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

*Updated December 22, 2022*

The nation’s drug overdose and death epidemic continues to worsen. The epidemic affects every state and now is driven by illicitly manufactured fentanyl, methamphetamine, and cocaine, often in combination or in adulterated forms. More than 107,000 deaths were reported in the United States between January 2021 to January 2022. The AMA continues to urge policymakers’ action to increase access to evidence-based care for substance use disorders, pain and harm reduction measures. The news articles, reports and other information below cite data from multiple and varied sources, including national, state and local public health agencies, law enforcement, emergency medical services, hospitals, treatment centers, and journals. Recent AMA advocacy, resources and recommendations to end the epidemic also are below.

- **Recommendations from the AMA Substance Use and Pain Care Task Force and AMA 2022 Overdose Epidemic national report** Updated recommendations that highlight physicians’ actions as well as additional steps that must be taken to have a meaningful impact on reducing drug-related mortality and improving patient outcomes.
- **AMA-Manatt Health 2022 state policy toolkit** provides more than 400 specific laws, regulations, policy guidance and other actions being implemented to help reduce mortality and improve outcomes. The toolkit builds on the 2020 AMA-Manatt Health national policy roadmap use of best practices to increase access to evidence-based care for mental illness, substance use disorders, comprehensive pain care and harm reduction initiatives.
- **The Fight to End the Nation’s Overdose Epidemic and Restore Compassionate Care: Profiles in Leadership** profiles the work of more than 25 practicing physicians, policymakers, researchers and advocates working daily to reduce drug-related mortality and improve patient outcomes. December 2022.
- The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on November 4, 2022, released its CDC Clinical Practice Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Pain—United States, 2022, which CDC said “updates and replaces” the 2016 guideline. The CDC makes clear in its revision that the updated guideline “is meant to be a flexible clinical tool and should not be used as a rigid standard of care or one-size-fits-all policy or law.” The AMA urges all states, payers, pharmacy chains and others to review, revise and rescind any laws or policies based on the 2016 guideline.
- Recent federal activity includes an AMA letter urging Congress to hold health plans accountable for nearly 15 years of failures in complying with the 2008 Mental Health Parity And Equity Addiction Act; AMA comments on Biden Administration’s 2022 National Drug Control Strategy.
- AMA issue brief on [key considerations for employers during the drug overdose epidemic](#). This includes reviewing benefit plans for patients and families with substance use disorders, mental illness and/or pain; promoting harm reduction at work; and reducing stigma.

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

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

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National reports
(State-by-state reports begin on page 9 below)

