

## Overdose Deaths Reach All Time High

Lost behind the veil of the COVID-19 pandemic are the skyrocketing overdose death rates as the epidemic has resurged this past year across the nation. While deaths related to COVID-19 reach record highs in the U.S., new data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that deaths from drug overdoses are accelerating amid the pandemic, signaling the continued emotional strain that the virus is having on people. The CDC said that more than 81,000 drug overdose fatalities occurred in the U.S. over the last 12 months, ending in May 2020. This is the highest number of overdose deaths ever recorded in a 12 month/one year-long period, officials said in a press release. Although the observed time frame encompasses many months outside the COVID-19 pandemic, experts believe the record-high numbers are linked to the onset of the pandemic.

“The disruption to daily life due to the COVID-19 pandemic has hit those with substance use disorder hard,” said CDC Director Robert Redfield. “As we continue the fight to end this pandemic, it’s important to not lose sight of different groups being affected in other ways. We need to take care of people suffering from unintended consequences.”

Opioids were largely responsible for most of the overdose deaths, primarily illegally manufactured fentanyl. Synthetic opioid-linked fatalities rose 38.4 percent when analyzing yearly rates from 2019 to 2020. Deaths involving cocaine — a substance sometimes mixed with fentanyl — have also increased by 26.5 percent. Other drugs seen in more overdose deaths include psychostimulants, namely methamphetamine, which increased by 34.8 percent, outpacing cocaine-related deaths.

“The increase in overdose deaths is concerning,” said Deb Houry, the director of CDC’s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. “CDC’s Injury Center continues to help and support communities responding to the evolving overdose crisis. Our priority is to do everything we can to equip people on the ground to save lives in their communities.”

COVID-19 has been documented to have exacerbated addiction and substance-abuse illnesses, with studies naming the social and economic challenges caused by the pandemic as key factors in driving overdoses. Logistical results of the pandemic, such as needing to isolate oneself and limited access to shared spaces that help people with substance abuse disorders cope, also contribute to a rise in overdose deaths. Recently, the American Medical Association (AMA) documented a similar spike in drug overdose deaths fueled by opioid abuse.

“It is imperative that we continue to talk about other health issues that are impacting our nation,” AMA Immediate Past President Patrice A. Harris said. “We are appropriately focused on COVID, it is still top of mind for most people, and it's understandable that we can lose focus on other issues ... but we still have to make sure we are focused on the overdose epidemic that we continue to experience in this country. ”The pandemic is taking its toll on those struggling with addiction, with nationwide spikes in overdoses and another troubling trend in Suffolk As recently as 2019 we were seeing a decline in overdose deaths of about 30-40% for the first time in about four years. Data from the medical examiner's offices show there's been a 43% increase in fatal overdoses in Suffolk and a 40% increase in fatal overdoses in Nassau over the last 10 months. Clearly the full effect of the pandemic has not been fully calculated.

A recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advisory urged all public health departments to raise awareness about the need for the opioid-reversing drug naloxone. It states that synthetic opioids, including manufactured fentanyl, appear to be the primary cause of the increase in overdose deaths. According to Suffolk County's Heroin and Opiate Advisory panel the opioid overdose-reversing drug naloxone has saved scores of lives in Suffolk, with 910 saves in 2020 alone,"

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