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

*Updated February 2, 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 by an increasing number of reports from national, state and local media suggesting increases in opioid- and other drug-related mortality—particularly from illicitly manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogs. The media 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.

More than 40 states have reported increases in opioid-related mortality as well as ongoing concerns for those with a mental illness or substance use disorder. 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 and naloxone.

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.

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

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National reports

- 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


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.


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State reports

1. **Alabama**

2. **Arizona**

3. **Arkansas**

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4. California


5. Colorado
• Denver and Colorado Set New Fentanyl and Overdose Death Marks.  

• Drug overdoses in Colorado surged along with stress and loneliness caused by the pandemic.  

• How the pandemic is impacting another health crisis: opioid addiction.  

• Fentanyl And Meth Fuel Record Colorado Overdose Deaths Amid Coronavirus Pandemic.  

• Opioid crisis in Colorado could get worse amid pandemic.  
  https://apnews.com/bf1c11ac45d63808ffea945c750cd81 June 28, 2020

• After COVID-19 addiction treatment may never be the same.  

• Struggling with addiction in quarantine? You’re not alone.  

6. Connecticut

• New Haven Keeps An Eye On Opioid Epidemic Amid Coronavirus Pandemic.  

• Overdose Deaths On The Rise, But Recovery Help Is Available.  

  https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/Departments-and-


• With over 1,000 Connecticut deaths last year, opioids demand even greater attention during pandemic. https://ctmirror.org/2020/07/09/with-over-1000-deaths-last-year-opioids-demand-even-greater-attention-during-pandemic/ July 9, 2020

7. Delaware


8. District of Columbia
• Despite efforts by Bowser and D.C. Council, opioid deaths hit record this year. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/dc-opioid-deaths-2020/2020/12/05/95cfba3a-34c0-11eb-b59c-adb7153d10c2_story.html December 5, 2020

• One doctor is working to fight D.C.’s opioid epidemic, even as a pandemic rages. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/one-doctor-is-working-to-fight-dcs-opioid-epidemic-even-as-a-pandemic-rages/2020/08/04/c5c1cc54-d662-11ea-aff6-220dd3a14741_story.html August 4, 2020

9. Florida
• Central Florida drug OD deaths up 70% during COVID, report shows. https://www.orlandosentinel.com/coronavirus/os-ne-coronavirus-dramatic-rise-in-florida-
10. Georgia

- Some Georgia Hospitals Are Reporting A Rise In Trauma Cases. [December 2, 2020]
  https://www.wabe.org/some-georgia-hospitals-are-reporting-a-rise-in-trauma-cases/

- How to maintain emotional wellness during COVID-19. [October 5, 2020]

- Updated Suspected Drug Overdose Increases in Georgia Amid COVID-19. [September 8, 2020]

- ‘An Epidemic Within This Pandemic’: Reported Drug Overdoses Rise In Georgia Amid COVID-19, Groups Say. [August 31, 2020]

- DPH warns of overdose increases in Georgia amid COVID-19. [August 7, 2020]

- Health chief warns of drug overdose increase during pandemic. [June 29, 2020]

- Addiction Recovery Leaders Say Opioid Crisis Didn’t Stop When Pandemic Began. [April 20, 2020]
11. Illinois

- Local accidental overdose deaths are up during pandemic. [https://foxillinois.com/news/local/local-accidental-overdose-deaths-are-up-during-pandemic] (October 26, 2020)
- Pritzker Administration Announces Over $2 million in Fines for Major Health Insurance Companies Violating Illinois Mental Health Parity Laws CIGNA Healthcare of IL, UnitedHealthcare, CIGNA Health and Life, HCSC, and Celtic found to be in violation of Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act [https://www2.illinois.gov/IISNews/21819-IDOI_Press_Release.pdf] (July 15, 2020)

12. Indiana

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Drug Overdoses in Indianapolis. 


