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

*Updated March 3, 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](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

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• ‘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://abcnews.go.com/Health/expanded-telehealth-helps-communities-address-opioid-use-disorder-during-pandemic July 1, 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.

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• The pandemic is triggering opioid relapses across Appalachia. https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/14/health/opioids-addiction-appalachiacoronavirus-trnd/index.html May 14, 2020


State reports

1. Alabama
   • Opioid overdoses on the rise since pandemic began. https://www.wbrc.com/2020/08/18/opioid-overdoses-rise-since-pandemic-began/ August 18, 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
   • 1/4 of Arizona voters say the opioid crisis has become less important to them following the pandemic, reveals survey. https://prescottenews.com/index.php/2020/10/28/1-4-of-arizona-voters-say-the-opioid-crisis-has-become-less-important-to-them-following-the-pandemic-reveals-survey/ October 28, 2020
5. California


6. Colorado
• Street drugs containing fentanyl circulating in Boulder, officials say. https://www.9news.com/article/news/health/fentanyl-drugs-boulder-xanax-oxycodone/73-0528e9e1-0081-4938-9b75-0892ca2a3caa February 6, 2021

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• Opioid crisis in Colorado could get worse amid pandemic. [https://apnews.com/bf1c11ac45d63808ffea945c750c8d81] June 28, 2020


7. Connecticut


• Coronavirus CT News: Drug overdose increase in Connecticut linked to coronavirus pandemic. [https://abc7ny.com/covid-19-coronavirus-updates/6397299] August 31, 2020


• 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

8. Delaware

• Delaware looks to roll out stabilization centers to reduce overdose deaths. [https://www.delawarepublic.org/post/delaware-looks-roll-out-stabilization-centers-reduce-overdose-deaths] December 2, 2020


• Commissioner Navarro Partners with Aquila to Distribute Overdose Medication. [https://news.delaware.gov/2020/07/20/commissioner-navarro-partners-with-aquila-to-distribute-overdose-medication/] July 20, 2020


• Suspected Overdose Deaths for May in Delaware Tie Previous Monthly High Set in
9. 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
   • Rise in fatal drug overdoses in D.C. region likely tied to pandemic, officials say.  
     https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/drug-overdose-washington-coronavirus/2020/08/20/2a4c64b8-e0a4-11ea-ade1-28daf1a5e919_story.html August 21, 2020
   • One doctor is working to fight D.C.’s opioid epidemic, even as a pandemic rages.  

10. Florida
   • Central Florida drug OD deaths up 70% during COVID, report shows.  
   • Ocala sees spike in opioid overdoses during COVID-19 pandemic.  
   • COVID-19’s latest toll in Central Florida: Rising drug overdoses, mental health issues.  
   • Experts: Coronavirus Contributing To Increase In Substance Abuse.  
   • Overdose calls up 40% during COVID-19 pandemic; treatment centers seeing relapses in long-time sober patients.  
   • Manatee County reports 44% increase in opioid overdoses since last year.  
   • Fake pills laced with fentanyl are causing overdoses in west Pasco, deputies say.  
   • Jacksonville overdose calls increased 20% in March.  

11. Georgia
12. Illinois

- 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-IDOL_Press_Release.pdf July 15, 2020

13. Indiana

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COVID-19 Worsens Mental Health, Sparks Overdose. 
November 17, 2020


Mental health trends worrisome.
http://www.therepublic.com/2020/10/30/mental_health_trends_worrisome/ October 29, 2020

10.

14.
Kentucky

COVID-19 blamed for increased drug overdose deaths nationwide.

‘Don’t give up’ After years of decline, Lexington’s overdose deaths are rising fast.

The perfect storm: Drug overdoses spike across Kentucky as COVID-19 pandemic continues. 

Kentucky Drug Overdoses Spike During COVID-19 Shutdown.
http://www.mc.uky.edu/kiprc/pubs/files/July%202020%20KyOD2A%20final.pdf July 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

15. Louisiana

Opioid-related overdose deaths continue to rise in Lafayette Parish, and fentanyl a big reason why.
16. Maine


17. Maryland


- Health officials say COVID-19 might be worsening opioid crisis. [https://www.times


18. Massachusetts

• While doctors prepare to handle rise in opioid cases, access to recovery programs remains limited. http://bunews.service/while-doctors-prepare-to-handle-rise-in-opioid-cases-access-to-recovery-programs-remains LIMITED/ December 8, 2020


• SouthCoast doctors say telemedicine has proven its worth, hope it will continue.* https://www.southcoasttoday.com/news/20200528/southcoast-doctors-say-telemedicine-has-proven-its-worth-hope-it-will-continue May 28, 2020

• The Pandemic Has Changed Addiction Treatment, Some Hope For Good.* https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2020/05/21/opioid-addiction-treatment-changes May 21, 2020

19. Michigan


20. Minnesota


• In Duluth, ODs spike as pandemic decreases access to aid; The pandemic might be increasing the demand for dangerous drugs. https://www.startribune.com/in-duluth-ods-spike-as-pandemic-decreases-access-to-aid/570895192/ May 31, 2020


21. Mississippi

22. Missouri


23. Montana


24. Nevada
- Nevada placed on “red alert” for risk of death from overdose.
- Fentanyl overdoses increase in Nevada, Placer counties causing concerns.
- Fentanyl contributes to a rising death toll in Southern Nevada.
- Teen overdose deaths point to growing problem.

