

New government data show 64,000 Americans died due to drug overdose in 2016

By Tom Hall
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Approximately 64,000 Americans died in 2016 from drug overdose, a jump of 21 percent from the previous year, according to newly released figures from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The report substantiates earlier studies that have shown sharp increases in mortality rates due to “deaths of despair,” such as drug overdoses, alcoholism and suicides, driven by widespread social misery within the American working class. Last month, a report by the Society of Actuaries showed that American life expectancy declined in 2015 for the first time in more than two decades.

Nearly 20 people per 100,000 died of a drug overdose in 2016, compared to 16.3 per 100,000 in 2015. This one-year increase is larger than the combined four-year increase in the drug mortality rate from 2011 to 2015, Bloomberg News noted. The current rate is also more than triple that in 1999, when it was around 6 per 100,000.

While drug overdoses among teenagers declined somewhat, the overall rise in overdose deaths has impacted both young adults and the middle-aged. “We have roughly two groups of Americans that are getting addicted,” an opioid addiction researcher told the *New York Times*. “We have an older group that is overdosing on pain medicine, and we have a younger group that is overdosing on black market opioids.”

A criminal role in the growing opioid epidemic is being played by the US pharmaceuticals industry, which has flooded impoverished communities with highly addictive opioid painkiller drugs. A report last month by the CDC found that in 10 states more than 50 percent of deaths due to opioids, a class of drugs that includes heroin, were caused by the prescription drug fentanyl. Fentanyl is a highly addictive painkiller that is

50 to 100 times more potent than morphine, and which has been marketed over the years in patches, sprays and even lollipops.

US drug companies, working through lobbyists and influential members of Congress, have repeatedly blocked attempts to strengthen federal oversight of opioid sales. A report on the news program “60 Minutes” last month exposed the bipartisan push, led by Republican congressman Tom Marino, to block the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) from halting unusually large shipments of opioids, which culminated in the passage of the 2016 *Ensuring Patient Access and Effective Drug Enforcement Act*, which was signed into law by Obama.

Rural areas, such as parts of Appalachia, where social conditions are particularly dire, have been the hardest hit by the opioid epidemic. This is the reverse of the situation in 1999, according to a previous report by the CDC, when the rates of drug overdose in urban and rural areas were 6.4 and 4.0 per 100,000, respectively.

However, the study noted that both rural and urban areas saw substantial increases over that time and that this “was consistent across sex, race, and intent (unintentional, suicide, homicide, or undetermined).” Provisional statistics for 2016 released in August showed a 50 percent increase in drug overdose deaths in New York City, for a total of 1,478 deaths.

The CDC’s statistics also found a significant rise in the number of deaths due to firearms, to more than 38,000. The mortality rate from gunshot wounds also increased sharply in 2015, after staying relatively constant in previous years. While, as in years past, the vast majority of these deaths were due to suicide, the increase in 2016 was mostly due to an increase in homicides.

Even as the CDC report recorded notable declines in

the death rates for heart disease and cancer, the two leading causes of death in the United States, the overall mortality rate continues to climb and life expectancy has even begun to decline. Improvements in treatment methods and medical technology have been more than offset by “deaths of despair” among workers facing an economic and social situation that many find increasingly impossible to bear.

The response of President Trump, who recently declared that the opioid crisis would “get worse before it gets better,” exudes indifference and contempt. His administration has refused to declare a state of emergency in the opioid epidemic, as recommended by his own hand-picked commission, because such an announcement would obligate the government to commit significant resources to meet the crisis.

Instead, Trump declared a toothless “public health emergency” last month without committing any new public resources, while calling for an advertising campaign to discourage opioid use. The cost of curbing the opioid epidemic has been estimated at \$60 billion over 10 years, a small fraction of the annual budget of the US military.

However, the CDC report itself is principally an indictment of the Democratic Party and the former Obama administration, which was in the third year of its second term during the period of the study. The growth of opioid deaths is the result of the measures enacted by the Democrats, with the support of the entire political establishment, after the 2008 financial crisis. Social resources were used to prop up the profits of American capitalism through the intensified exploitation of the working class, resulting in the largest transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich in American history.

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