‘There needs to be awareness’: Addiction recovery help still available during pandemic. http://www.bcdemocrat.com/2020/06/16/there_needs_to_be_awareness_addiction_recovery_help_still_available_during_pandemic/ June 16, 2020


An Indiana Police Dept. No Longer Reversing Overdoses During Pandemic. https://filtermag.org/cops-naloxone-coronavirus/ April 24, 2020


‘Don’t give up’ After years of decline, Lexington’s overdose deaths are rising fast. https://www.kentucky.com/news/local/counties/fayette-county/article245379110.html August 31, 2020


OPD, DCSO records increase in overdoses on altered pills. https://www.14news.com/2020/05/26/opd-seeing-increase-overdoses-altered-pills/ May 27, 2020


People who use drugs are more vulnerable to coronavirus. Here’s what clinics are doing to help. https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/coronavirus/article_f80cf77e-84fa-11ea-88d5-2b37de9dd966.html May 3, 2020

16. Maryland


17. Massachusetts
18. Michigan

- **Target 8: Fatal ODs doubled in parts of W. MI at COVID-19’s spring peak.**

- **Macomb County medical board: EMS opioids overdose treatment up during COVID-19.**

- **Naloxone kits could end up being lifesavers.**

- **Michigan to give opioid antidote for free to community groups, residents.**

- **Push to telehealth means more medication to treat addiction in northern Michigan.***

- **20% increase in patients seeking substance abuse treatment.**

19. Minnesota

- **Duluth police: 20 opioid overdose deaths in 2020.**

- **New report finds increase in 2020 overdose deaths.**

- **DEA: Significant increase in counterfeit pills in Minnesota.**
20. Missouri


21. Montana


22. Nevada

- With opioid-related overdoses on the rise, health providers try preparing everyday Nevadans to respond to a crisis. [https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/with-opioid-](https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/with-opioid-)
related-overdoses-on-the-rise-health-care-providers-try-preparing-everyday-nevadans-to-respond-to-a-crisis September 6, 2020


23. New Hampshire
- NH has seen at least 200 fatal drug overdoses so far this year. https://www.sentinelsource.com/news/local/nh-has-seen-at-least-200-fatal-drug-overdoses-so-far-this-year/article_a04ea351-e402-5375-bcf6-51e4ecfe49c2.html August 26, 2020

24. New Jersey
- New Jersey giving away 72,000 doses of Narcan to combat drug overdoses. https://abc7ny.com/drug-overdose-opioid-crisis-naloxone-narcan/6504624/ September 15, 2020

25. New York
26. **North Carolina**

- Opioid ODs way up, ERs see 46% case hike. https://greensboro.com/rockingham_now/news/opioid-ods-way-up-ers-see-46-case-hike/article_155a410e-fc80-11ea-b36a-a3876ce79885.html September 21, 2020

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• Overdoses way up, officials try new approach to fighting drug abuse during pandemic. [https://greensboro.com/rockingham_now/news/overdoses-way-up-officials-try-new-approach-to-fighting-drug-abuse-during-pandemic/article_863d0ae7-62b0-5118-8df3-e9de9396b0db.html] August 7, 2020


27. North Dakota


• Drug overdose death raises concerns in the area. [https://www.newsdakota.com/2020/03/10/drug-overdose-death-raises-concerns-in-the-area/] March 10, 2020

28. Ohio

• COVID-19: Ohio deaths up by 7.8% so far in 2020, coronavirus pandemic likely to blame. [https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/2020/11/15/ohio-deaths-up-nearly-8-so-far-2020-pandemic-likely-blame/62630ae7-62b0-5118-8df3-e9de9396b0db/] November 15, 2020

• A legacy of distrust: The racial disparities that mean many can be reluctant to seek help. [https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2020/11/12/systemic-racism-addiction-treatment-outreach-ohio-and-kentucky/3731197002/] November 11, 2020


• Don’t forget the other epidemic; editorial. [https://www.toledoblade.com/opinion/editorials/2020/05/31/dont-forget-other-epidemic-opioids-naloxone-toledo-lucas-county] May 30, 2020

• Narcan handed out to step opioid overdose rise amid COVID-19.
Pennsylvania

• Pennsylvania

30.

• Oregon


• HEALTH ALERT: Canton latest to close its syringe program. https://www.harmreductionohio.org/covid-19-updates-syringe-programs-ongoing/ March 29, 2020

29. Oklahoma

• Authorities investigate additional deaths in Oklahoma linked to fake oxycodone pills. https://www.koco.com/article/authorities-investigate-additional-deaths-in-oklahoma-linked-to-fake-oxycodone-pills/34314735# October 8, 2020


• Deaths caused by fake pills continue to climb in Oklahoma, with links to North Texas. https://www.star-telegram.com/news/local/crime/article243600002.html June 17, 2020

30. Oregon

• OHA sees 70 percent increase in drug overdose deaths. https://kqennnewsradio.com/2020/10/30/oha-sees-70-percent-increase-in-drug-overdose-deaths/ October 30, 2020


31. Pennsylvania


32. Rhode Island


• Texas

• Tennessee

• South Carolina

• Rhode Island sees 22% increase in drug overdose deaths.