- These 8 states are doing the worst job of treating hepatitis C in prisons.  
  December 15, 2022
- In rural America, deadly costs of opioids outweigh the dollars tagged to address them.  
  https://www.kunc.org/health/2022-12-14/in-rural-america-deadly-costs-of-opioids-outweigh-the-dollars-tagged-to-address-them  
  December 14, 2022
- Endocarditis in patients with cocaine or opioid use disorder saw marked increase between 2011 to 2022.  
  December 13, 2022
- U.S. opioid crackdown hampers some patients’ access to psychiatric drugs.  
  December 12, 2022
- Cause of death: Washington faltered as fentanyl gripped America.  
  https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2022/dea-fentanyl-failure/  
  December 12, 2022
- Drug overdose deaths during pregnancy and postpartum rose sharply in recent years, study shows.  
  December 6, 2022
- Schools stockpile medication to combat rise in fentanyl overdoses.  
  https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/schools-stockpile-medication-to-combat-rise-in-fentanyl-overdoses  
  December 6, 2022
- New research finds racial disparity in use and access to medications for opioid use disorder.  
  November 29, 2022
- Walmart agrees to $3.1 billion opioid settlement framework.  
  November 15, 2022
- Medication Treatment for Addiction Is Shorter for Black and Hispanic Patients, Study Finds.  
  November 9, 2022
- How to Talk to Kids About Drugs in the Age of Fentanyl.  
  November 8, 2022
- CDC Releases New Opioid Guidelines: What to Know.  
  November 8, 2022
- FDA warns about the risk of xylazine exposure.  
  November 8, 2022.  
  https://www.fda.gov/media/162981/download
- The other Supreme Court ruling with big repercussions for U.S. health care.  
  October 24, 2022
- ‘Imminent’ need for Narcan on campus: School safety leader says fentanyl threat is real, preparation is key.  
  September 29, 2022
- The Persistent Criminalization of Pregnant People Who Use Drugs.  
  September 16, 2022
• Meth use is driving overdose epidemic in rural America—not opioids. https://studyfinds.org/meth-overdose-epidemic-rural/ August 15, 2022
• Walmart has a new policy denying some telehealth prescriptions for controlled drugs. It’s implicating patients in recovery. https://www.fiercehealthcare.com/digital-health/new-policy-walmart-denies-telehealth-prescriptions-without-person-visit August 9, 2022
• Once feared, illicit fentanyl is now a drug of choice for many opioid users. https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/fentanyl-related-overdose-deaths-increasing-associated-with-opioid-use July 21, 2022
• Decreased Access to Buprenorphine Significantly Affects Minorities with OUD. https://www.hclive.com/view/decreased-access-to-buprenorphine-significantly-affects-minorities-with-oud June 1, 2022
• Tribal leaders sound the alarm after fentanyl overdoses spike at Blackfeet Nation. https://www.npr.org/sections/healthshots/2022/06/01/1101799174/tribal-leaders-sound-the-alarm-after-fentanyl-overdoses-spike-at-blackfeet-natio June 1, 2022
• Opioid abuse treatments don’t reach those most at risk. https://www.axios.com/2022/05/12/opioid-abuse-treatments-overdose-deaths May 12, 2022
HHS needs to step up so CDC’s new guidelines won’t be a bridge to nowhere for most Americans living with chronic pain. https://www.statnews.com/2022/04/29/cdc-guidelines-bridge-to-nowhere-chronic-pain-patients/ April 29, 2022

Drug overdose deaths are at a record high. Here’s what the White House plans to do. https://www.npr.org/2022/04/21/1093974276/drug-overdose-deaths-opioid-fentanyl April 21, 2022

Has the Pendulum Swung Too Far Against the Use of Opioids? https://www.managedhealthcareexecutive.com/view/the-time-is-now-for-laboratory-benefit-management April 20, 2022


Treatment for opioid addiction often brings discrimination. https://www.wizmnews.com/2022/04/16/treatment-for-opioid-addiction-often-brings-discrimination/ April 16, 2022


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• The fight to legalize life-saving fentanyl test strips in Southern states. 
  http://www.louisianaweekly.com/the-fight-to-legalize-life-saving-fentanyl-test-strips-in-
  southern-states/ January 31, 2022

• Overdose deaths hit a historic high in 2020. Frustrated experts say these strategies could
  save lives. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/overdose-deaths-hit-a-historic-high-in-
  2020-frustrated-experts-say-these-strategies-could-save-lives January 13, 2022

• The future of Overdose Prevention Centers—With two U.S. centers now open, will the
  Biden administration intervene or look away? https://www.medpagetoday.com/psychiatry/addictions/96468
  January 1, 2022

• Making Addiction Treatment More Realistic And Pragmatic: The Perfect Should Not
  January 3, 2022

• To save lives, overdose antidote should be sold over-the-counter, advocates argue. 
  https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/12/14/1063865914/to-save-lives-overdose-
  antidote-should-be-sold-over-the-counter-advocates-argue December 14, 2021

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• Buprenorphine Misuse: What’s the Reality? 
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• Opinion: U.S. overdose deaths are soaring. Biden’s new plan could help ease the crisis. 
  https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/11/09/us-overdose-deaths-are-soaring-
  bidens-new-plan-could-help-ease-crisis/ November 9, 2021

