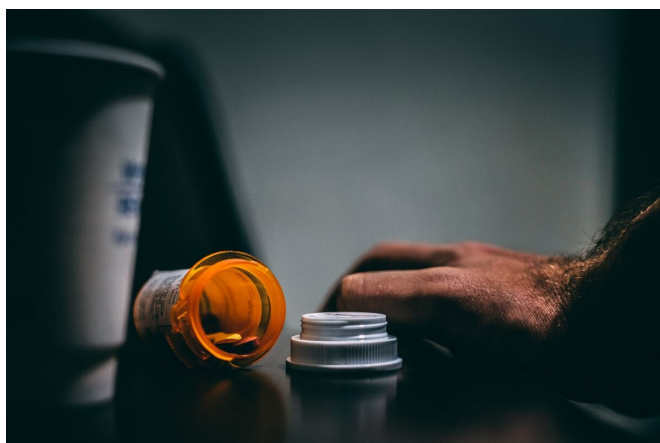


Overdose deaths up 42% in 2020; largest increases among Black and Latino communities

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Credit: Kevin Bidwell/Pexels

Based on cases handled by emergency medical services, the number of people in the U.S. who died due to drug overdoses was 42% higher in 2020 than the average number of overdose deaths in 2018 and 2019.

According to a study by researchers from UCLA, Northeastern University and the University of Utah, the largest increases were among Black Americans (50.3%) and Latinos (49.7%). Spikes were also most pronounced in [low-income neighborhoods](#) (46.4%) and in the five states—Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon and Washington—that border the Pacific Ocean (63.8%).

Public health authorities had expected a sharp increase in overdoses during the pandemic because of the [social isolation](#) created by stay-at-home orders. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had previously published data on overdose deaths during the early stages of the

pandemic, but those reports did not categorize statistics by race and ethnicity, neighborhood-level poverty rates and other relevant metrics, and they drew from data with a lag time of more than seven months.

The researchers examined near-real-time data from about 90% of U.S. emergency medical service calls. The researchers write that the emergency medical service data they reviewed serves only as a proxy for actual total number of overdose deaths, so a deeper look at the data will be needed when the final statistics for 2020 are available.

Also, the study notes that about 20% of racial and ethnic data is missing; this may in part be due to the difficulty in assessing those characteristics during emergency treatment.

The study concludes that overdose prevention should be part of the U.S.'s post-pandemic recovery efforts and that such efforts may be especially important for certain racial and ethnic minority communities.

The study is published in *JAMA Psychiatry*.

More information: Joseph Friedman et al, Racial/Ethnic, Social, and Geographic Trends in Overdose-Associated Cardiac Arrests Observed by US Emergency Medical Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *JAMA Psychiatry* (2021). [DOI: 10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2021.0967](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2021.0967)

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