33. South Carolina

• SC firefighters deliver 200 opioid antidotes in effort to prevent overdoses.

• DHEC warns of increased opioid addiction in South Carolina amid pandemic.

• Health experts, recovery organizations fear ‘frightening’ rise in S.C. opioid overdoses.
  https://www.live5news.com/2020/07/30/pandemic-hurting-efforts-to-combat-overdose-deaths; Knox Co. DA looks to deliver 200 opioid antidotes in effort to prevent overdoses.

• Spike in substance abuse seen in Aiken County as coronavirus disruptions continue.

34. Tennessee

• COVID-19 could compound holiday suicides, drug overdoses.

• MPHD: More drug overdose deaths in 2020 than in all of 2019.

• Hamilton County overdoses spike during COVID-19 pandemic as leaders worry about long-term effects for people in recovery.

• Experts concerned about recent spike in overdose deaths amid pandemic.

• COVID-19 hurting efforts to combat overdose deaths; Knox Co. DA looks to community for help.

• Knox County sees increase of overdose-related deaths since start of coronavirus pandemic.

• Nashvile doctors say they’ve seen a rise in polydrug overdoses during COVID-19 pandemic.

• Opioid crisis sees impact of COVID-19 in Middle Tennessee.

35. Texas

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• As drug deaths rise, County autopsy costs soar to $70K. https://coortlandvoice.com/2020/10/18/as-drug-deaths-rise-county-autopsy-costs-soar-to-70k/ October 18, 2020


36. Utah


• Alcohol poisoning, fentanyl use rises in Utah during pandemic. https://kslnewsradio.com/1935612/utah-overdose-deaths-alcohol-fentanyl/? October 22, 2020


37. Vermont
• ‘The drug became his friend’: Pandemic drives hike in opioid deaths.  

• Tom Dalton: The deadly nexus between Covid-19 and overdose.  

• Bennington recovery center seeing rise in opioid overdoses.  

• Vermont gets $2 million for programs targeting rural addiction.  

• Opioid overdoses rise in pandemic.  

• As Vermont drug deaths drop, Brattleboro hits a record high.  
https://vtdigger.org/2020/05/14/as-vermont-drug-deaths-drop-brattleboro-hits-a-record-high/  May 14, 2020

38. Virginia

• Pandemic triggers ‘enormous’ spike in drug overdose deaths.  

• Altered marijuana causing overdoses in Virginia, officials say.  

• Experts discuss how COVID-19 has led to rise in overdoses in the area.  

• With drug overdose cases up 60% in Richmond area, Henrico allocates $184,000 to addiction recovery, jail diversion efforts.  

• Opioid Overdose Deaths Plunge in Virginia Counties After Influx of Naloxone. Harm reduction has worked, but causes for concern during pandemic remain.*  

39. Washington

• King County seeks spike in fatal overdose cases.  

• As doctors, we call for treatment, not incarceration, for those with drug addiction.  

• With overdose deaths on the rise in King County, family hopes son's story saves lives.  
https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/as-overdose-deaths-are-on-the-rise-one-family-hopes-to-save-lives-with-sons-story/281-8a64e997-165f-4756-a0c7-2aa1d22cc2fe  October 20, 2020

• Public health officials warn of fentanyl in black tar heroin.  
• **Seattle sees spike in fentanyl overdose deaths.** [https://dailyhive.com/seattle/king-county-spike-overdose-deaths](https://dailyhive.com/seattle/king-county-spike-overdose-deaths) April 24, 2020

40. **West Virginia**

- 'How are we going to keep people alive?’ Behind the pandemic, overdoses are rising across West Virginia. [https://www.wvgazettemail.com/coronavirus/how-are-we-going-to-keep-people-alive-behind-the-pandemic-overdoses-are-rising-across/article_6df7f23b-ef35-54fc-94e3-360662f5a123.html](https://www.wvgazettemail.com/coronavirus/how-are-we-going-to-keep-people-alive-behind-the-pandemic-overdoses-are-rising-across/article_6df7f23b-ef35-54fc-94e3-360662f5a123.html) June 20, 2020

41. **Wisconsin**


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42. Wyoming