

Issue brief: Nation's drug-related overdose and death epidemic continues to worsen

***Updated September 20, 2021**

The nation's COVID pandemic made the nation's drug overdose epidemic worse. This issue brief highlights media and other reports showing increases in drug overdose mortality and other concerns relating to access to evidence-based care for substance use disorders, patients with pain as well as harm reduction services. The 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. Every state has reported a spike or increase in overdose deaths or other problems during the COVID pandemic. One prevailing theme is the fact that the epidemic now is driven by illicit fentanyl, fentanyl analogs, methamphetamine, and cocaine, often in combination or in adulterated forms. Overdose related to prescription opioids and heroin remain high and also are increasingly adulterated with illicit fentanyl.

Among AMA advocacy, resources and recommendations:

- [AMA 2021 Overdose Epidemic national report](#)
- Expand access to evidence-based treatment through additional steps to [reduce barriers](#) to medications to treat substance use disorders (SUDs), including medications to treat opioid use disorder (MOUD), and support for efforts to broaden access to a [wide range of harm reduction services](#), including naloxone, sterile needle and syringe exchange services, and drug checking supplies.
- Require all health insurance programs, including Medicare and Medicare Advantage, Medicaid, the plans offered on the federal and state health exchanges, and health benefit programs serving veterans, military members and families, federal employees, Native Americans, and others to [remove arbitrary restrictions](#) for patients who benefit from opioid therapy.
- Make use of [best practices that already exist](#)—i.e., critically review programs and initiatives that have been federally funded to identify those that have reduced drug-related harms and improved patient outcomes.
- Take steps to develop and support a national, standardized reporting system for key metrics related to drug use, including fatal and non-fatal overdose. Taken together, these elements will help move the nation from a crisis framework to a more resilient public health framework, help reduce overdose and death, and improve patient outcomes.
- Enact new laws to ensure that monies from opioid-related litigation is focused on public health, treatment and prevention efforts. [Virginia](#) and [Kentucky](#) are leading examples.
- [Employers also can take specific actions](#) to help increase access to evidence-based care.

See below for reports from all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

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

- **Black Opioid Deaths Increase Faster Than Whites, Spurring Calls For Treatment Equity.** <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/09/10/1035445899/black-opioid-overdose-deaths-increasing-faster-than-whites-study-finds> September 10, 2021
- **Pregnant and Postpartum People Continue to Encounter Barriers to Opioid Use Disorder Treatment.** <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2021/09/09/pregnant-and-postpartum-people-continue-to-encounter-barriers-to-opioid-use-disorder-treatment> September 9, 2021
- **AMA statement on International Overdose Awareness Day.** <https://www.ama-assn.org/press-center/ama-statements/ama-statement-international-overdose-awareness-day> August 31, 2021
- **The High Price of the Opioid Crisis, 2021.** <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/data-visualizations/2021/the-high-price-of-the-opioid-crisis-2021> August 27, 2021
- **Patients on high doses of opioid analgesics risk overdose when tapering study finds.** <https://www.pharmacist.com/Pharmacy-News/patients-on-high-doses-of-opioid-analgesics-risk-overdose-when-tapering-study-finds> August 26, 2021
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- **How drug warriors made the ‘opioid epidemic’ deadlier.** <https://chicago.suntimes.com/columnists/2021/7/28/22597967/opioid-epidemic-pain-management-war-drugs-jacob-sullum> July 28, 2021
- **How can the U.S. reduce drug overdose deaths? A wide range of ideas awaits Biden.** https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/biden-opioid-overdose-deaths/2021/07/17/0af03c3e-e63e-11eb-8aa5-5662858b696e_story.html July 19, 2021
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- **Overdose Deaths in State Prisons Have Jumped Dramatically Since 2001.** <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/15/1015447281/overdose-deaths-state-prisons-increase> July 15, 2021
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- **Opinion. If Lawmakers Really Want to “Follow the Science” They Will Repeal Codified Opioid Guidelines.** <https://www.cato.org/blog/lawmakers-really-want-follow-science-they-will-repeal-codified-opioid-guidelines> May 24, 2021
- **Chronic pain can be burdensome. Isolation during the pandemic can make it worse.** https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/chronic-pain-pandemic-isolation/2021/05/07/9e0c7112-addc-11eb-b476-c3b287e52a01_story.html May 9, 2021
- **Study: 1 in 5 Pharmacies Blocks Access to Addiction Treatment Buprenorphine.** <https://www.pharmacytimes.com/view/study-1-in-5-pharmacies-blocks-access-to-addiction-treatment-buprenorphine> May 3, 2021
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- **“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
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State reports

1. Alabama

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- **Opioid overdoses increased 20% in Ala. in 2020.** <https://www.wbrc.com/2021/04/21/opioid-overdoses-increased-ala/> May 4, 2021
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