

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

***Updated November 12, 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 news articles and 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 contaminated with illicit fentanyl.

Among AMA advocacy, resources and recommendations:

- [AMA letter to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). 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. June 2020.
- [AMA-Manatt Health national policy roadmap](#) urges use of best practices that already exist at the local, state and national levels that have helped reduced drug-related harms and improved patient outcomes. December 2020.
- [AMA comments on Biden Administration's 2022 National Drug Control Strategy](#). Among the AMA's recommendations in support of the strategy: Reduce barriers to medications to treat substance use disorders; 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 to remove arbitrary restrictions for care for patients with pain; make use of best practices that already exist; and take steps to develop and support a national, standardized reporting system for key metrics related to drug use. July 2021.
- [Recommendations from the AMA Substance Use and Pain Care Task Force](#) and [AMA 2021 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. September 2021
- 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 news and other 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

- **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.** <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/27/1049245787/biden-hhs-tackle-drug-overdose-deaths> October 27, 2021
- **Overdose deaths are so high that the Biden team is embracing ideas once seen as taboo.** <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/27/1049245787/biden-hhs-tackle-drug-overdose-deaths> 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.** <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/oct/19/naloxone-price-soars-opioid-overdoses> 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
- **Drug users face obstacles and mistrust when it comes to getting COVID vaccine.** <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/03/1042802584/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-increase-fake-prescription-pills-containing-fentanyl-and-meth> September 27, 2021
- **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
- **As opioid epidemic rages, an overdose antidote is in short supply; Pfizer says manufacturing issue led to problems producing injectable Narcan.** <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/08/02/metro/opioid-epidemic-rages-an-overdose-antidote-is-short-supply-ri/> August 2, 2021

- **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
- **Drug overdose deaths in 2020 hit highest number ever recorded, CDC data shows.**
<https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/14/health/drug-overdose-deaths-2020/index.html> July 17, 2021
- **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
- **In pandemic, drug overdose deaths soar among Black Americans.**
<https://apnews.com/article/george-floyd-michael-brown-pandemics-coronavirus-pandemic-race-and-ethnicity-ea94f4021018bfc7bc88e7b494c8665e> June 24, 2021
- **The Opioid Crackdown is Hurting People in Pain.**
<https://washingtonmonthly.com/2021/06/15/the-opioid-crackdown-is-hurting-people-in-pain/> June 15, 2021
- **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
- **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> 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/> April 7, 2021
- **The Spike in Drug Overdose Deaths During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Policy Options to Move Forward.** <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/blog/2021/spike-drug-overdose-deaths-during-covid-19-pandemic-and-policy-options-move-forward> March 25, 2021.
- **Latinos grapple with opioid overdose rise as pandemic triggers surge in U.S. use.**
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/latinos-grapple-opioid-overdose-rise-covid-pandemic-triggers-surge-us-rcna415> March 17, 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.**
<https://news.bloomberglaw.com/health-law-and-business/in-birth-and-death-opioid-crisis-to-leave-mark-long-after-covid> February 25, 2021

- **As the pandemic ushered in isolation and financial hardship, overdose deaths reached new heights.** <https://www.statnews.com/2021/02/16/as-pandemic-ushered-in-isolation-financial-hardship-overdose-deaths-reached-new-heights/> February 16, 2021.
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- **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
- **Thousands of Northwest residents are unexpectedly dying from causes other than COVID-19.** <https://www.opb.org/article/2020/11/25/covid-19-oregon-washington-idaho-excess-deaths/> December 4, 2020
- **Overdose-Related Cardiac Arrests Observed by Emergency Medical Services During the US COVID-19 Epidemic.** <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.4218> December 3, 2020
- **“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
- **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.** <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/overdose-deaths-appear-rise-amid-coronavirus-pandemic-u-s-n1244024> October 20, 2020
- **The opioid crisis didn’t disappear amid the pandemic. It still calls for urgent action. Editorial.** https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-opioid-crisis-didnt-disappear-amid-the-pandemic-it-still-calls-for-urgent-action/2020/10/16/7df74fd0-0d7f-11eb-b1e8-16b59b92b36d_story.html October 16, 2020
- **Drug overdose deaths on pace for record year during coronavirus pandemic, CDC says.** <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/coronavirus/article246469555.html> October 15, 2020
- **Opioid Deaths: America’s Other Fatal Health Crisis Hasn’t Gone Away.** <https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2020-10-14/opioid-deaths-americas-other-fatal-health-crisis-continues-during-covid-19> October 14, 2020
- **Sharp Rise In Drug Overdose Deaths Seen During 1st Few Months Of Pandemic.** <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/10/14/923721544/sharp-rise-in-drug-overdose-deaths-seen-during-1st-few-months-of-pandemic> October 14, 2020
- **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
- **Opioid overdoses on the rise during COVID-19 pandemic, despite telemedicine care.** <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/opioid-overdoses-rise-covid-19-pandemic-telemedicine-care/story?id=72442735> August 24, 2020
- **U.S. Sees Deadly Drug Overdose Spike During Pandemic.** <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/08/13/901627189/u-s-sees-deadly-drug-overdose-spike-during-pandemic> August 13, 2020

