

Over 1 million years of life lost to drug overdose among youth in the US

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Children and young adults in the US lost approximately 1.2 million years of life due to unintentional drug overdoses over a five year period, according to a recent research letter published in *JAMA*.

The Ohio State researchers found that approximately 3,300 adolescents (ages 10–19 years old) died of an unintentional drug overdose between 2015 and 2019, representing about 187,078 years of life lost. Nearly 22,000 young people, those aged 19–24 years old, died from an unintentional overdose over the same time period. All told, young people saw 1,227,223.58 years of life lost. Males collectively lost more years of life than females, the researchers said.

These figures are a staggering illustration of the devastation the drug epidemic has wrought on society, and in particular, on a whole generation of young people. What potential scientific, artistic, or cultural achievements were also lost with the one million years of life taken from this generation?

These figures are all the more alarming considering that there has been a sharp rise in overdose deaths since the end of the study in 2019, which coincides with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Drug overdose deaths in the US rose nearly 30 percent in 2020, resulting in a total of 93,000 deaths, according to 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 lives lost every hour.

The rise in deaths from 2019 to 2020 marked the largest single-year increase of overdose deaths on record, eclipsing previous years by thousands. The increase equates to 21,000 more deaths in 2020 than in 2019. Prior to 2020, 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.

Provisional data from CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics indicate that 2021 will set a new record. According to the preliminary data, there were an estimated 100,306 drug overdose deaths in the United States during the 12-month period ending in April 2021. The figure represents an increase of 28.5 percent from the 78,056 deaths during the same period the year before.

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.

All 50 states and the District of Columbia reported a spike or increase in overdose numbers during the COVID-19 pandemic. West Virginia continues to be the epicenter of the crisis with the highest rate of overdose deaths in the country. However, urban areas have overtaken rural areas for age-adjusted death rates. The number of 45–64-year-old non-Hispanic Black people in urban areas dying from synthetic opioid overdose has been rising swiftly, according to the latest data.

The sheer scale of death from drug overdoses in the heart of world capitalism is among the starkest indications of a profound sickness in American society. Drug abuse and overdoses and other “deaths of despair” are symptoms of a society in deep crisis.

Consider the following: overdose deaths combined with COVID-19 deaths have driven down life expectancy to such an extent that the year 2020 officially registered the largest drop since 1943, during World War II. Mortality rates for young adults aged 25 to 34 have skyrocketed in the last decade, reaching levels not seen since 1953.

Behind each one of the tragic deaths there is a family, friends, teachers and others whose lives are forever

changed after losing a loved one.

The political establishment, Democrat and Republican alike, have no solution to this crisis. In fact, the crisis itself is a direct product of their policies which have for decades starved social services, driven down wages for workers, crushed any movement of working class opposition to austerity measures and further lined the pockets of the richest layers of society.

For the ruling class, “economic health” is consistently raised above human life. Nowhere is this phenomenon more clearly illustrated than in the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the present daily death rate of 2,700, it will take just over 30 more days for the United States to register a million dead. In response to this incredible figure, the New York Times published only a tiny blurb at the bottom of its front page, entitled “900,000 Dead, but Many Americans Move On.”

For the Biden administration, the financial-corporate elite and their media apologists, the pandemic is over. At the behest of the White House, federal and state governments are ending restrictions on the spread of the disease and winding up systematic reporting on cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

Throughout the pandemic, governments around the world responded to the unprecedented public health emergency by pumping trillions of dollars into stock markets, big banks and corporations to prop up world capitalism. In order to pay back this money, workers were forced into plants, factories and other workplaces where COVID easily spreads to continue production and guarantee corporate profits.

As a result of these policies, inequality has reached new heights throughout the world. A new billionaire has been created every 26 hours since the pandemic began. The world’s 10 richest individuals have doubled their fortunes, while over 160 million people are projected to have been pushed into poverty. Meanwhile, an estimated 17 million people have died from COVID-19 worldwide.

Workers and youth will remember the years 2020 and 2021 as years of great suffering, during which they lost a loved one, struggled to provide for their families, or wondered about what sort of future they might look forward to under such dire circumstances.

Over the last two years, the callous and indifferent

attitude of the ruling class to workers has been more starkly exposed than at any time in recent history.

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 historic levels of wealth, to put those resources to use in dealing with an acute social crisis.

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 spends each year on the military.

However, the mobilization of the necessary resources is impossible under a political system dominated by two right-wing capitalist parties that do the bidding of Wall Street. 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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