

NEWS BRIEF

Provided by: Evolution of Benefits

U.S. Drug Overdose Deaths Hit Record High in 2021

According to new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [data](#), an estimated 107,622 Americans died from drug overdoses in 2021, a 15% increase from the previous year. Fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid, was involved in the most deaths.

Opioids were again responsible for the vast majority (75%) of overdose deaths in the country. Deaths by overdose may involve multiple drugs; therefore, a single death might be included in more than one drug category. Here is the drug breakdown of overdose deaths in 2021:

- Fentanyl: 71,238
- Methamphetamine: 32,856
- Cocaine: 24,538
- Prescription pain medications: 13,503

Overdose deaths have been on the rise for years in the United States, but they surged during the pandemic, especially in its first year. For perspective, annual deaths were nearly 50% higher in 2021 than in 2019.

Throughout the pandemic, experts noticed an uptick in substance abuse amid widespread unemployment and more Americans reporting mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. Even as the pandemic ends, it won't be a quick switch back to normalcy since these conditions will need to be addressed and treated.

Treatment, or the lack thereof, is a crucial reason overdose numbers continue to rise. Drug abuse treatment was lacking even before the pandemic. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, more than 20 million people age 12

and older reported having a substance abuse disorder in 2019—but only 10% were receiving care.

“You won’t see a reversal in the same way you saw the acceleration because these drug distribution networks and addiction become embedded in the community. And it’s not like they turn off overnight.”

- Katherine Keyes, associate professor at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health

What’s Next?

Undoubtedly, the pandemic accelerated trends already heading in the wrong direction. Reversing this course will take concentrated efforts—and time.

May is designated as Mental Health Awareness Month in the United States. Mental health problems and substance use disorders sometimes co-occur. This month is a reminder to check in with yourself and others living with mental health conditions and facing substance abuse. If you have concerns, reach out to a doctor or use the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s National Helpline by calling 800-662-HELP (4357).

