

OCTOBER 2023



The Overdose Crisis In Florida:

A red map of Florida is positioned to the right of the title. The background features a faint, light-colored illustration of various medical supplies, including syringes, vials, and pills.

*A Critical Analysis of Recent Trends
and Recommendations for
Sustaining Effective Interventions*

*Working to solve Florida's overdose crisis, one
person, one leader, one community at a time*

02

ABOUT PROJECT OPIOID INITIATIVE IN FLORIDA

Project Opioid is a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering communities in their efforts to reduce opioid-related deaths. We achieve this specific purpose by working directly with motivated leaders, providing them with the information, the guidance, and the tools that they need to confront the overdose crisis within their spheres of influence.

Using our own proven model of coalition building, we help leaders construct unified groups of diverse individuals who work together to achieve a common goal: the reduction of opioid-related deaths in the communities where they live and work.

CONTACT THE AUTHORS

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATORS

Dr. Kendall Cortelyou, PhD
National Data Advisor, Project Opioid Initiative
Assoc. Prof. Global Health Management & Informatics, UCF
kcortely@ucf.edu
[407-823-2359](tel:407-823-2359)

Andrae Bailey
CEO & Founder, Project Opioid Initiative
andrae@projectopioid.org
[407-456-0605](tel:407-456-0605)

Stephen J Wilson
Data Analyst, Project Opioid Initiative
steve@projectopioid.org

03

INTRODUCTION

The opioid crisis is far from over; in fact, it has escalated to alarming proportions. Despite numerous interventions and policy measures, overdose deaths in the United States have risen consecutively for the past four years, reaching a harrowing peak in 2022. As we move further into the post-pandemic world, we are left grappling with this multifaceted public health emergency that shows few signs of abating.

In the face of these grim statistics, this report aims to delve into the current state of the opioid crisis, with a special focus on Florida and its Central Florida communities. We seek to address the following urgent questions:

- **What factors are contributing to the consistent rise in overdose deaths nationally?**
- **Given that fentanyl continues to be a significant driver, how can its distribution and consumption be curbed effectively?**
- **What is the extent of opioid-related deaths among younger Americans, and what specialized interventions can be implemented for this demographic?**
- **How can medications like naloxone and buprenorphine be more widely deployed to save lives, and what are the challenges in scaling up these efforts?**
- **Are there unique trends or interventions in Florida that can offer insights into tackling this crisis more effectively?**



04



Drawing from a rich array of data sources including governmental reports and peer-reviewed academic studies, this report aims to offer actionable insights and recommendations. The ultimate goal is to guide policymakers, healthcare professionals, and community leaders in evolving our strategies to combat this enduring and complex crisis more effectively.

METHODOLOGY

Accurate data is crucial for understanding the evolving nature of the opioid epidemic in Florida. Given that available datasets from various agencies don't always perfectly align, multiple sources were consulted to capture the broader trends:

- **Centers for Disease Control (CDC): Utilizes the Vital Statistics Reporting System to report overdose deaths based on death certificates for 12-month periods. Data is categorized by the decedent's county of residence and the month of death.**
- **Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) Medical Examiners Commission: Provides detailed reports on overdose deaths, covering all 25 districts in Florida. These reports include demographic information and toxicology results.**

The study also relied on peer-reviewed articles, academic databases, research reports, and news articles for additional insights.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

From overdoses to unintentional poisonings: A reassessment of fentanyl-related deaths.

The understanding of fentanyl-related fatalities is undergoing a pivotal shift. The conventional perception of these incidents as simple overdoses is giving way to a more nuanced perspective, considering these deaths in most cases as instances of unintentional poisoning. The implications of this transformation are profound, influencing both prevention strategies and drug policy formulation.

Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid of extraordinary potency—50 times more powerful than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine[1]—has become a stealthy killer. Its incorporation into other drugs, such as heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, or counterfeit prescription pills, often occurs without users' knowledge. Given the minute quantity of fentanyl required to cause death—comparable in weight to a snowflake—users can unknowingly ingest lethal doses. Surveys consistently demonstrate that a significant number of users test positive for fentanyl despite having neither intentionally consumed it nor wished to do so.[2]

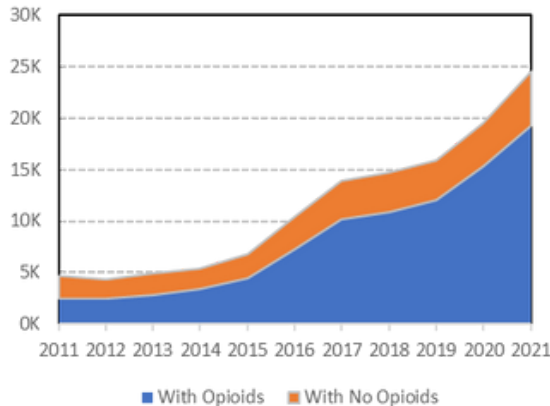
[1] <https://www.dea.gov/factsheets/fentanyl>

