19 addiction treatment may never be the same.**
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- **SWORD Statewide Reporting August 2020. Statewide Opioid Reporting Directive Newsletter.** <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/Departments-and->

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8. Delaware

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<https://www.delawarepublic.org/post/delaware-looks-roll-out-stabilization-centers-reduce-overdose-deaths> December 2, 2020
- **Opioid epidemic is worsened by COVID-19 pandemic.**
<https://www.capegazette.com/article/opioid-epidemic-worsened-covid-19-pandemic/210494>
October 27, 2020
- **Commissioner Navarro Partners with Aquila to Distribute Overdose Medication.**
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- **Providers say drug and alcohol use up during pandemic following record year of Delaware overdoses.** <https://www.delawarepublic.org/post/providers-say-drug-and-alcohol-use-during-pandemic-following-record-year-delaware-overdoses> June 21, 2020
- **Suspected Overdose Deaths for May in Delaware Tie Previous Monthly High Set in 2018.** <https://news.delaware.gov/2020/06/16/suspected-overdose-deaths-for-may-in-delaware-tie-previous-monthly-high-set-in-2018/> June 16, 2020

9. District of Columbia

- **Despite efforts by Bowser and D.C. Council, opioid deaths hit record this year.**
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