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

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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:

- 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


- 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-adde-11eb-b476-c3b287e52a01_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/chronic-pain-pandemic-isolation/2021/05/07/9e0c7112-adde-11eb-b476-c3b287e52a01_story.html) May 9, 2021


- One in five pharmacies blocks access to key medication to treat addiction. [https://news.ohsu.edu/2021/04/26/one-in-five-pharmacies-blocks-access-to-key-medication-to-treat-addiction](https://news.ohsu.edu/2021/04/26/one-in-five-pharmacies-blocks-access-to-key-medication-to-treat-addiction) April 26, 2021

- Overdose Deaths Surged in Pandemic, As More Drugs Were Laced With Fentanyl. [https://www.delawarepublic.org/post/overdose-deaths-surged-pandemic-more-drugs-were-laced-fentanyl](https://www.delawarepublic.org/post/overdose-deaths-surged-pandemic-more-drugs-were-laced-fentanyl) April 22, 2021

- 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/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/04/07/health-202-overdose-deaths-may-have-topped-90000-2020/) April 7, 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.
• As Addiction Deaths Surge, Profit-Driven Rehab Industry Faces ‘Severe Ethical Crisis’
• As Overdose Deaths Surge, White House Takes Steps To Build Drug Policy Team.
• 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
• Overdose-Related Cardiac Arrests Observed by Emergency Medical Services During the US COVID-19 Epidemic.
• “The stakes are life and death”: Addiction treatment’s Covid-19 challenge.
• 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.
• Drug overdose deaths on pace for record year during coronavirus pandemic, CDC says.
• Opioid Deaths: America’s Other Fatal Health Crisis Hasn’t Gone Away.
• Sharp Rise In Drug Overdose Deaths Seen During 1st Few Months Of Pandemic.
• The Opioid Crisis, Already Serious, Has Intensified During Coronavirus Pandemic.
- 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.

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• The pandemic is triggering opioid relapses across Appalachia.  

• Don’t Forget the Other Pandemic Killing Thousands of Americans.  

• The pandemic may fuel the next wave of the opioid crisis.  

State reports

1. Alabama
• Overdose deaths are up 31.3% in Alabama. https://whnt.com/news/overdose-deaths-are-up-31-3-in-alabama/ May 21, 2021
• Opioid overdoses increased 20% in Ala. in 2020. https://www.wbrc.com/2021/04/21/opioid-overdoses-increased-ala/ May 4, 2021
• 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
The battle of addiction during COVID-19 pandemic.


### 4. Arkansas

5. California

- **3 San Diegans Die Daily from Opioid, Other Drug Overdoses.** [https://www.countynewscenter.com/3-san-diegans-die-daily-from-opioid-other-drug-overdoses](https://www.countynewscenter.com/3-san-diegans-die-daily-from-opioid-other-drug-overdoses) September 25, 2020
- **Colliding epidemics: Need for ‘safe consumption sites’ more dire in COVID era, scientists and lawmakers say.** [https://missionlocal.org/2020/07/colliding-epidemics-need-...](https://missionlocal.org/2020/07/colliding-epidemics-need-...
6. Colorado

- **Largest jump in Colorado overdose deaths in more than 20 years, data show.**

- **Under cover of COVID, fentanyl and isolation fuel spiraling overdose crisis.**

- **Street drugs containing fentanyl circulating in Boulder, officials say.**
  https://www.9news.com/article/news/health/fentanyl-drugs-boulder-xanax-oxycodone/73-0528ece1-0081-4938-9b75-0892ca2a3caa February 6, 2021

- **Denver and Colorado Set New Fentanyl and Overdose Death Marks.**

- **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.**

- **Colorado sees drug overdoses rise with coronavirus-related stress.**

- **Pueblo diversion program showing success.***

- **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/bf1c11ac45d63808ffae945c750c481 June 28, 2020

- **After COVID-19 addiction treatment may never be the same.**
7. Connecticut
- Echo of pandemic isolation continues to impact addiction crisis in Connecticut.  
- ‘A Perfect Storm for Anybody Struggling’ CT Saw 1,374 Deadly Drug Overdoses in 2020.  
- New Haven Keeps An Eye On Opioid Epidemic Amid Coronavirus Pandemic.  
- Coronavirus CT News: Drug overdose increase in Connecticut linked to coronavirus pandemic.  
- Overdose Deaths on the Rise in CT Amid COVID-19 Pandemic.  
- Two epidemics taking a toll in CT as opioid overdoses rise amid coronavirus.  