[2] <https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2023/may/fentanyl-new-york-city.html>

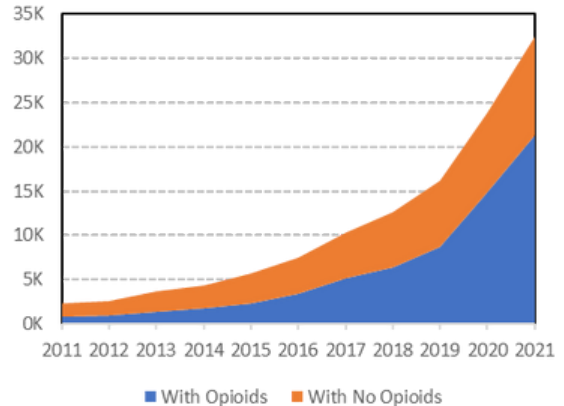




Overdose Deaths
Involving Cocaine



Overdose Deaths
Involving Psychostimulants



Source: National Vital Statistics System, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Findings from the CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics align with this perspective. Over the past decade, there has been a dramatic increase in the co-abuse of opioids, including fentanyl, with other substances such as cocaine and psychostimulants. Importantly, these trends have evolved without a corresponding rise in overall drug use, highlighting the critical role of fentanyl and its analogs in unintentional poisonings. Of the 4,681 overdose deaths in 2011 where cocaine was present, 2,505 (or 54%) also involved opioids. By 2021, opioids contributed to 19,250 (or 79%) of the 21,371 overdose deaths involving cocaine. Similarly, of the 2,266 overdose deaths in 2011 in which psychostimulants were present, opioids were involved in just 876 cases (39%). By 2021, opioids contributed to 11,166 (or 66%) of the 21,371 overdose deaths involving psychostimulants.[3] Over this decade-long period, cocaine-related deaths involving opioids increased almost five times as quickly as those with no opioids detected, while psychostimulant-related deaths involving opioids increase more than three times as fast as those with no opioids detected.

[3] <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db474.htm>

07

The current International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision (ICD-10) validates this shift, with a poisoning code already assigned to fentanyl-related fatalities.[4] Toxicological findings also support this change in perception. Autopsy results reveal that victims of fatal overdoses often had multiple drugs in their systems at the time of death. Post-mortem examinations reveal that victims of lethal overdoses often had multiple drugs present in their systems at the time of death. Specifically, the majority of overdose deaths involving substances such as methamphetamine, cocaine, and heroin also involved the presence of fentanyl.[5]

The recognition of fentanyl overdoses as poisonings necessitates a shift in prevention strategies and drug policy. Measures may include improved detection of fentanyl contaminations in other drugs, enhanced user education about the risks of polydrug use, and harm reduction strategies. These efforts should also consider the increasing co-involvement of opioids with substances such as cocaine and psychostimulants, and regional variations in drug use patterns. This revised perspective is a crucial step towards mitigating the impact of the opioid crisis.

[4] <https://icd.who.int/browse10/2019/en#/T40.4>

[5] <https://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>



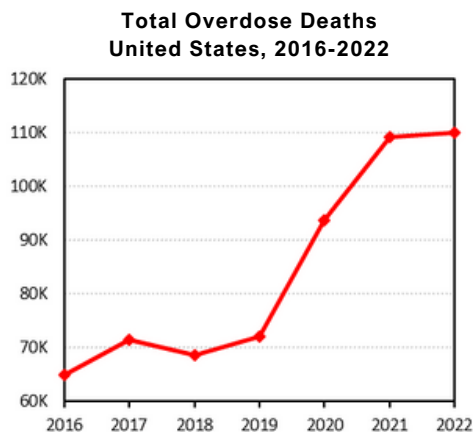
08

OVERDOSES IN AMERICA:

Overdose deaths in the US stand at historical high levels, but in Florida there are some encouraging signs.

The opioid crisis continues to pose an urgent public health threat in the United States, with overdose deaths climbing to new records for each of the past four years. Recently released data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) underscore the severity of this crisis: in 2022 alone, over 110,000 fatal drug overdoses occurred nationwide—translating to a staggering average of more than 300 deaths every day.[6] This alarming figure extends the troubling upward trend already observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, exceeding the disturbingly high levels seen during that period.