• As overdose deaths soar, DEA-wary pharmacies shy from dispensing addiction 
  medication. https://www.healthleadersmedia.com/clinical-care/overdose-deaths-soar-dea-
  wary-pharmacies-shy-dispensing-addiction-medication November 9, 2021

• The Biden team is scrambling to slow a crushing wave of drug overdose deaths. 
  October 27, 2021

• Overdose deaths are so high that the Biden team is embracing ideas once seen as taboo. 
  October 27, 2021

• US Overdose Deaths Surge to an All-Time High. https://news.wttw.com/2021/10/25/us-
  overdose-deaths-surge-all-time-high October 25, 2021

• The U.S. Fentanyl Crisis: What to Know. https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/us-fentanyl-crisis-
  what-know October 20, 2021

• Price for drug that reverses opioid overdoses soars amid record deaths. 
  October 19, 2021

• Fentanyl is one reason why the U.S. drug addiction crisis is roaring back. 
  https://www.npr.org/2021/10/19/1047223109/fentanyl-is-one-reason-why-the-u-s-drug-
  addiction-crisis-is-roaring-back October 19, 2021

• Xylazine, an Emerging Adulterant. https://www.acep.org/tacticalem/newsroom/oct-
  2021/xylazine-an-emerging-adulterant/ October 18, 2021

• Drug users face obstacles and mistrust when it comes to getting COVID vaccine. 
  October 3, 2021

• DEA Safety Alert: Sharp Increase in Fake Prescription Pills Containing Fentanyl and 
  Meth. DEA Warns that International and Domestic Criminal Drug Networks are 
  Flooding the United States with Lethal Counterfeit Pills. https://www.dea.gov/alert/sharp-


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](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/chronic-pain-pandemic-isolation/2021/05/07/9e0c7112-addc-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.
The opioid crisis didn’t disappear amid the pandemic. It still calls for urgent action.

**The Health 202: Overdose deaths may have topped 90,000 in 2020.**

**The Spike in Drug Overdose Deaths During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Policy Options to Move Forward.**

**Latinos grapple with opioid overdose rise as pandemic triggers surge in U.S. use.**

**House reshapes approach to mental health and addiction.**
[https://www.rollcall.com/2021/03/16/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](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

**Thousands of Northwest residents are unexpectedly dying from causes other than COVID-19.**

**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](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.**

**The opioid crisis didn’t disappear amid the pandemic. It still calls for urgent action.**
**Editorial.**
• 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.

• Opioid overdoses on the rise during COVID-19 pandemic, despite telemedicine care.

• U.S. Sees Deadly Drug Overdose Spike During Pandemic.

• As overdoses rise during pandemic, 2 moms share their stories of loss.

• AMA Urges Changes After Dramatic Increase in Illicit Opioid Fatalities.

• Drug overdose deaths jump in 2019 to nearly 71,000, a record high, CDC says.

• 'Opioid overdoses are skyrocketing': as Covid-19 sweeps across US an old epidemic returns.

• High Rate of Stimulant Use in Opioid ED Cases.

• Coronavirus Crisis Disrupts Treatment For Another Epidemic: Addiction.

• ‘Cries for help’: Drug overdoses are soaring during the coronavirus pandemic.

• Expanded Telehealth Helps Communities Address Opioid Use Disorder During Pandemic; Practitioners see benefits for patients and providers, especially in rural areas.*

• Pandemic unleashes a spike in overdose deaths.

• Despite the Challenges, We Must Fight Harder to Address the Nation’s Opioid Epidemic; Patrice A. Harris, MD. https://morningconsult.com/opinions/2020/06/15/despite-the-challenges-we-must-fight-harder-to-address-the-nations-opioid-epidemic/ June 15, 2020

• A New Addiction Crisis: Treatment Centers Face Financial Collapse.