25. New Hampshire
- Despite pandemic, fatal overdoses decrease in 2020.
- Recovery community focuses on NH’s other health crisis.
- NH has seen at least 200 fatal drug overdoses so far this year.
- New law requires opioid treatment in county jails.*
- Opioid overdose reversal drug naloxone to be free at Planned Parenthood.

26. New Jersey
- New Jersey giving away 72,000 doses of Narcan to combat drug overdoses.
- Mid Hudson overdoses spike during COVID-19 pandemic.
  https://www.wbgo.org/post/naloxone-mail-what-nj-addiction-help-looks-during-covid-
27. New York


- COVID-19 cited in spike of opioid overdoses; Pandemic has worsened the opioid crisis. More people are dying of overdoses and fewer are being admitted for treatment. https://www.investigativepost.org/2020/05/21/covid-19-cited-in-spike-of-opioid-overdoses/ May 21, 2020


- As overdoses spike, local experts remind people help is available. (Albany, Greene, Rensselaer counties) https://www.timesunion.com/news/article/As-overdoses-spike-Capital-
28. North Carolina

- COVID-19 stressors fuel surge in overdoses of contaminated street drugs.
- Opioid crisis grows worse in Fayetteville even as COVID-19 pandemic rages, officials say.
- Opioid ODs way up, ERs see 46% case hike.
- NC organizations fighting the rural opioid crisis receive a $4M federal boost.
- Overdoses way up, officials try new approach to fighting drug abuse during pandemic.
- Increase in overdose emergency department visits seen in Carteret County.

29. North Dakota

- Grand Forks law enforcement, state officials report increase in opioid overdoses during pandemic.
- Drug overdose deaths climb dramatically in Minot; Fentanyl use frightening.
- Drug overdose death raises concerns in the area.

30. Ohio

- COVID-19: Ohio deaths up by 7.8% so far in 2020, coronavirus pandemic likely to blame.
- A legacy of distrust: The racial disparities that mean many can be reluctant to seek help.
- Editorial: The addiction epidemic hasn’t gone anywhere.
- Cuyahoga County sees 19 drug overdose deaths in a week, on pace for highest total in three years.
COVID-19 not slowing drug trafficking, overdose deaths.  

Ohio drug overdose deaths back on rise.  

Overdose Incidents Rose Sharply Around Ohio Valley During Pandemic.  

Coronavirus can’t stem central Ohio opioid abuse.  

Don’t forget the other epidemic; editorial.  

Narcan handed out to stop opioid overdose rise amid COVID-19.  

Ohio County Prosecutor: Pandemic Puts More Stress On Families Dealing With Addiction.  

Coroner: 6 overdose deaths in Franklin County Friday.  

Health officials fear COVID-19 could trigger rise in drug overdoses.  

HEALTH ALERT: Canton latest to close its syringe program.  

31. 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

Methamphetamine: The Overlooked Addiction Epidemic in Oklahoma.  

GUEST EDITORIAL: Pandemic makes fighting opioid abuse even tougher.  

Oklahoma recovery center reports surge in alcohol abuse.  

Deaths caused by fake pills continue to climb in Oklahoma, with links to North Texas.  

32. Oregon
• OHA sees 70 percent increase in drug overdose deaths. [https://kennnewsnradio.com/2020/10/30/oha-sees-70-percent-increase-in-drug-overdose-deaths/](https://kennnewsnradio.com/2020/10/30/oha-sees-70-percent-increase-in-drug-overdose-deaths/) October 30, 2020


33. Pennsylvania


• Syringe exchanges deemed ‘life-sustaining’ during Pa. coronavirus shutdown, raising hopes for eventual legalization. [https://www.post-
34. Rhode Island


35. South Carolina


36. Tennessee

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

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

38. Utah


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39. Vermont

- ‘The drug became his friend’: Pandemic drives hike in opioid deaths.
- Bennington recovery center seeing rise in opioid overdoses.
- Vermont gets $2 million for programs targeting rural addiction.
- 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

40. 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.*

41. Washington

• King County seeks spike in fatal overdose cases. https://www.courierherald.com/news/king-county-seeks-spike-in-fatal-overdose-cases/ January 21, 2021

• As doctors, we call for treatment, not incarceration, for those with drug addiction. https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/as-doctors-we-call-for-treatment-not-incarceration-for-those-with-drug-addiction/ November 8, 2020

• 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


• Seattle sees spike in fentanyl overdose deaths. https://dailyhive.com/seattle/king-county-spike-overdose-deaths April 24, 2020

42. 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 June 20, 2020


43. Wisconsin


• As drug overdose deaths soar, advocates fight uphill battle. 

• Opioid Overdoses Rise in Wisconsin During Pandemic. 

• Deadly Overdoses Spike in Wisconsin During Coronavirus Pandemic. 

• Overdose Surge Mirrors Coronavirus Pandemic; Experts say addiction triggers compounded by stay-at-home orders and a disruption of support networks are just two contributing factors. 


• Fentanyl overdose deaths on the rise in Milwaukee County. 

• Public health alert issued in Dane County following suspected rise in opioid overdoses. 

44. Wyoming