[6] <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm>



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

09

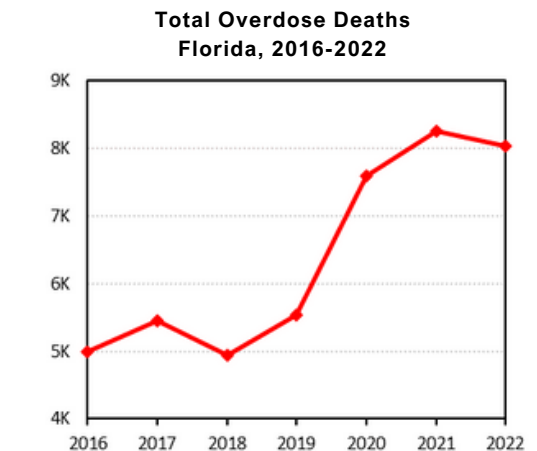
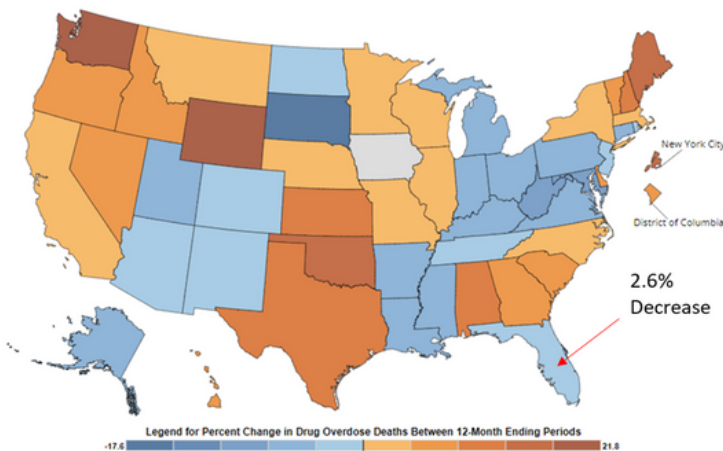
OVERDOSES IN FLORIDA:

Overdose deaths in the US stand at historical high levels, but in Florida there are some encouraging signs.



In Florida overdose deaths declined last year for the first time since 2018, even as deaths nationally continued to rise to new record levels. Despite the 2.6% yearly decline seen in 2022, the crisis remains acute, with 8,042 Florida residents losing their lives to drug overdoses in the past year—an average of 22 deaths per day.[7] However, any sign that the trajectory of the crisis may be beginning to change in the state is welcome news

[7] Ibid.



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



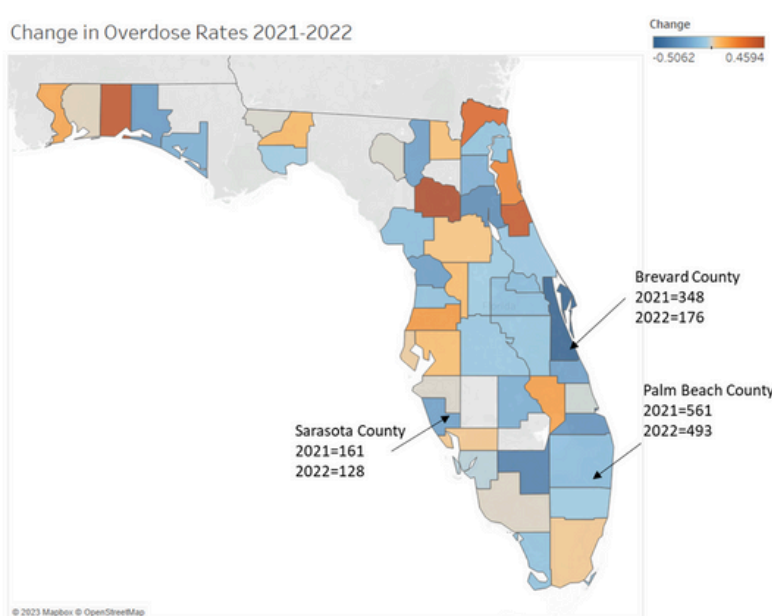
REGIONAL ANALYSIS:

Some counties are doing better than others

Despite Florida's overall reduction in overdose deaths and a 4.2% drop in the overdose death rate (from 37.8 to 36.2 per 100,000) in 2022, the situation varies significantly among its 67 counties. Certain counties commendably report consistently lower death rates or significant declines in fatalities. In contrast, others either grapple with persistently elevated rates or alarming surges.

Central Florida

All counties throughout the Central Florida region reported year-over-year declines in both the sheer number and rate of overdose deaths. Generally, this area maintains death rates marginally lower than the state average. A striking outlier was Brevard County, which, despite having a 2021 death rate (56.3 per 100,000) much higher than the state average, managed to slash its 2022 rate to 27.9 per 100,000.



