

# Opioid overdose deaths triple among US teens and young children

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31 December 2018

Opioid overdose death rates among US teens and children have tripled over the past 17 years, a new study shows. The study, published online in *JAMA Network Open*, examined a group of almost 9,000 children and adolescents (under age 20) who died in all settings from opioid poisonings between 1999 and 2016.

Researchers found that young children have either died from accidentally ingesting narcotics or from intentional poisoning. Teens, meanwhile, have more often died from unintentional overdoses, using prescriptions painkillers found in their homes or drugs bought on the streets. These include prescription opioids, heroin, fentanyl and other legal and illicit drugs.

Julie Gaither, lead researcher of the study and an instructor at the Yale School of Medicine, told *MedicalXpress*, “These deaths don’t reach the magnitude of adult deaths from opioids, but they follow a similar pattern.” She added, “As we consider how to contain this epidemic, parents, clinicians and prescribers need to consider how children and adolescents are affected and how our families and communities are affected.”

The study shows the depth of the opioid crisis facing the youngest segments of the population and points to the woefully inadequate response of the government in dealing with this social catastrophe as it spirals out of control.

The study notes: “What began more than two decades ago as a public health problem primarily among young and middle-aged white males is now an epidemic of prescription and illicit opioid abuse that is taking a toll on all segments of US society, including the pediatric population.”

Drug overdose deaths in the US topped 72,000 in

2017, according to estimates released earlier this year by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This staggering figure was 6,000 more deaths than 2016 estimates, a rise of 9.5 percent. Some 43,000 of drug overdose deaths in 2016, the latest year examined by the *JAMA* study, are attributed to opioid overdoses. Other causes include alcohol poisoning and other drug overdoses.

The study categorized children and adolescents by the following ages: 0 to 4, 5 to 9, 10 to 14, and 15 to 19 years. Deaths in these age groups were then classified according to intent: unintentional, suicide, homicide, and undetermined intent. The study based its findings on death certificates since 1999.

A total of 8,986 children and adolescents died from prescription and opioid poisonings between 1999 and 2016: 605 (or 6.7 percent) among ages 0–4; 96 (1.1 percent) ages 5–9, 364 (4.1 percent) ages 10–14 and 7,921 (88.1 percent) ages 15–19. Among those under age 20, the annual estimated mortality rate from opioids more than tripled during this period—rising from 0.22 per 100,000 in 1999 to 0.81 per 100,000 in 2016.

The largest changes were seen among the oldest and youngest children. Teenagers ages 15–19 had by far the highest death rates from opioids, at 88.1 percent of the total. Of these teen deaths, more than 85 percent were unintentional. In other words, while some teens deliberately overdose, others, seeking escape from the stresses of unemployment, peer pressure, school demands, and college admissions and debt, are falling victim to the wide availability and lethal potency of both legal and illegal opioids.

While some deaths can be blamed on unscrupulous drug dealers, these deaths must above all be laid at the feet of the multibillion-dollar pharmaceutical companies who have flooded neighborhoods with these

potent opioids. Workers and professionals who have been prescribed these drugs become the unwitting suppliers to their children, who find them in home medicine cabinets and ingest them, lacking adequate knowledge of the dangers they pose.

The 605 deaths among children ages 0 to 4 is the second highest, accounting for 6.7 percent of all pediatric deaths. Two hundred thirty of these deaths were unintentional, while the manner of death could not be determined in 227 of these cases.

However, 148 deaths in this age group, about one-quarter of the total, were due to homicide. And the percentage of deaths due to homicide was highest for those younger than 1 year, standing at 34.5 percent of this age group. Behind this appalling statistic stands the social desperation that would drive a parent or caregiver to kill an innocent infant with the aid of opioids. There are no figures that indicate how many of these young victims have been born addicted to opioids themselves.

While the study found that the majority of pediatric deaths were among non-Hispanic white males, with each passing year non-Hispanic black children accounted for a larger proportion of fatalities. While white children saw a threefold increase in deaths, black children had a nearly fourfold increase.

A similar trend has been seen for female children, among whom death rates increased more than threefold compared with a twofold increase among males. These trends mirror those seen in the adult population, where deaths due to opioids have been rising at a faster rate than among blacks and women than among white men.

In line with the opioid crisis affecting the US adult population, the devastating toll of opioid deaths among children casts a grim light on 21st century America. While the opioid crisis spares no segment of society, the most profoundly affected are workers and the poor and the communities where they live. At the root of this crisis lies a society characterized by growing social inequality, corporate greed and profound government indifference.

In 2017, the Trump administration declared the opioid epidemic a “public health emergency,” but then allocated no new funding to the states to address it. In September, congressional Democrats and Republicans approved compromise legislation that purports to address the opioid crisis, but the bill is primarily

focused on law enforcement. It allocates as little as \$8 billion over five years, or roughly \$1.6 billion per year—a pittance given the dimensions of the epidemic.

A health emergency on the scale of the drug epidemic requires an emergency, socialist response. The giant pharmaceutical companies, who are responsible for the scourge of opioid addiction and deaths, must be transformed into publicly owned utilities. The health insurance industry, which dedicates its resources to denying coverage and treatments instead of curing the ill, must be abolished and replaced with universal, socialized medicine.

To counter the opioid crisis, which claims increasing numbers of the young and old, the Socialist Equality Party insists that billions of dollars be allocated to fund rehabilitation centers, using the most advanced scientific methods and procedures. In order to facilitate this, profit must be taken out of healthcare, which is a social right that must be guaranteed to all.



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