

# More than 52,000 in the US died from drug overdoses in 2015

E.P. Milligan  
1 April 2017

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 52,404 people in the US died from drug overdoses in 2015. Sixty-three percent of overdoses were due to opioids.

Drug overdoses now account for more deaths than from guns or car accidents. The 2015 death rate is significantly higher than the rate during the peak of the AIDS epidemic in 1995, in which 43,115 succumbed to the illness.

Since 1999, opioid overdose numbers have quadrupled. One in four overdose deaths in the US is now due to heroin in particular. Prescription opioids such as oxycodone and hydrocodone also factor in prominently.

The journal JAMA Psychiatry, published by the American Medical Association, has issued a new study that details changes in patterns of heroin use since 2001. It concluded that the number of people who have used heroin at some point in their life has increased five times, and the number of heroin abusers has roughly tripled. Some 3.8 million Americans—1.6 per cent of the population—claim to have used heroin at least once.

The sharpest increase in heroin use of all demographic groups has occurred among white males.

The report's authors compiled survey data from 79,402 individuals between the periods between 2001-2002 and 2012-2013. The responses were collected from the National Epidemiological Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions, a study made by the National Institutes of Health to evaluate substance use and abuse.

Heroin use levels between whites and non-whites were similar in the 2001-2002 figures, at 0.34 percent and 0.32 percent. By 2012-2013, those figures jumped to 1.90 percent among whites—an almost sixfold increase—as opposed to 1.05 percent among non-whites.

Use greatly increased among those with a high school education or less in addition to those who lived under the federal poverty line.

Alluding to the deepening social crisis in the United States, the report states “these trends are concerning because increases in the prevalence of heroin use and use disorder have been occurring among vulnerable individuals who have few resources to overcome problems associated with use.”

According to a 2016 Surgeon General's report on alcohol and drug abuse, only one in 10 individuals that struggle with substance abuse disorders receive treatment.

The study provides further evidence to the culpability of the pharmaceutical industry, which has generated immense profits by flooding the medical market with prescription opioids like oxycodone and hydrocodone. According to survey data, many respondents claimed that they started using heroin after using prescription opioids.

Around one-third of all white heroin users had used prescription drugs in 2001-2002. In 2013, more than half of all white heroin users began with prescription drug abuse. Over the past 20 years, the number of opioid prescriptions has grown threefold.

Heroin use has spread more or less evenly across all age groups. Heroin addiction, however, has grown disproportionately higher amongst those under 45 years of age.

A county by county study published by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation on Wednesday shows that drug overdose deaths have resulted in 778 years of potential life lost for every 100,000 people. It also notes that the increase in premature deaths among 15- to 44-year-olds is largely from drug overdoses.

A particularly striking development is the growth of

drug overdoses in suburban and rural communities. Suburbs, which previously saw the lowest rates of premature death from overdoses, now have the highest.

Confronted with decades of deindustrialization, rising social inequality and debt, housing insecurity, lack of access to decent education and other much-needed social programs, growing layers of working-class populations in suburban and rural communities have turned to substance abuse. These same stresses have given rise to mental illness, with rates of depression and suicide finding a particularly high expression among white male workers.

The so-called “rust-belt” and former coal mining regions of the United States have seen a concentrated expression of these processes. What were once thriving industrial and mining towns have been transformed into desolate, rusting shells of their former selves. Places like Pontiac, Michigan; Akron, Ohio and Huntington, West Virginia have little in the way of decent-paying jobs, while schools and community centers have been shuttered.

The rate of drug overdose deaths in West Virginia has spiraled out of control to the point that the state’s Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR) funding for its Indigent Burial Program has run out with five months left in the fiscal year.

The shocking rise of drug use is an ugly expression of the social crisis in America, particularly amongst young people who see no future and no way out from such a desperate predicament.

On Wednesday, President Trump announced the formation of a high-profile group he claims will formulate a strategy to curb the country’s opioid epidemic. This group includes New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, US Attorney General Jeff Sessions, Defense Secretary James “Mad Dog” Mattis and Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price. Officials from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have been deliberately left out.

The decision not to include the FDA in this group has sparked criticism from opioid addiction experts, who claim that the agency is an integral part of addressing the epidemic by introducing much-needed regulations on the sale of prescription opioid drugs.

Regardless, Trump’s nominee to head the FDA, Dr. Scott Gottlieb, has deep ties to the pharmaceutical industry. Gottlieb serves on the boards of three drug

companies and has a venture capital firm which funds no less than 150 others. It is inconceivable to think that such a pro-corporate administration will lift a finger to alleviate the country’s drug epidemic.

The FDA has been accused of expediting the approval of opioid pain killers for some time now. In 2013 under the Obama administration, the FDA approved Zohydro, the first extended-release pure form of hydrocodone. Ignoring its own advisory panel, which voted 11-2 to reject the drug entirely, the agency approved it without tamper-resistant protections. This allowed the drug to be easily crushed to maximize potency, creating greater potential for abuse.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**