11

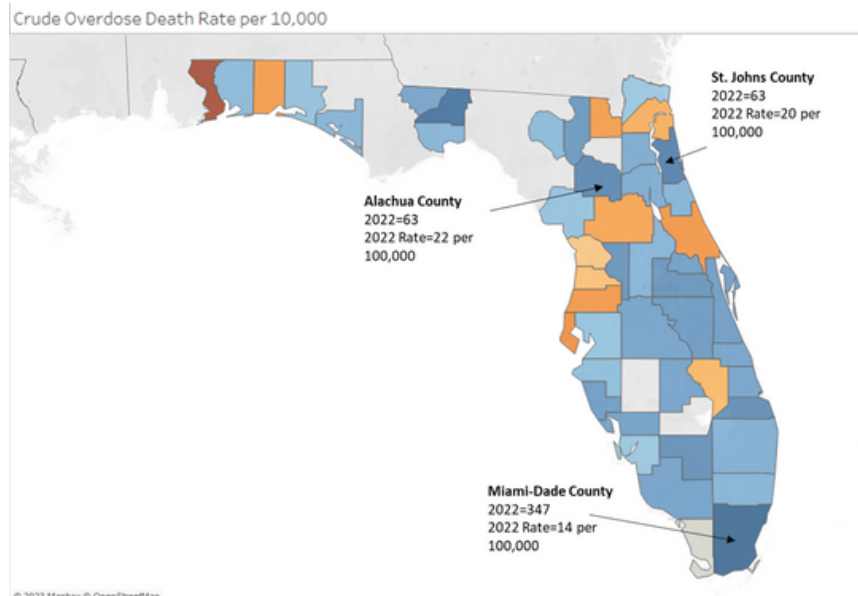
Central Florida continued...

Orange and Seminole counties also celebrated significant reductions, each dropping by around 13% in their death rates and 11% in fatalities. Neighboring counties Lake, Osceola, and Polk saw more modest declines, aligning with broader state trends. Volusia County, although recording a decline, still grapples with a rate of 55.1 per 100,000, the third highest in the state.

The reduction in deaths seen in these counties, likely due to the increased availability of naloxone, is encouraging, but concerted efforts must continue to further alleviate the impact of the opioid crisis in Central Florida.

South Florida

Miami-Dade County's 3.3% uptick in overdose deaths in 2022 initially appears troubling, especially when compared to nearby Broward County, where deaths decreased by 5.6%, and Palm Beach County, where deaths decreased by 12.1%.



12

South Florida continued...

The death rate from drug poisoning in Miami-Dade stood at roughly 13.6 per 100,000 population at the end of 2021, versus 36.1 for Broward and 37.3 for Palm Beach. In 2022, Miami-Dade's death rate was essentially flat at 14.0, while Broward and Palm Beach saw 6% and 13% reductions, to 33.8 and 32.5, respectively.

Miami-Dade's overdose rate remains the lowest in Florida, despite last year's uptick. However, the fact that overdose deaths in Miami-Dade are still about 200% higher today than they were 10 years ago, standing near all-time highs, underscores the need for robust, sustained efforts to combat the opioid crisis in the area.

Palm Beach County's significant 11% and 13% reductions in overdose deaths and death rate, respectively, merit recognition.

North Florida

Duval and Clay Counties both exhibited encouraging trends, with Duval marking a 4.7% decrease and Clay a more pronounced 16.8% drop in the overdose death rate. Saint Johns, Nassau, and Baker counties, on the other hand, all trended upward.

Alachua County, while still significantly below the statewide average death rate, experienced the fastest increase in its overdose death total (a 43% increase) and death rate (up 42%) in 2022, suggesting a situation that warrants observation for signs of continued alarming trends.





Tampa Bay Area

Recent upticks in the Tampa region may indicate a trend of rising overdose death rates which bears monitoring.

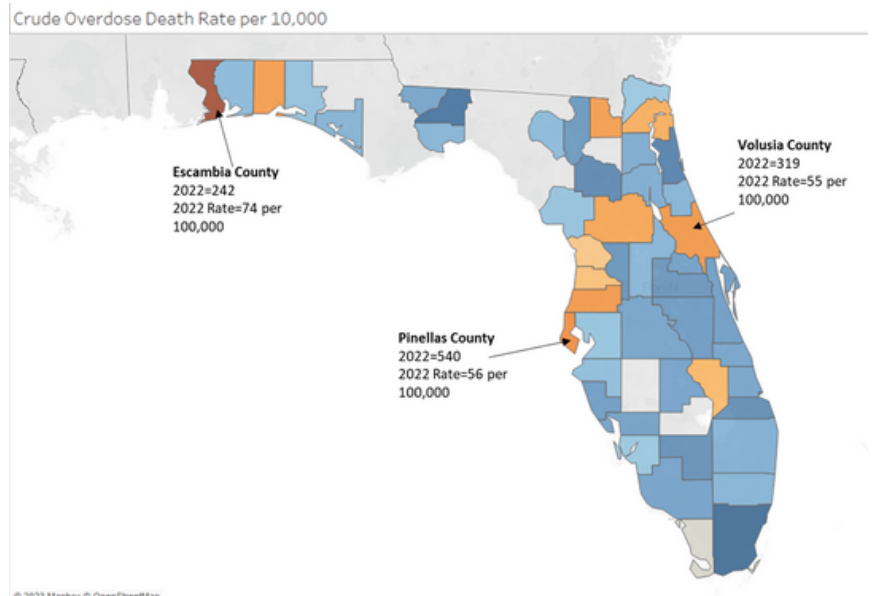
Hernando County death rate declining, while other counties in the region are up.

