US drug overdose deaths surged to 100,000 in first year of pandemic

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More than 100,000 people died of drug overdoses in the United States during the 12-month period ending April 2021, according to new provisional data published Wednesday by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

This staggering number, a dismal record for human misery, coincides roughly with the first year of the coronavirus pandemic. COVID-19 killed about 509,000 people during that same timeframe, from May 2020 to April 2021.

The drug overdose death toll jumped 29.5 percent from the same period a year earlier and has nearly doubled over the past five years. Synthetic opioids, mainly fentanyl, caused 64 percent of these overdose deaths, up nearly 50 percent from the year before, according to the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics.

Fentanyl was introduced in the 1960s as an intravenous anesthetic. Cheaper, legally or illegally produced fentanyl is often mixed with other drugs like heroin, cocaine or marijuana by drug dealers and sold to users who may not be aware of its presence.

Increases in overdose death counts were almost universal across states, while varying in magnitude. Year-over-year increases of 50 percent were seen in California, Tennessee, Louisiana, Mississippi, West Virginia and Kentucky. Increases in deaths in the range of 40 percent were seen in Washington state, Oregon, Nevada, Colorado, Minnesota, Alaska, Nebraska, Virginia and the Carolinas.

Although the numbers were small, cases in Vermont increased by 85 percent during the year studied. Only New Hampshire, New Jersey and South Dakota saw overdose deaths drop.

Overdose deaths from methamphetamine and other psychostimulants also increased dramatically, up 48 percent in the year ending April 2021 compared to the year before, accounting for more than a quarter of all overdose deaths in the 12-month period studied. While previously fentanyl had been more widely used on the East Coast and methamphetamines on the West Coast, both drugs are now proliferating nationwide. Deaths from cocaine and prescription pain medication have also increased, although not as drastically.

The latest data from the CDC suggests that drug overdose deaths now kill slightly less than Alzheimer's disease, which claimed about 121,000 lives in 2019, and slightly more than diabetes, about 88,000 lives. Heart disease was the leading cause of death in 2019, killing nearly 660,000 people, while cancer killed nearly 600,000.

Referring to the coming together of the COVID-19 pandemic and drug overdose deaths, Dr. Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, told CNN, "In a crisis of this magnitude, those already taking drugs may take higher amounts and those in recovery may relapse. It's a phenomenon we've seen and perhaps could have predicted." The rise of the synthetic opioid fentanyl, which is as much as 100 times more powerful than morphine, has exacerbated this deadly explosion of opioid deaths.

The death toll of 100,000 Americans from overdoses was more than deaths from car crashes and guns combined. This number was up almost 30 percent from the 78,000 deaths the previous year and more than double since 2015. Most of these deaths occurred among people aged 25 to 55, the so-called prime of life.

By contrast, of the more than 787,500 who have died from COVID-19 to date in the US according to Worldometer, three-quarters have been over the age of 65. It is likely that among American adults under 50 years of age, more died from opioids last year than from the worst pandemic the world has seen in a century.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a perfect storm for the proliferation of drug overdose deaths. In the early

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stages of the pandemic, when lockdowns, school and business closures, and mask mandates were put in place in many states, resources to treat substance abuse were scaled back. Many suffering from addiction, particularly young adults, were isolated from their support systems and unable to access treatment. Many were left to overdose alone with no one with them to administer Narcan (naloxone) or call for help.

However, the loosening of restrictions—which has allowed the coronavirus to spread and kill—has not resulted in an improvement in access to care for substance abuse. “Even if COVID went away tomorrow, we’d still have a problem. What will have an impact is dramatic improvement to access to treatment,” Dr. Andrew Kolodny, medical director of opioid policy research at the Brandeis University Heller School for Social Policy and Management, told CNN. “These are deaths in people with a preventable, treatable condition,” he said “The United States continues to fail on both fronts, both on preventing opioid addiction and treating addiction.”

Due to the chaotic, unplanned character of the for-profit health care system and lack of resources, there is also no coordinated program to distribute naloxone (Narcan) widely and at no cost to health departments nationwide. This is also the case with fentanyl test strips, which can tell a user if the deadly opioid is present.

Substance abuse continues to be stigmatized in the US. Those suffering from addiction are chastised by the right and those in authority for their moral failings while programs and treatments are starved for cash. Presidential candidate Biden pledged to “Hold accountable big pharmaceutical companies, executives and others responsible for their role in triggering the opioid crisis,” but this was just hot air.

Lawsuits against such legal drug dealers have yielded a slap on the wrist or less. Earlier this month, a California judge said he would rule against several large counties in the state that accused four drug makers—Johnson & Johnson, Teva, Endo International and AbbVie—of fueling the US opioid epidemic, saying they failed to prove their $59 billion case.

In August, a bankruptcy judge approved a settlement by OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma and the Sackler family that the company values at more than $10 billion—a drop in the bucket for the mega-wealthy drug company owners and cold comfort for the millions of Americans who have suffered due to their marketing of deadly opioids.

Over the past three years, the Department of Health and Human Services, through the Health Resources and Services Administration, has invested a paltry $384 million in community-based grants and technical assistance on prevention, treatment and recovery services in rural communities to fight opioid use and other substance abuse disorders.

Speaking on the release of the new overdose death figures, President Biden claimed, “We are strengthening prevention, promoting harm reduction, expanding treatment, and supporting people in recovery, as well as reducing the supply of harmful substances in our communities. And we won’t let up.” He added, “Together we will turn the tide on this epidemic.”

Biden’s false and cynical statements cannot hide the reality. The United States will no more “turn the tide” in opioid deaths than on COVID-19 deaths, although in both cases, there are practical solutions at hand, if the necessary resources were provided.

Instead, the White House turns a blind eye to the enormity of the crisis. Anne Milgram, head of the Drug Enforcement Administration, said, “This year alone, DEA has seen enough fentanyl to provide every member of the United States population with a lethal dose and we are still seizing more fentanyl each and every day.”

In a call with reporters Wednesday, in support of his anti-China campaign Biden attempted to shift the blame for the opioid crisis from the US to Mexican drug cartels sourcing drug-making chemicals from China.

Contrary to suggestions that the surging overdose deaths have come because health care resources have been diverted from substance abuse treatment to the pandemic, the US ruling elite and the profit-based health care system are responsible for both catastrophes. Those dying from drug overdoses and those cut down by COVID-19 are both victims of the homicidal policies of corporate America and its political representatives.

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