

Drug overdose deaths hit record high in West Virginia in 2020

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West Virginia, the national epicenter of the opioid crisis for the past decade, saw its fatal overdose rate spike by at least 45 percent in 2020 according to data from the state Office of the Chief Medical Officer. The increase is a reversal of two years of declining drug deaths and marks a new record as drug companies responsible for dumping millions of opioids into the state fight lawsuits in West Virginia.

Preliminary figures show at least 1,275 residents died of overdoses last year, up from 878 in 2019. The new numbers could rise as more autopsies are completed.

Statewide, the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* reported April 26, “15 counties at least doubled their number of fatal overdoses between 2019 and 2020. Only eight saw drops. Of those eight, none saw decreases of more than five cases.” Of the 1,275 fatal overdoses, 955 involved fentanyl.

Southern and coalfield counties in the state fared the worst, with McDowell County—home to the once-mighty mining center of Welch—tripling its fatal overdose rate.

Logan County, another former mining stronghold, had the highest drug death rate per capita, at 159 per 100,000. The urban center of Huntington and its surrounding Cabell County registered 158 deaths per 100,000.

This rate is nearly eight times the national average, which has also tripled in the past five years. Nationwide last year, preliminary federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data analyzed by the health policy foundation the Commonwealth Fund found overdose deaths may have surpassed 90,000, up from 70,630 in 2019. That jump is the largest in more than 20 years.

The *Gazette-Mail* reports that in addition to heroin and opioid painkiller overdoses, deaths from

methamphetamines have seen “a more than 1,000 percent increase over 2015” across the state, with meth use spiraling in coalfield counties.

Chelsea Carter, program coordinator at Brighter Futures Substance and Mental Health Treatment in Boone County, told *Mountain State Spotlight* on March 25 that the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the crisis. “One of the reasons is [addicted people] are using alone more frequently and when they overdose, there is no one there to help save them.”

Cabell County and the city of Huntington are taking a lawsuit into federal court in Charleston this week against pharmaceutical companies responsible for delivering 81 million doses of opioids into the county over eight years. The companies—AmerisourceBergen Drug Co., Cardinal Health Inc. and McKesson Corp.—are producers of painkillers that left millions of Americans addicted to opioids over the past 20 years. Many drug-addicted people turned to illicit alternatives like heroin when they could no longer afford or acquire their prescriptions legally.

The city and county are suing for up to \$1.25 billion to offset the damage caused by the opioid epidemic. This is not even remotely adequate. According to the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, the epidemic cost West Virginia \$11.3 billion in 2019 alone. That year, Cardinal Health and AmerisourceBergen paid out a mere \$36 million to the state.

Meanwhile, West Virginia will receive only 1 percent of a \$7 billion national settlement with Purdue Pharma, manufacturer of OxyContin.

Eclipsed by the catastrophe of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, the drug overdose crisis has all but disappeared from the news cycle. Behind the scenes, politicians have dropped pretenses that they

intend to hold drug manufacturers and distributors accountable. After campaign pledges to rein in the opioid addiction crisis, President Joe Biden did not even mention the epidemic in his recent address to Congress. The administration's "drug czar" position at the head of the Office of National Drug Control Policy remains unfilled.

In West Virginia, the state legislature has taken up no legislation dealing with the drug epidemic this year. Instead, state Republican Governor Jim Justice signed a bill that increases licensing processes and regulations on syringe exchange programs. The new law makes it more difficult to operate exchanges that have proven to reduce the spread of hepatitis C and HIV.

The state already has the highest rate of new hepatitis B and C infections in the country. In the capital of Charleston, public health officials reported a surge of 1,100 new hepatitis C cases within months of the forced closure of the city's clean needle exchange in 2018.



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