Apart from Hillsborough County, which mirrors the state's rate, death rates for Pinellas, Pasco, and Hernando counties are 40% to 56% higher than the statewide rate. Pinellas County, in particular, had the second highest overdose rate in 2022, at 56.5 per 100,000. More targeted interventions in this area may be in order.

Panhandle

While overdose rates in the Tallahassee area are some of the lowest in the state, Leon County experienced a 40% increase in deaths and a 35% increase in the overdose rate in 2022.

Escambia County, which saw a 13% rise in deaths last year has the highest overdose rate in the state, at 74.5 per 100,000 people.



FENTANYL FACTOR:

Fentanyl remains the driver of the opioid crisis, implicated in the majority of overdose deaths.

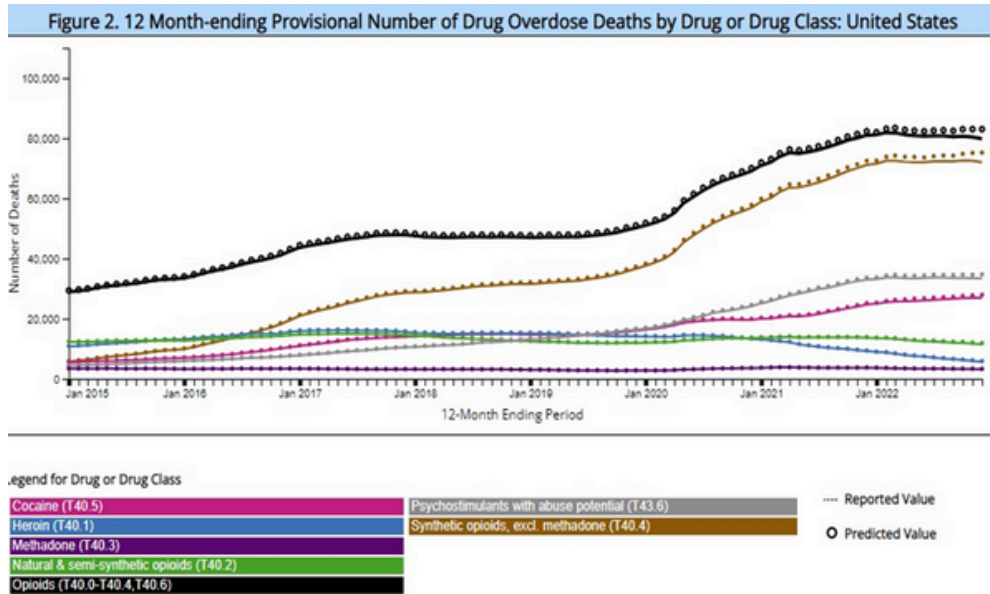
Fentanyl continues to be the dominant force in the overdose crisis, playing a role in the majority of overdose deaths.[9] Since 2013, the crisis has escalated significantly, predominantly due to the rise in synthetic opioids, particularly illicitly manufactured fentanyl. This potent substance has been a major contributor to the surge in overdose fatalities, casting a dark shadow on the national public health landscape.

The figures are daunting. Since the declaration of a national public health emergency in 2017, more than 450,000 Americans have died from drug overdoses. [10] These numbers are testament to the severity and widespread nature of the crisis. A key point to note is that two thirds of these overdose deaths are now attributable to fentanyl and other synthetic opioids, further highlighting fentanyl's decisive role in the continuing opioid crisis.[11]

[9] <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm>

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.



This trend has been accompanied by a shift in the primary agents of opioid-related harm. Prescription opioids, which were previously the main contributors to the crisis, now play a lesser role compared to synthetic opioids like fentanyl. While this does not diminish the dangers posed by misuse of prescription opioids, it does underscore the need for a strategic focus on combating the threat posed by fentanyl and similar substances.