8. Delaware
- Fentanyl driving Delaware overdoses.  
- Mental Health Parity Examinations Find Inequities in Insurer Behavior.  
- Division of Forensic Science 2020 Annual Report.  
  https://forensics.delaware.gov/resources/contentFolder/pdfs/2020%20DFS%20Annual%20Report.pdf June 29, 2021
• Overdose Review Commission Releases Annual Report.  
February 9, 2021

• Delaware looks to roll out stabilization centers to reduce overdose deaths.  
December 2, 2020

• Opioid epidemic is worsened by COVID-19 pandemic.  
October 27, 2020

• Commissioner Navarro Partners with Aquila to Distribute Overdose Medication.  
July 20, 2020

• Providers say drug and alcohol use up during pandemic following record year of Delaware overdoses.  
June 21, 2020

• Suspected Overdose Deaths for May in Delaware Tie Previous Monthly High Set in 2018.  
June 16, 2020

9. District of Columbia

• Opioid death surged during coronavirus pandemic in D.C., Virginia and Maryland.  
May 23, 2021

• Despite efforts by Bowser and D.C. Council, opioid deaths hit record this year.  
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.  
August 4, 2020

10. Florida

• Jacksonville opioid-related overdose deaths have jumped 2,000% in 6 years.  
July 15, 2021

• The Epidemic Within the Epidemic: Tampa Bay’s Opioid Crisis. Preliminary Assessment.  
https://www.tampabay.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/project%20opioid%20preliminary%20assessment_05.10.21_0.pdf  
April 15, 2021

• Central Florida drug OD deaths up 70% during COVID, report shows.  
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drug-overdoses-during-covid-20201202-u6rognhntrh7foitil4h5klqiq-story.html December 2, 2020

- Ocala sees spike in opioid overdoses during COVID-19 pandemic.  
- 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

- ‘Perfect storm’: In Georgia, rising opioid overdoses don’t discriminate.  
- Officials: Fentanyl overdoses spreading across Georgia.  
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- Fentanyl-related deaths on the rise in the Peach State.  
  https://www.wtvm.com/2021/05/06/fentanyl-related-deaths-rise-peach-state/ May 6, 2021
- Some Georgia Hospitals Are Reporting A Rise In Trauma Cases.  
  https://www.wtvm.com/2021/05/06/fentanyl-related-deaths-rise-peach-state/ May 6, 2021
- How to maintain emotional wellness during COVID-19.  
- Updated Suspected Drug Overdose Increases in Georgia Amid COVID-19.  


12. Hawaii
• Fentanyl from Mexican cartels coming into Hawaii as overdoses rise. https://www.khon2.com/local-news/fentanyl-from-mexican-cartels-coming-into-hawaii-as-overdoses-rise/ May 19, 2021


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

13. Idaho


• Notes from the Field: Opioid Overdose Deaths Before, During, and After an 11-Week COVID-19 Stay-at-Home Order — Cook County, Illinois, January 1, 2018–October 6,
15. 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

16. Iowa

17. Kansas
• Meth and crime: Recent increase has Kansas law enforcement calling it a threat to the state. https://www.ksn.com/news/local/meth-and-crime-recent-increase-has-kansas-law-enforcement-calling-it-a-threat-to-the-state/ April 29, 2021

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• 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

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• Opioid-related overdose deaths continue to rise in Lafayette Parish, and fentanyl a big reason why. https://www.theadvocate.com/acadiana/news/article_dd5b697a-13a6-11eb-9087-7b523df99843.html October 23, 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_f80c977e-84fa-84d5-2b37dc9dd966.html May 3, 2020

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21. Maine


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- Garrett County among 4 to see decrease in opioid deaths. https://www.times-news.com/community/garrett-county-among-4-to-see-decrease-in-opioid-deaths/article_21c02288-eeee-11eb-9595-27aba2ea007f.html August 1, 2021


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- While doctors prepare to handle rise in opioid cases, access to recovery programs remains limited. [link](http://bunewsservice.com/while-doctors-prepare-to-handle-rise-in-opioid-cases-access-to-recovery-programs-remains-limited/) December 8, 2020
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- The Pandemic Has Changed Addiction Treatment, Some Hope For Good.* [link](https://www.wburr.org/commonhealth/2020/05/21/opioid-treatment-changes) May 21, 2020

23. Michigan

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24. Minnesota

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25. Mississippi


26. Missouri

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27. Montana

- **County applies for opioid program.** [https://www.mtairynews.com/news/88655/country-applies-for-opiod-program](https://www.mtairynews.com/news/88655/country-applies-for-opiod-program) July 26, 2020

28. Nebraska


29. 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-related-overdoses-on-the-rise-health-care-providers-try-preparing-everyday-nevadans-to-respond-to-a-crisis September 6, 2020
• Teen overdose deaths point to growing problem. https://www.kolotv.com/content/news/Teen-overdose-deaths-point-to-growing-problem-568505931.html March 4, 2020

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31. New Jersey

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• Fatal Drug Overdoses in Ohio in 2020 Spiked Weeks After National Emergency
Declaration, Early Lockdowns.


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

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Q&A: Overdoses are peaking again and opioids are only going to get cheaper, one expert explains. https://www.publicsource.org/qa-overdoses-are-peaking-again-and-opioids-are-only-going-to-get-cheaper-one-expert-explains/ May 27, 2021


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- 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
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