

Overdose Deaths: Back on the Rise in the Shadow of COVID-19

Nearly 71,000 Americans died of drug overdoses last year, a new record that predates the COVID-19 crisis, which the White House and many experts believe will drive such deaths even higher. Drug overdose deaths in the United States rose 4.6% in 2019 to 70,980, surpassing the peak of deaths in 2017, as overdose deaths continue to spike amid the current pandemic that's taken a toll on America's mental health. These deaths include 50,042 involving opioids, according to preliminary data released by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention. The numbers released by the CDC show the trend is driven by fentanyl and similar synthetic opioids, which accounted for 36,500 overdose deaths. Deaths involving cocaine and methamphetamine also are rising.

With billions of dollars devoted to ending the opioid epidemic, policymakers had hoped overdose deaths would continue to decline, or at least plateau, after 2018 showed a dip for the first time in three decades.

Chuck Ingoglia, president and CEO of the National Council for Behavioral Health, a trade association for mental health and addiction treatment providers said "It was premature to declare victory in 2018". "We still don't have enough capacity to reach people who need it. Even with the new investments we are still woefully underfunded". Experts say the federal focus on opioids has been too narrow and should be extended more broadly on all substances, including alcohol.

Just last year officials were touting a turn in the trend for the first time in many years as fatal opioid overdoses in Nassau and Suffolk counties decreased in 2018 after alarming spikes at the height of an epidemic that has claimed almost 3,700 lives on Long Island since 2010. Fatal overdoses fell to 483 in 2018, from a high of 614 in 2017, according to data provided by the police departments and medical examiners in Nassau and Suffolk counties. The figures are estimates because in some cases toxicology reports can take years to complete. In the past nine years, roughly 3,685 people fatally overdosed on opioids on Long Island. Island wide fatal overdoses decreased by 21 percent from 2017 to 2018.

In addition to the noted increase in 2019 we have seen an alarming spike in fatal drug overdoses on Long Island in 2020, linked to the coronavirus pandemic, law enforcement and public health officials said. Newsday recently reported preliminary data in Suffolk County suggests a 40% year-to-date increase in fatal overdoses during the same period in 2019. In Nassau County, fatal overdoses have jumped at least 50% year to date during the same time period in 2019.

Suffolk District Attorney Timothy Sini, Nassau Police Commissioner Patrick Ryder and other officials blame the rise of fatal overdoses on the pandemic, which has pushed many people struggling with anxiety, loneliness, grief and fear to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol. The pandemic has also altered the supply of drugs like heroin and cocaine to Long Island, prompting dealers to cut their products with fentanyl, a cheap and deadly synthetic opioid.

Sales of at-home alcohol, according to a Nielsen report from June, have spiked nearly 27% since the start of the pandemic. And though that doesn't take into account shutdowns of bars and

restaurants nationwide, it suggests people are turning to alcohol to cope with a life-altering global crisis.

Dr. Elinore McCance-Katz head of the Federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), told USA TODAY in May that more people reportedly sought treatment for alcohol misuse in regions where the coronavirus has hit hardest.

What Dr. McCance Katz did not report however is that access to treatment was severely impacted in many places including here in New York. Some hospitals closed detox units and converted the beds to COVID care. Others refused to admit clients from hard hit areas and virtually all programs shifted to virtual services during the height of the pandemic. We are slowly seeing a restoration of on-site services as things have stabilized to an extent in New York.

Suspected overdoses nationally (not all of them fatal) jumped 18 percent in March compared with last year, 29 percent in April and 42 percent in May, according to the Overdose Detection Mapping Application Program, a federal initiative that collects data from ambulance teams, hospitals and police. In some jurisdictions, such as Milwaukee County, dispatch calls for overdoses have increased >50%.

Addiction is a disease of isolation where the solution in large part is connection and community. Being unable to be in the presence of others has taken a toll despite a proliferation of online virtual support groups.

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