The persistent centrality of fentanyl to the opioid crisis necessitates continued attention from policy makers, healthcare professionals, and the public. It is crucial to tackle the issue on multiple fronts, from curtailing the illicit production and distribution of fentanyl, to enhancing awareness of its dangers, and ensuring that those at risk or affected have access to effective interventions and treatments. The scale and impact of the crisis calls for sustained and comprehensive efforts to address this ongoing public health emergency.

16

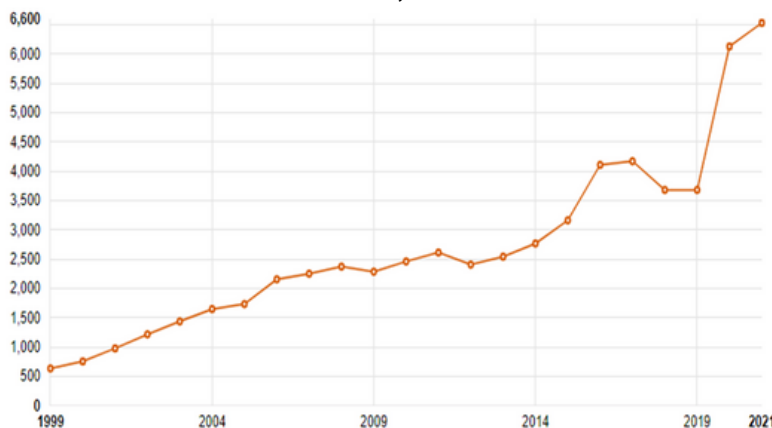
DEATHS ARE TRENDING YOUNGER:

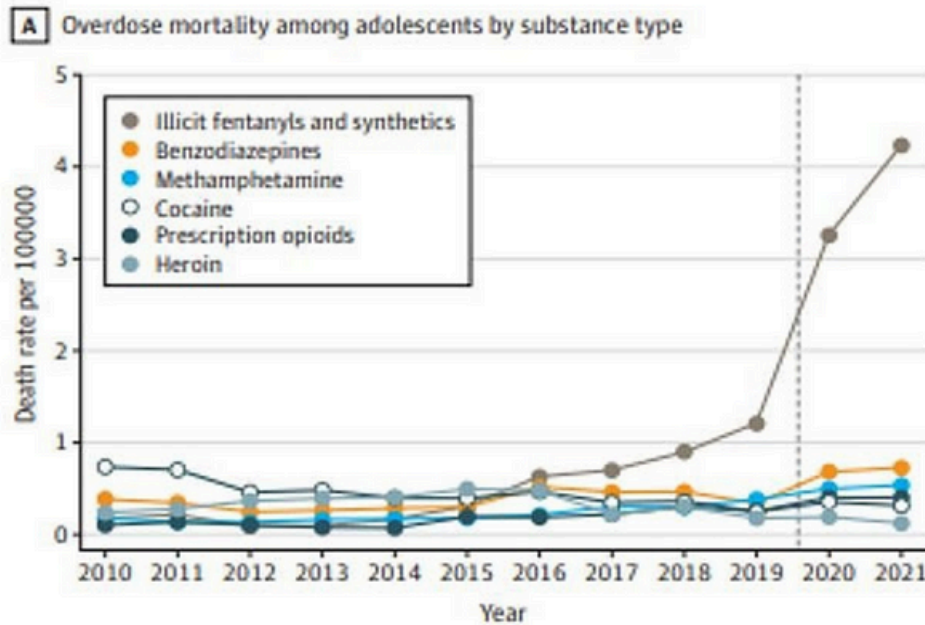
Opioid-related deaths are affecting younger Americans in increasing numbers.

The opioid crisis has exhibited a distressing trend of increasingly impacting younger Americans. The effects of the crisis are alarmingly pronounced among adolescents. Data reveals that fatal overdoses in the age group of 14 to 18 years old surged by an astounding 94% in 2020. This increase far outpaces the overall rise in overdose deaths in the general population, which stood at 29.5% in the same year. In 2021, the situation worsened further with a 20% rise in fatal overdoses among adolescents, nearly double the rate of increase for the overall population, which was at 11.5%.[12]

[12] <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2790949>

**Overdose Deaths for those Aged 0-24,
United States, 1999 - 2021**





It is crucial to underscore that these escalating numbers do not correspond to an increase in drug-seeking behavior among these age groups.[13] Rather, the evidence points towards the contamination of the entire illicit drug supply with fentanyl as a major factor behind this trend. The prevalence of fentanyl, often mixed into other substances without users' knowledge, significantly heightens the risk of fatal overdose, particularly among adolescents experimenting with other substances for the first time.

The growing impact of the opioid crisis on younger Americans demands urgent attention and action. Strategies must be tailored to address the unique challenges and needs of this age group, and should prioritize preventive measures, early detection, and access to age-appropriate interventions and treatments. These data underline the need for concerted efforts to protect younger populations from the devastating effects of the opioid crisis.