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<https://www.today.com/health/overdoses-rise-during-coronavirus-pandemic-moms-speak-out-t188420> August 5, 2020
- **AMA Urges Changes After Dramatic Increase in Illicit Opioid Fatalities.**
<https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/934548> July 24, 2020
- **Drug overdose deaths jump in 2019 to nearly 71,000, a record high, CDC says.**
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/15/health/drug-overdose-deaths-2019/index.html> July 16, 2020
- **'Opioid overdoses are skyrocketing': as Covid-19 sweeps across US an old epidemic returns.** <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/09/coronavirus-pandemic-us-opioids-crisis> July 9, 2020
- **High Rate of Stimulant Use in Opioid ED Cases.**
<https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/933527> July 7, 2020
- **Coronavirus Crisis Disrupts Treatment For Another Epidemic: Addiction.**
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- **'Cries for help': Drug overdoses are soaring during the coronavirus pandemic.**
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- **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
- **Pandemic unleashes a spike in overdose deaths.**
<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2020/06/pandemic-unleashes-a-spike-in-overdose-deaths-1959428?source=email> June 29, 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.
- **A New Addiction Crisis: Treatment Centers Face Financial Collapse.**
<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/06/15/865006675/a-new-addiction-crisis-treatment-centers-face-financial-collapse> June 15, 2020
- **Substance use up amid pandemic: survey.** <https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/501923-substance-use-up-amid-pandemic-survey> June 9, 2020
- **The Escalation of the Opioid Epidemic Due to COVID-19 and Resulting Lessons About Treatment Alternatives.** <https://www.ajmc.com/journals/issue/2020/2020-vol26-n7/the-escalation-of-the-opioid-epidemic-due-to-covid19-and-resulting-lessons-about-treatment-alternatives> July 2020
- **Drug overdoses climb during COVID-19 pandemic; Officials nationwide report spikes less than a year after the Trump administration touted progress in battling the crisis.**
<https://www.rollcall.com/2020/05/27/drug-overdoses-climb-during-covid-19-pandemic/> May 27, 2020
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<https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/14/health/opioids-addiction-appalachia-coronavirus-trnd/index.html> May 14, 2020
- **Don't Forget the Other Pandemic Killing Thousands of Americans.**
<https://www.thedailybeast.com/opioid-deaths-surge-during-coronavirus-in-americas-overdose-capitals> May 4, 2020

- **The pandemic may fuel the next wave of the opioid crisis.**
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/coronavirus-pandemic-may-fuel-the-next-wave-of-the-opioid-crisis/> April 21, 2020

State reports

1. Alabama

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<https://www.waaytv.com/content/news/HPD-now-carrying-Narcan-other-law-enforcement-agencies-do-as-well-575625151.html> October 28, 2021
- **What's up with all those purple flags planted beside a Huntsville street?**
<https://www.al.com/news/huntsville/2021/08/whats-up-with-all-of-those-purple-flags-planted-beside-a-huntsville-street.html> August 31, 2021
- **Fatal overdoses skyrocket in Alabama.** <https://www.waff.com/2021/07/15/fatal-overdoses-skyrocketing-alabama/> July 14, 2021
- **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.**
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- **Health officials raise the alarm over overdose deaths in Birmingham area.**
<https://www.al.com/news/2021/05/health-officials-raise-the-alarm-over-overdose-deaths-in-birmingham-area.html> May 4, 2021
- **Opioid deaths increased in Jefferson County in 2020.**
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- **Drug overdoses climbed in Alabama during pandemic.**
<https://www.al.com/news/2021/01/drug-overdoses-climbed-in-alabama-during-pandemic.html> January 25, 2021
- **Overdoses on the rise in pandemic.** <https://mountaineagle.com/stories/overdoses-on-the-rise-in-pandemic,28650> September 30, 2020
- **Opioid overdoses on the rise since pandemic began.**
<https://www.wbrc.com/2020/08/18/opioid-overdoses-rise-since-pandemic-began/> August 18, 2020
- **Drug Overdoses Increase During the Pandemic.** <https://wbhm.org/feature/2020/drug-overdoses-increase-during-the-pandemic/> July 20, 2020
- **Madison County seeing a spike in overdoses, deaths amid pandemic.**
<https://www.rocketcitynow.com/article/news/local/madison-county-seeing-a-spike-in-overdoses-deaths-amid-pandemic/525-021e43d6-44de-4c50-99ee-a326f2394a22> May 13, 2020

2. Alaska

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- **Alaska reports increase in drug-related overdoses.** <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/northwest/alaska-reports-increase-in-drug-related-overdoses/> May 22, 2021
- **Overdose deaths in Alaska have been on the rise since the pandemic began, report says.**
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3. Arizona

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<https://prescottnews.com/index.php/2021/10/10/governor-ducey-fights-to-protect-arizona-communities/> October 10, 2021
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- **Arizona teens are overdosing at alarming rates.**
https://www.azfamily.com/news/investigations/opioid_crisis/arizona-teens-dying-of-fentanyl-overdoses/article_bbc50ce6-e022-11eb-8f1b-97acac350276.html July 15, 2021
- **Tragedies Pile up With Drug Overdoses Surging Amid Pandemic.**
<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/arizona/articles/2021-05-08/tragedies-pile-up-with-drug-overdoses-surging-amid-pandemic> May 8, 2021
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- **Amid COVID-19 pandemic, the opioid epidemic rages on: Here are resources to get help.** <https://www.abcl5.com/news/rebound/keeping-you-safe/amid-covid-19-pandemic-the-opioid-epidemic-rages-on-here-are-resources-to-get-help> September 16, 2020
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4. Arkansas

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