

One pandemic fuels another: US overdose deaths hit all time high in 2020 with 93,000 dead

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Drug overdose deaths in the US rose nearly 30 percent in 2020, resulting in a total of 93,000 deaths, according to preliminary statistics released Wednesday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The figures translate to an average of more than 250 overdose deaths each day, or roughly 11 overdoses every hour in the heart of world capitalism.

The rise in deaths marks the largest single-year increase of overdose deaths on record, eclipsing previous years by thousands. The thirty percent rise in deaths in 2020 equates to 21,000 more deaths than in 2019. Prior to last year, the largest year-to-year increase was 11,000 in 2016—a figure which stunned experts at the time and is just barely over half of the increase in 2020.

The new figures have shocked public health experts, including professionals who have been tracking drug overdose trends for decades.

Daniel Ciccarone, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, who studies heroin markets, commented to the *New York Times* on the revelations: “It’s huge, it’s historic, it’s unheard-of, unprecedented, and a real shame.”

Robert Anderson, chief of the mortality statistics branch at the CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics, told the *Wall Street Journal*: “I can remember thinking 30,000 was an astounding number ... Now we’re three times that. It’s crazy.”

To put these figures in historical context, according to the CDC, there were about 9,000 overdose deaths in 1988, around the height of the crack epidemic.

The new figures also mark the most deaths on record from opioids in particular, as well as the most overdose deaths from stimulants such as methamphetamine. Finally, it marks the most deaths from one specific synthetic opioid family known as fentanyl. Fentanyl is 50 times more potent than heroin and is more and more frequently being mixed into other widely used illicit drugs. Fentanyl was involved in

more than 60 percent of the overdose deaths last year, CDC data suggests.

According to the new data, overdose deaths rose in every state but two, South Dakota and New Hampshire. The data suggests that at least ten states endured a 40 percent or higher rise in drug overdose deaths from the previous 12-month span. These include Arkansas, California, Kentucky, Louisiana, Nebraska, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia and West Virginia. In Kentucky alone, overdose deaths rose 54 percent last year, to more than 2,100, up from under 1,400 the year before.

The drug epidemic has a severe and profound impact on nearly every facet of US society. There is, first and foremost, the devastating toll that these deaths have on friends, family, co-workers and other loved ones. Children whose parents are caught up in the throes of addiction or die from it are inundating an already overwhelmed foster care system.

Understaffed and overrun hospitals, already dealing with the crippling pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic, cannot cope with the flood of overdose patients. In many towns overdoses are among the most common emergencies that confront first responders. There is no doubt that these deaths, on top of the impact of the pandemic, have taken a deep emotional toll on them.

Overdose deaths are just one facet of what was overall the deadliest year in US history. With about 378,000 deaths attributed to COVID-19 in 2020, more than 3.3 million Americans died last year.

COVID-19 was the third-leading cause of death in the US in 2020, after heart disease and cancer, according to preliminary mortality data. A category ambiguously named “unintentional injuries,” which include drug overdoses, was the fourth leading cause of death.

Overdose deaths combined with COVID-19 deaths have driven down life expectancy to such an extent that some experts believe 2020 will officially register the largest drop since 1943, during World War II. The CDC is expected to

report preliminary 2020 life-expectancy data next week.

However, a report released from the CDC earlier this month found that approximately 19 percent more Americans died in 2020 than in 2019. Perhaps most shockingly, researchers also discovered that mortality rates for young adults aged 25 to 34 have skyrocketed in the last decade, reaching levels not seen since 1953.

Researchers determined the rising death rate for adult workers was driven by a sharp increase in deaths from drug overdoses, alcohol, suicide, and cardiometabolic conditions (including both heart disease and metabolic disorders such as diabetes).

Any objective observer reviewing these statistics would assuredly conclude that the social situation facing workers in the US, and indeed around the world, reveals a profound sickness in American society, the heart of world capitalism. Drug abuse and overdoses and other “deaths of despair” are symptoms of a society in deep crisis.

Since the onset of the pandemic, governments around the world responded to the unprecedented public health emergency by pumping trillions of dollars into Wall Street and corporations to prop up world capitalism. In order to pay back this money, workers were forced into plants and factories to continue production.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson perhaps best epitomized the response of the entire global ruling elite when he blurted out bitterly last November: “No more f***ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands!” ... And pile up they did.

Workers were forced into impossible situations, often choosing between risking their lives and the lives of their families or giving up their livelihoods. In the last year poverty has soared and hunger has skyrocketed. Thousands of families were evicted from their homes and many more are currently hovering on the brink of eviction as moratoriums continue to be lifted and governments insist that things “return to normal.”

Over the last year and a half, the callous and indifferent attitude of the ruling class to workers has been more starkly exposed than at any time in recent history.

As for the institutions that are ostensibly meant to defend workers and improve their conditions, the trade unions, not a single one organized any resistance to the policies of the ruling class. On the contrary the trade unions acted as junior partners in the facilitation of the reckless and criminal “back-to-work” policy initiated by Trump and continued under Biden.

For many of the tens of thousands of people who had already been struggling with addiction, or who were in recovery, these crushing conditions, social isolation, and the further atomization of the working class were enough to

push them to relapse. For many others, including many young people whose plans and lives were totally derailed by the events of 2020, the circumstances led many to turn to drugs, which resulted in tragic premature deaths.

The devastating revelations about drug overdoses in the US underscore the complete inability of the capitalist system, in the country where the financial aristocracy has amassed untold wealth, to put those resources to use in dealing with an acute social crisis. American capitalism can no more deal with the opioid crisis than it can deal with the even greater pandemic of COVID-19.

The necessary resources—doctors, nurses, counselors, drug treatment programs, anti-overdose drugs like Narcan—should be made freely available through a massive social mobilization that would cost only a fraction of what the Pentagon squanders each year on the means of death and destruction.

But this is impossible under a political system dominated by two right-wing capitalist parties that do the bidding of Wall Street and the pharmaceutical companies—including some which directly profited from pumping opioid drugs into impoverished inner city and rural communities.

The working class must break through the political monopoly of corporate America. It must connect the global wave of emerging strikes and rebellions against the trade union straitjacket, and build an independent mass political movement of its own, based on a socialist program.

Workers everywhere are on the move, fighting against the social conditions that laid the groundwork for the horrific drug epidemic ripping through the US. The measures required to confront the drug crisis in the US cannot be carried out without a frontal attack by the working class on the wealth of the corporate and financial elite and its stranglehold on the entire economic and political system.



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