

US drug overdose deaths soared to record highs in 2019

By Genevieve Leigh
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Drug deaths in America rose to record numbers in 2019 and are continuing to climb with 2020 on track to see even more overdose deaths. According to preliminary data released Wednesday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 72,000 Americans died from drug overdoses last year, a staggering increase of 5 percent from 2018.

To put this number in perspective, drug overdoses claimed more lives in 2019 than the peak yearly death totals *ever recorded* for car accidents, guns or AIDS. The sheer volume of deaths from drug overdoses has become so devastating in recent years that it has lowered the overall life expectancy in the US.

Experts predict that this deadly trend will only get worse in the coming year. Preliminary data covering 40 percent of the US population collected by the *New York Times* shows that so far in 2020, drug deaths have risen an average of 13 percent. In New Jersey, overdose deaths in the first half of 2020 were 17 percent higher than in 2019. In Colorado, deaths were up by 30 percent through March. Even more shocking numbers were reported in large counties across the country with Los Angeles, California showing a 35 percent spike and 32 percent in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The *Times*' analysis suggests that if this trend continues for the rest of the year it will be the sharpest increase in annual drug deaths since 2016.

While there is no doubt that the social and economic pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic will have devastating consequences in 2020 in terms of overdose deaths and increase drug abuse, several leading public health experts have noted that the rise in deaths in 2020 was well underway before the pandemic began in the US, and certainly before the stay-at-home orders were put into place.

In other words, the pandemic is going to dramatically

worsen an already horrific situation.

Dan Ciccarone, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, explained it to the *New York Times* as such: "Covid just makes [the crisis of drug overdoses] a bit worse" but "it's a small wave riding on top of a tsunami that continues to devastate."

Experts believe that one factor in the increase in deaths stems from the proliferation of fentanyl, a synthetic pain killer, and the deadliest opioid available. Since 2014, the US has seen a dramatic increase in the prevalence of fentanyl and its cousin, carfentanil. These drugs are extremely lethal. Less than half a teaspoon of pure fentanyl is enough to kill 10 people. Carfentanil, which is used as an elephant tranquilizer, is 5,000 times stronger than heroin. For a human, an amount of carfentanil equal to a few grains of salt can be a lethal dose.

Fentanyl had been confined mostly to New England and other parts of the eastern US since 2014. Generally, fentanyl was found in powdered heroin. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, however, increasing numbers of counterfeit pills containing fentanyl have been found in California, Arizona, and other Western states. Deaths involving fentanyl accounted for 36,500 overdose deaths in 2019. Deaths involving cocaine and methamphetamine also are rising.

The real root of the problem is not primarily a question of the prevalence of drugs. Rather, it is the expression of a profound social illness. The depth of despair which an individual often feels when succumbing to drug abuse is the consequence of inequality, poverty, unemployment, and a general feeling of hopelessness that afflicts broad sections of the population. At its root, it is the product of an

economic and political system that leaves those most severely impacted by the social crisis to fend for themselves.

Perhaps nowhere has this reality been more blatantly displayed as in the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Millions of workers have had their lives upended and their livelihoods destroyed. Millions remain unemployed or underemployed. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions more, do not know if their jobs will be secure next month or even next year. Workers do not know how they will put food on the table for their families in the coming weeks, or if they will be able to pay their rent or mortgages. Devastating scenes of workers lined up for hours to get tests, hospital ICU beds over capacity, and nurses and doctors worked to exhaustion have left so many in precarious situations, with few public resources, and a profound sense of despair.

On top of the impact of these events on the social and political outlook of broad sections of the population, there have also been many practical impediments for those already struggling with addiction.

For thousands of people who are struggling with addiction, the isolation of quarantine places them under extraordinary danger. Using drugs alone is much more dangerous than doing so with others since there is no one around to call a hospital or to revive you with Naloxone if needed. On top of this, many in-person treatment options—including group counseling sessions and residential treatment centers—have been shuttered, leaving many without the medical and emotional support on which they rely.

Substance use and abuse also increase the risk of both infection and a negative prognosis with COVID-19. The effect of opioids on the immune system has been extensively studied. Those using opioids chronically or therapeutically have been shown to have both slower and weaker immune responses.

There is no doubt that the current crisis will intensify the on-going drug epidemic in the US in profound ways. The measures required to confront the drug crisis in the US cannot be carried out without a frontal attack on the wealth of the corporate and financial elite and its stranglehold on the entire economic and political system.

As tens of thousands die from drugs this year, and

hundreds of thousands die from the pandemic, the ruling class has conspired to dump trillions of dollars into the stock market to keep Wall Street afloat and conjure up new ways to amass ever-greater fortunes. No faith can be put in representatives of either bourgeois parties to address the prevailing ills of the capitalist system, including drug abuse.

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