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

© 2021 American Medical Association. All rights reserved.
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
- 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


• 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


• ‘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


• 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.


© 2020 American Medical Association. All rights reserved.


State reports

1. Alabama

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
   - Sheriff’s Office saw increase in overdose calls in 2020.
Arkansas

4. Arkansas

- Drug epidemic claims lives of thousands amid coronavirus pandemic.

- Substance abuse in Arkansas a worry during pandemic, officials say.

- ACHI: Opioid prescriptions fall 29% in three-year period.

- Drug overdoses skyrocket in Fort Smith during COVID-19.

- Number of overdose saves tops 500 through Arkansas program.

- Number of Narcan ‘saves’ triple during COVID-19 pandemic.


- Pima County reaches of overdose deaths this year.

- 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


- Flagstaff police report spike in fentanyl overdoses, deaths.

- Tucson’s rise in drug overdose deaths could be linked to pandemic.


5. California

6. Colorado
7. Connecticut

- New Haven Keeps An Eye On Opioid Epidemic Amid Coronavirus Pandemic. 
  November 24, 2020

  October 8, 2020

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

---

**Connecticut Newsletter SWORD Statewide Reporting August 2020.**


- Overdose deaths in US on track to break all-time record. 

- Deaths in Colorado rose 20% during first 6 months of pandemic, reflecting COVID-19’s broader toll on health. 

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

- Pueblo diversion program showing success.* 

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

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

- Opioid crisis in Colorado could get worse amid pandemic. 
  [https://apnews.com/611ac45d63808f49e4c95e750cd81](https://apnews.com/611ac45d63808f49e4c95e750cd81) June 28, 2020

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

- Struggling with addiction in quarantine? You’re not alone. 
8. Delaware


9. District of Columbia

- Despite efforts by Bowser and D.C. Council, opioid deaths hit record this year. https://www.washingtongpost.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.washingtongpost.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. https://www.washingtongpost.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

10. Florida

11. Georgia

- Some Georgia Hospitals Are Reporting A Rise In Trauma Cases. https://www.wabe.org/some-georgia-hospitals-are-reporting-a-rise-in-trauma-cases/ October 5, 2020
12. Hawaii

- More homeless residents dying from meth overdoses.  
  https://abc17news.com/news/national-world/2021/04/01/more-homeless-residents-dying-from-meth-overdoses/ April 1, 2021

13. Illinois

  https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7010a3.htm?s_cid=mm7010a3_w March 12, 2021

- The Brutality of 2020 on Full Display at County Morgue, Which is Having Its Deadliest Year Ever.  

- Drug overdose deaths in Kankakee County on the rise.  

- Local accidental overdose deaths are up during pandemic.  

- COVID-19’s true toll in Illinois is likely higher than reported. A closer look at ‘excess deaths’ in 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  

- Overdose Deaths Have Skyrocketed in Chicago, and the Coronavirus Pandemic May Be Making It Worse.  

- COVID-19 pandemic causes needle exchange programs to cut back.  

- DuPage sees ‘unusual spike’ in overdose deaths during coronavirus pandemic: coroner.  

14. Indiana

- COVID-19 Worsens Mental Health, Sparks Overdose.  

- “An Unintended Consequence”: Overdoses Spike In Clark Co. After Pandemic, Lockdowns.  

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

- Overdose deaths in St. Joseph County rise again as COVID-19 takes toll on mental health.  
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

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. 
- 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

Louisiana
- Opioid-related overdose deaths continue to rise in Lafayette Parish, and fentanyl a big reason why. 
- Dr. Nicholas Goeders: The hidden health crisis resulting from COVID-19. 
- People who use drugs are more vulnerable to coronavirus. Here’s what clinics are doing to help. 

Maine
- Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Maine’s opioid epidemic continues. 
Maryland


• Overdose risk during pandemic is tragic reality for some families. https://www.pressherald.com/2020/04/20/overdose-risk-during-pandemic-is-tragic-reality-for-some-families/# April 20, 2020

18. Maryland


19. Massachusetts

- While doctors prepare to handle rise in opioid cases, access to recovery programs remains limited. [http://bunewsservice.com/while-doctors-prepare-to-handle-rise-in-opioid-cases-access-to-recovery-programs-remains-limited/](http://bunewsservice.com/while-doctors-prepare-to-handle-rise-in-opioid-cases-access-to-recovery-programs-remains-limited/) December 8, 2020


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

20. Michigan


21. 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


22. Mississippi


23. Missouri


• Missouri’s Fentanyl Problem: State recently topped nation in rate for overdose deaths. https://www.thesalemnews.com/news/local/article_be048678-ec71-11ea-aa59-bb8db363c4f0.html September 1, 2020


24. Montana


25. Nevada
• Nevada placed on “red alert” for risk of death from overdose. 

• Fentanyl overdoses increase in Nevada, Placer counties causing concerns. 

