

# CDC report: Worsening drug abuse epidemic across US

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A recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) describes the worsening epidemic of drug abuse across the US, especially the use of opioids. With nearly 48,000 drug overdose deaths, 2014 has eclipsed all other recorded years as the most deadly. From 2013 to 2014, opioid overdose deaths increased by 14 percent, while overall drug overdose deaths increased by 6.5 percent.

In a public statement on issuing the report, CDC Director Tom Frieden said, “The increasing number of deaths from opioid overdose is alarming.” He added, “The opioid epidemic is devastating American families and communities. To curb these trends and save lives, we must help prevent addiction and provide support and treatment to those who suffer from opioid use disorders.”

The authors begin the report: “The United States is experiencing an epidemic of drug overdose (poisoning) deaths. Since 2000, the rate of deaths from drug overdoses has increased 137 percent, including a 200 percent increase in the rate of overdose deaths involving opioids (opioid pain relievers and heroin),” totaling almost half a million deaths.

Over half of all these overdoses resulted from drugs that are classified as opioids, including heroin. Most of the states with the highest rates and sharp increases of drug overdoses lie within the Rust Belt and the coal mining region of Appalachia—West Virginia (35.5 deaths per 100,000), New Mexico (27.3), New Hampshire (26.2), Kentucky (24.7) and Ohio (24.6). States that experienced a sharp increase in the rate of drug overdoses from 2013 to 2014 include: Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

Overdose deaths have increased for both males and females, persons aged 25-44 years, and those 55 years and older, as well as for non-Hispanic whites and blacks.

The WSWS has reported previously on the overdose epidemic afflicting West Virginia, with Huntington infamously holding the title as the overdose capital of the state. West Virginia has the highest rate of unemployment and the lowest labor force participation rate in the US, and with the price and demand of coal plummeting, more layoffs will hit the region.

In Buffalo, New York, another rust belt city, opioid overdosing has likewise reached epidemic proportions.

The report states that there are “two distinct but interrelated trends [in the data]: a 15-year increase in overdose deaths involving prescription opioid pain relievers and a recent surge in illicit opioid overdose deaths, driven largely by heroin.”

Overdose deaths from synthetic opioids have almost doubled between 2013 and 2014, while natural and semisynthetic opioids, including the frequently prescribed opioid pain relievers oxycodone and hydrocodone, are still implicated in more overdose deaths than any other opioid-type drug.

The increase in synthetic opioid deaths, the report notes, is related to the increase in the accessibility of illicit fentanyl—a synthetic opioid mainly issued for sedation during medical procedures, which is 100 times stronger than morphine and 50 times stronger than heroin. The drug can also be counterfeited and sold as OxyContin or Percocet pills, and perniciously mixed with heroin. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Florida, Maryland, Maine and Ohio have seen a spike of illicit fentanyl seizures, along with paralleling overdose deaths.

Heroin overdose deaths have tripled in four years as

more and more people begin using the drug nationwide, partially a result of opioid pain reliever misuse and dependence. “Past misuse of prescription opioids is the strongest risk factor for heroin initiation and use, specifically among persons who report past-year dependence or abuse,” the report notes.

As a result, those who become dependent on painkillers frequently turn to heroin because of its ease of availability, its inexpensive price, and high purity, which are all causes for the increase in heroin use and overdose.

At the end of the report, the authors present some palliatives to solve the epidemic, such as “efforts to improve safer prescribing of prescription opioids must be intensified ... expanding access to and use of naloxone (a safe and effective antidote for all opioid-related overdoses) ... increasing access to medication-assisted treatment, in combination with behavioral therapies ... Efforts to ensure access to integrated prevention services,” and a collaboration of public health agencies, coroners, medical examiners and law enforcement to “improve detection of outbreaks of drug overdose deaths.”

But these measures offer no long-term solutions to the ongoing problem. In fact, while some of these measures have already been implemented, the overdose rate has increased. For instance, Pennsylvania had at least 800 people overdose on heroin in 2014, with expected numbers for 2015 to surpass the previous year. State and local governments, however, have tried to decrease deaths by allowing police departments to use the life-saving drug naloxone, which reverses the adverse effects of heroin. The drug has already saved the lives of 500 people.

The inherent problem rests with the lack of prospects for many people, turning to dependence on drugs to escape the social misery around them. The eradication of decent-paying jobs, quality education, and inequality contribute greatly to such a horrible epidemic. Magnifying the problem is the lack of quality health care and affordable rehabilitation clinics, along with the stigma the ruling class tends to associate with “junkies,” resulting in individuals failing to seek help when it is desperately needed.

As the New Year begins and the social devastation across America continues uninterrupted, the CDC report is a stark indicator that increasing numbers of

people, unable to find any progressive outlet within the confines of the current state of society, are becoming addicted to illegal and prescription drugs and suffering deadly consequences.



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