State reports

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   - Montgomery County, DA warns of rising fentanyl overdoses. [https://www.wsfa.com/2022/06/14/montgomery-county-da-warns-rising-fentanyl-overdoses/](https://www.wsfa.com/2022/06/14/montgomery-county-da-warns-rising-fentanyl-overdoses/) June 14, 2022
   - Anniston police investigating several likely fentanyl overdoses. [https://www.wbrc.com/2022/04/02/anniston-police-investigating-several-likely-fentanyl-overdoses/](https://www.wbrc.com/2022/04/02/anniston-police-investigating-several-likely-fentanyl-overdoses/) April 1, 2022
   - Overdose deaths are up 31.3% in Alabama. [https://whnt.com/news/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/](https://www.wbrc.com/2021/04/21/opioid-overdoses-increased-ala/) May 4, 2021
   - Opioid deaths increased in Jefferson County in 2020.

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- Governor Dunleavy Addresses Fentanyl Crisis in Alaska. https://gov.alaska.gov/newsroom/2022/05/03/governor-dunleavy-addresses-fentanyl-crisis-in-alaska/ May 3, 2022
- Juneau fire department is distributing opioid overdose rescue kits. https://www.ktoo.org/2022/04/18/juneau-narcan-opioid-overdose-kits/ April 18, 2022
- 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

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- ‘We can’t tell how much is manufactured’: How much fentanyl is not getting seized in Arizona? https://www.12news.com/article/news/local/arizona/over-half-of-the-nations-fentanyl-pills-are-seized-in-arizona/75-9574d508-6cb2-47e7-b4a4-171f2a74007b August 5, 2022
- Cops: 500,000 fentanyl pills found in Arizona traffic stop.
Tucson's rise in drug overdose deaths could be linked to pandemic.
Arkansas

  November 21, 2022
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• 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.  

5. California
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• Rainbow Fentanyl Alert.  
  https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CCDPHP/sapb/Pages/Rainbow-Fentanyl-Alert.aspx September 21, 2022
• ‘We Have To Teach Them To Stay Safe’—High Schooler Dies From Fentanyl Overdose Amid Rise in Drug Deaths.  
• California governor rejects legal drug injection sites.  
• Northern California officials warn about ‘rainbow’ fentanyl going around.  
• Quelling the ‘stigma of shame’: The county’s top doctor opens up about the pain of losing a child to fentanyl.  
• Overdoses, not COVID-19, drive spike in LA homeless deaths.  
• More than 92 pounds of fentanyl seized in California.  
• California lawmakers target fentanyl as opioid overdoses surge.  
• Goodbye Harm Reduction Institute. OC closes its last needle exchange.  
• S.F. opioid epidemic: Fewer people died of overdoses in 2021 than 2020, but crisis still unprecedented.  
• San Francisco’s new rapid response teams race to save lives as ODs dramatically rise.  
• In L.A. County, Opioid Deaths Spiked During Stay-At-Home in One Particular
September 16, 2021


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- Opioid crisis in Colorado could get worse amid pandemic. https://apnews.com/bf1c11ac45d63808ffeae945c750cd81 June 28, 2020

7. Connecticut
Two epidemics taking a toll in CT as opioid overdoses rise amid coronavirus.


Addiction experts call for more funding, compassion to fight opioid epidemic.

Accidental drug overdoses are now a leading cause of death in Connecticut.


Fentanyl ‘driving force’ to rising overdose deaths in CT, officials say.

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Echo of pandemic isolation continues to impact addiction crisis in Connecticut.


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


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- Delaware police seize largest supply of pre-packaged heroin in state history.


- 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


- Delaware looks to roll out stabilization centers to reduce overdose deaths.

- Opioid epidemic is worsened by COVID-19 pandemic.

- Commissioner Navarro Partners with Aquila to Distribute Overdose Medication.

- Providers say drug and alcohol use up during pandemic following record year of Delaware overdoses.

- Suspected Overdose Deaths for May in Delaware Tie Previous Monthly High Set in 2018.

9. District of Columbia


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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-opiod-epidemic-even-as-a-pandemic-rages/2020/08/04/c5c1cc54-d662-11ea-aff6-220dd3a14741_story.html August 4, 2020

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