[13] Ibid.

M.A.T. & HARM REDUCTION ARE LEADING THE WAY:

Medications such as naloxone and buprenorphine have proven to be useful tools in addressing the opioid crisis.

Medications such as naloxone and buprenorphine have emerged as instrumental tools in mitigating the impact of the opioid crisis. Their use in emergency and treatment contexts has had a significant influence on the trajectory of the crisis.

Naloxone, a medication designed to rapidly reverse opioid overdose, has undoubtedly saved countless lives in recent years. Its wider availability in many communities has provided a critical safety net for individuals at risk of overdose. However, it's crucial to recognize that the successful use of naloxone may inadvertently mask the true scope of the opioid crisis.

While death totals are often used as a key indicator of the crisis's severity, these figures certainly underrepresent the actual number of opioid overdoses that occur, as many are reversed through naloxone administration.

19

Accurate and comprehensive data about non-fatal overdoses, including those reversed by naloxone, is hard to come by, often due to underreporting, the inconsistency in the collection of data across different jurisdictions, the reluctance of individuals to seek medical treatment, and the lack of standardized definitions or methodologies for identifying and classifying non-fatal overdose events.[14]

On the treatment front, buprenorphine, an opioid addiction treatment medication, has faced a complex landscape. Despite regulatory changes intended to expand access to this medication, actual prescriptions of buprenorphine have not risen significantly.[15] This discrepancy suggests possible barriers to access or utilization, even in the face of policy efforts to increase its availability.

Medication-assisted treatment, which includes the use of medications like buprenorphine, has demonstrated effectiveness in preventing relapse when used consistently. These treatments combine medication with counseling and behavioral therapies to provide a more comprehensive approach to the treatment of substance use disorders.

Overall, while medications such as naloxone and buprenorphine have proven to be valuable tools in addressing the opioid crisis, it's essential to recognize the complexities surrounding their use and availability. These challenges underscore the need for ongoing efforts to optimize the use of these life-saving resources and to develop comprehensive, patient-centered approaches to treatment and prevention.

[14] <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/dawn-non-fatal-overdoses>

[15] <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2804078>



20

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUSTAINING EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS:

Increase advocacy and education for "opioid naïve" individuals

Given the alarming rate at which overdose deaths are occurring, particularly among younger individuals, it's crucial to educate those who have not been exposed to opioids about the risks and realities of misuse. Awareness campaigns should be targeted towards schools, colleges, and social media platforms where younger audiences can be most effectively reached.

Focus on mental health services in relation to opioid misuse

The link between mental health and substance abuse cannot be overstated. Investments in mental health services, particularly those that focus on addiction counseling and treatment, should be increased. Moreover, integrated healthcare services that offer both mental health and addiction treatment may be effective in dealing with the root causes of opioid misuse.



21



Create regional opioid commissions in communities across Florida

In light of the significant decrease in overdose deaths in certain Florida communities, additional Regional Opioid Commissions could consolidate these gains by promoting best practices and effective strategies. These commissions could serve as a model for all regions in the state, helping to identify scalable and sustainable solutions to the opioid crisis.

Implement a technology-based stakeholder navigation system

Navigating the complex landscape of healthcare, addiction treatment, and social services is often overwhelming for individuals battling opioid addiction. Implementing a technology-based navigation system specifically tailored for these individuals could streamline the process of finding and accessing appropriate treatments and services. The system can help guide them through essential steps—from initial consultation and diagnosis to treatment options like medication-assisted treatments (MAT) and counseling, as well as follow-up care—ensuring a more coordinated and efficient approach to managing addiction.



Introduce naloxone in educational institutions (K-12, Colleges, Universities)

Given the effectiveness of naloxone in preventing opioid-related deaths, this life-saving medication should be made widely available in educational settings. Staff and students should also receive training on how to administer it in emergency situations. This measure is especially urgent considering the increasing rates of overdose among adolescents and young adults.

HR training focused on managing employees with opioid misuse

Given the societal scope of the opioid crisis, workplaces are not immune. Human resources professionals should be trained to recognize signs of opioid misuse among employees and to manage these situations in a way that aligns with best practices for harm reduction and compassionate intervention. This can include providing resources for treatment and reducing the stigma associated with seeking help for addiction.