• With opioid-related overdoses on the rise, health providers try preparing everyday Nevadans to respond to a crisis. 

• Fentanyl contributes to a rising death toll in Southern Nevada. 

• Teen overdose deaths point to growing problem. 

26. 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. 

27. New Jersey

• New Jersey giving away 72,000 doses of Narcan to combat drug overdoses. 

• Mid Hudson overdoses spike during COVID-19 pandemic. 

• Overdose deaths in NJ may hit record high. 

• Is the COVID-19 pandemic fueling a 20% rise in NJ overdose deaths? 


28. New York
In Upstate New York, a Jail Keeps Blocking Access to Lifesaving OUD Meds. https://filtermag.org/new-york-jail-suboxone/ March 26, 2021


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


29. 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
- 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_863d0ae7-62b0-51f8-8df3-e9dc9396b0db.html August 7, 2020

30. North Dakota


31. Ohio


• 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/stories/20200526122 May 30, 2020


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

32. Oklahoma

• Authorities investigate additional deaths in Oklahoma linked to fake oxycodone pills. https://article.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

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


34. Pennsylvania


• In curtailing overprescribing, Pennsylvania’s drug monitoring program is a limited tool in opioid epidemic. https://www.publicsource.org/pennsylvania-drug-monitoring-program-a-successful-but-limited-tool-in-opioid-epidemic/ March 4, 2021


• With overdose deaths up during the pandemic, Philadelphia fights for a legal safe injection site: "You can't put a dead person into recovery. It doesn't work that way. At Safehouse, they have a chance to live." https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/overdose-deaths-during-pandemic-philadelphia-fights-legal-safe-injection-site-n1235583 August 2, 2020.


© 2020 American Medical Association. All rights reserved.
35. Rhode Island
- Fatal drug overdose deaths in Rhode Island are on the rise. [Link](https://whdh.com/news/fatal-drug-overdose-deaths-in-rhode-island-are-on-the-rise/) October 29, 2020
- Another pandemic fallout: Deaths from accidental drug overdoses are soaring in Rhode Island. [Link](https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/08/05/metro/another-pandemic-fallout-deaths-accidental-drug-overdoses-are-soaring-rhode-island/) August 5, 2020

36. South Carolina

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

- Drug overdoses on the rise during COVID-19 pandemic, expert says.  
- 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
- ‘Laced’ opioids leading to more overdoses, deaths in El Paso.  
- ‘I am alone’: Opioid relapses on the rise as COVID-19 interrupts drug addiction recovery in Dallas.  
- WilCo sees spike in opioid overdose calls, counterfeit pills.  
  https://talk1370.radio.com/articles/wilco-sees-spike-in-opioid-overdose-calls-counterfeit-pills (Williamson County) April 17, 2020

39. Utah

- Government sues Ridley’s for alleged opioid prescription violations at Morgan grocery store.  
- COVID-19 complications likely increasing the severity of Utah’s opioid crisis.  
• Alcohol poisoning, fentanyl use rises in Utah during pandemic.  
• Experts watching concerning substance use & treatment trends during pandemic.  

40. 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.  
• 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

41. 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.*  

42. Washington

• King County sees spike in fatal overdose cases. https://www.courierherald.com/news/king-county-sees-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

43. 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-ef35-54fe-94e3-360662f5a123.html June 20, 2020


44. 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. 

• Pandemic Clashes With Opioid Crisis.  
  https://www.wpr.org/shows/pandemic-clashes-opiod-crisis June 29, 2020

• Opioid crisis getting worse during COVID-19 pandemic, medical professionals say. 

• Fentanyl overdose deaths on the rise in Milwaukee County. 

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

45. Wyoming

• Wyoming records show significantly more deaths in 2020. 

• Meth Involved in Majority of Cheyenne Drug Cases in 2019.  