

US overdose deaths rose to record levels in 2021, fueled by fentanyl, exacerbated by pandemic

Kate Randall
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Deaths from drug overdoses in 2021, the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, rose to record-setting levels. Overdose deaths neared 108,000, fueled by an ever-worsening fentanyl crisis, according to preliminary data published Wednesday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Overdose deaths in the US have now surpassed a staggering 1 million since the CDC began collecting data about two decades ago. The surge over the past two years is a result not only of the proliferation of fentanyl, but has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has served to isolate growing numbers of people and restricted access to treatment programs.

The number of deadly overdoses in 2021 was similar to those caused by diabetes and Alzheimer's disease and approximately a quarter of the official number of deaths from COVID-19 that year, according to the CDC.

Prior to the pandemic, the US was already coping with a groundswell of "deaths of despair" from suicides, overdoses and alcohol poisoning, as well as deaths from gun violence.

The 15 percent rise in overdose deaths in 2021 followed a rise of almost 30 percent in 2020. A growing share of these deaths were driven by fentanyl, a class of potent synthetic opioids that is as much as 100 times more powerful than morphine. Fentanyl and methamphetamines, synthetic stimulants, are often mixed with other drugs. Users are most often not aware of fentanyl's presence in the drugs they are using.

According to state health officials, many overdose deaths appear to be the result of mixing fentanyl and methamphetamines. Deaths involving synthetic opioids

rose to 71,000 in 2021, up from 58,000 the year before, while deaths from stimulants like methamphetamines increased to 33,000 from 25,000.

Alaska saw the largest percentage increase of any state in 2021. Dr. Anne Zink, Alaska's chief health official, told the *New York Times* that of the 140 fentanyl overdose deaths recorded in 2021, over 60 percent also involved methamphetamines and nearly 30 percent involved heroin.

Fentanyl, introduced in the 1960s as an intravenous anesthetic, is a white powder that is now often combined with other drugs such as heroin and cocaine to be sold on the illegal market. It can be produced in a lab and can be cheaper and easier to distribute than heroin, making it more lucrative for drug dealers and traffickers. It is often unwittingly used by those who have moved on to heroin after becoming addicted to opioids that have been pushed by Purdue and other pharmaceutical companies.

A substantial share of illicit pills believed by users to be the opioid OxyContin, the benzodiazepine Xanax or the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder drug Adderall now contain fentanyl, oftentimes in deadly doses. Individuals seeking prescription opioids, relief from anxiety, or a stimulant to stay awake for exams or work, become the unwitting victims of deadly doses of fentanyl.

Black Americans now have the highest fatality rates from drug overdoses, followed by American Indian and Alaska Native males, with significant increases seen among these groups in recent years.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), at the National Institutes of Health, overdose deaths among teens have doubled in the past three

years, even though drug use is decreasing overall among teens. Teens are more likely to take pills they think are Adderall, Xanax or Percocet, seeking help to study, calm anxiety or treat pain, according to Dr. Nora Volkow, director of NIDA.

“They’ve been doing this for decades,” the *Guardian* quotes Volkow saying. “What is now different is these prescription drugs that are illicitly manufactured containing fentanyl have increased 50-fold,” she said.

The proliferation of fentanyl is undoubtedly a significant contributing factor to the surge in overdose deaths. However, this epidemic of deaths cannot be separated from either the pandemic or the social crisis that it has exacerbated. The criminal government policy pursued by both the Trump and Biden administrations in relation to COVID-19 has led to an official death toll of 1 million Americans in just two years.

The government’s refusal to adopt a Zero-COVID public health strategy has created conditions in which the country is now in the third year of the pandemic with no end in sight.

The White House announced earlier this month that it expects the US to record 100 million new cases of COVID-19 during the coming fall and winter months, along with a “significant wave of deaths.” Using the accepted infection fatality rate from the virus of 0.5 percent, this translates into 500,000 additional deaths.

Last month, President Biden sent his administration’s inaugural National Drug Control Strategy to Congress which, according to the White House web site, “focuses on two critical drivers of the epidemic: untreated addiction and drug trafficking.” The Office of National Drug Control Policy has requested just over \$450 million for fiscal year 2023 to fund this effort.

This sum—much of which will end up going to federal and local police—compares to the record \$39.8 billion in military aid to Ukraine just authorized by the US House to fund the US-NATO proxy war. This goes beyond the \$33 billion requested by the Biden administration and is being pushed through by a bipartisan effort, including from the “left” wing of the Democratic Party.

The geyser of money for war comes as \$10 billion for COVID-19 relief was dropped by the Democrats, despite the Biden administration’s predictions of an approaching fall and winter of surging deaths from the coronavirus. Can it seriously be believed that this same Democratic Party will lead a war against overdose

deaths that are almost certain to rise in 2022–2023?

The crisis of overdose deaths in the US is above all a social crisis that must be confronted by workers and youth in a struggle against a wealthy elite that is prepared to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of lives annually to overdoses and other deaths of despair at the same time as it forces the population into unsafe workplaces and schools and drives millions into poverty as prices soar and real wages plunge.

Only the working class has the power and position in society to fight for socialist policies in opposition to a ruling class that prosecutes war abroad while condemning the population at home to death and disease.



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