REFERENCES

- <https://www.dea.gov/factsheets/fentanyl>
- <https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2023/may/fentanyl-new-york-city.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db474.htm>
- <https://icd.who.int/browse10/2019/en#/T40.4>
- <https://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/prov-county-drug-overdose.htm>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm>
- <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2790949>
- <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/dawn-non-fatal-overdoses>
- <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2804078>

KEY FINDINGS



The Overdose Crisis In Florida:

A Critical Analysis of Recent Trends
and Recommendations for Sustaining
Effective Interventions

Overdose deaths in the United States reached record levels in 2022

- The latest data from the CDC show that in 2022 more than 110,000 people died from drug overdoses nationwide – more than 300 people each day
- This tragically high level of overdose deaths shows little change from the alarming new highs seen during the COVID-19 pandemic

In Florida, there were some encouraging signs as overdose deaths declined for the first time since 2018

- In a positive development, Florida witnessed a 2.6% decrease in drug overdose fatalities in 2022, marking the first decline in four years
- Some counties previously burdened with high overdose death rates have seen impressive reductions, indicating targeted interventions and community initiatives are having positive impact
- In contrast, several counties with lower death rates are now experiencing escalating numbers, suggesting new challenges might be affecting previously less-impacted areas

Prescription opioids are contributing less to the crisis than before

- In the first phase of the opioid crisis, beginning in the late 1990s, the over-prescription of painkillers, fueled by misinformation about addiction risks, led to a surge in misuse and overdose deaths
- Around 2010, following tighter regulations on prescription opioids, addicted individuals turned to more accessible heroin, causing a sharp rise in heroin-related overdose deaths

Fentanyl remains the major driver of the opioid crisis, implicated in the majority of overdose deaths

- Starting in 2013, the crisis intensified with the emergence of synthetic opioids, particularly illicitly manufactured fentanyl, causing a significant increase in overdose deaths
- More than 450,000 Americans have died of drug overdose since a national public health emergency was declared in 2017
- Two thirds of overdose deaths are now attributable to fentanyl and other synthetic opioids

Opioid-related deaths are skyrocketing affecting younger Americans, with no corresponding increase in drug-seeking behavior, indicating growing risks for the “opioid naïve”

- Overdose is now the leading cause of death among those aged 18 to 49
- Fatal overdoses among adolescents, 14- to 18-year-olds, jumped an alarming 94% in 2020 (versus 29.5% for the overall population) and a further 20% (versus 11.5% for the overall population) in 2021

Medications such as naloxone and buprenorphine have proven to be useful tools in addressing the opioid crisis

- The wider availability of naloxone has undoubtedly saved numerous lives in recent years, but its usage may simultaneously obscure the full extent of the opioid crisis, as death totals could underrepresent the number of opioid overdoses occurring
- Despite recent regulatory changes aimed at expanding access to buprenorphine, data show that actual prescriptions of the medication have not increased significantly

The Overdose Crisis In Central Florida:

A Critical Analysis of Recent Trends and Recommendations for Sustaining Effective Interventions

COMMUNITY RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase advocacy and education for "opioid naïve" individuals

Given the alarming rate at which overdose deaths are occurring, particularly among younger individuals, it's crucial to educate those who have not been exposed to opioids about the risks and realities of misuse. Awareness campaigns should be targeted towards schools, colleges, and social media platforms where younger audiences can be most effectively reached.

Focus on mental health services in relation to opioid misuse

The link between mental health and substance abuse cannot be overstated. Investments in mental health services, particularly those that focus on addiction counseling and treatment, should be increased. Moreover, integrated healthcare services that offer both mental health and addiction treatment may be effective in dealing with the root causes of opioid misuse.

Create a Regional Opioid Commission in Central Florida

In light of the significant decrease in overdose deaths in Central Florida, a Regional Opioid Commission could consolidate these gains by promoting best practices and effective strategies. This commission could serve as a model for other regions and states, helping to identify scalable and sustainable solutions to the opioid crisis.

Implement a technology-based stakeholder navigation system

Navigating the complex landscape of healthcare, addiction treatment, and social services is often overwhelming for individuals battling opioid addiction. Implementing a technology-based navigation system specifically tailored for these individuals could streamline the process of finding and accessing appropriate treatments and services. The system can help guide them through essential steps—from initial consultation and diagnosis to treatment options like medication-assisted treatments (MAT) and counseling, as well as follow-up care—ensuring a more coordinated and efficient approach to managing addiction.

Introduce naloxone in educational institutions (K-12, Colleges, Universities)

Given the effectiveness of naloxone in preventing opioid-related deaths, this life-saving medication should be made widely available in educational settings. Staff and students should also receive training on how to administer it in emergency situations. This measure is especially urgent considering the increasing rates of overdose among adolescents and young adults.

HR training focused on managing employees with opioid misuse

Given the societal scope of the opioid crisis, workplaces are not immune. Human resources professionals should be trained to recognize signs of opioid misuse among employees and to manage these situations in a way that aligns with best practices for harm reduction and compassionate intervention. This can include providing resources for treatment and reducing the stigma associated with seeking help for addiction.