

Issue brief: Drug overdose epidemic worsened during COVID pandemic

***Updated June 1, 2021**

The nation's COVID pandemic made the nation's drug overdose epidemic worse. This issue brief highlights media and other reports showing increases in drug overdose mortality and other concerns relating to access to evidence-based care for substance use disorders, patients with pain as well as harm reduction services. The reports below cite data from multiple and varied sources, including national, state and local public health agencies, law enforcement, emergency medical services, hospitals, treatment centers, research journals and others. Every state has reported a spike or increase in overdose deaths or other problems during the COVID pandemic.

AMA advocacy and resources include support for states to adopt and promote:

- [U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) and [U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration](#) (DEA) increased flexibility for providing buprenorphine and methadone to patients with opioid use disorder.
- [Increased flexibility provided by the DEA](#) to help patients with pain obtain necessary medications. [The AMA strongly recommends](#) that all of the flexibilities that have been put in place by DEA during the COVID-19 PHE be kept in place at a minimum until both the COVID-19 and the opioid public health emergencies come to an end.
- Support the removal of prior authorization, step therapy and other administrative barriers for medications used to treat opioid use disorder (MOUD); meaningful enforcement of mental health and substance use disorder parity laws is long overdue. [Prior authorization of MOUD](#) remains a [major barrier](#).
- [Remove existing barriers for patients with pain](#) to obtain necessary medications. This includes removing arbitrary dose, quantity and refill restrictions on controlled substances; and
- Implement and support [evidence-based harm reduction strategies](#), including removing barriers to sterile needle and syringe services programs as well as strengthening Good Samaritan laws. [Arizona](#) is the latest example of positive legislative action.
- Enact new laws to ensure that monies from opioid-related litigation is focused on public health, treatment and prevention efforts. [Virginia](#) and [Kentucky](#) are leading examples.

Detailed policy recommendations to help patients with a substance use disorder can be found in the [2020 National Policy Roadmap](#) issued by the AMA and Manatt Health.

See below for reports from all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

For more information, please contact Daniel Blaney-Koen, JD, Senior Legislative Attorney, AMA Advocacy Resource Center, at daniel.blaney-koen@ama-assn.org

National reports

- **Opinion. If Lawmakers Really Want to “Follow the Science” They Will Repeal Codified Opioid Guidelines.** <https://www.cato.org/blog/lawmakers-really-want-follow-science-they-will-repeal-codified-opioid-guidelines> May 24, 2021
- **Chronic pain can be burdensome. Isolation during the pandemic can make it worse.** https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/chronic-pain-pandemic-isolation/2021/05/07/9e0c7112-addc-11eb-b476-c3b287e52a01_story.html May 9, 2021
- **Study: 1 in 5 Pharmacies Blocks Access to Addiction Treatment Buprenorphine.** <https://www.pharmacytimes.com/view/study-1-in-5-pharmacies-blocks-access-to-addiction-treatment-buprenorphine> May 3, 2021
- **Overdose Deaths Surged in Pandemic, As More Drugs Were Laced With Fentanyl.** <https://www.delawarepublic.org/post/overdose-deaths-surged-pandemic-more-drugs-were-laced-fentanyl/> April 22, 2021
- **The Health 202: Overdose deaths may have topped 90,000 in 2020.** <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/04/07/health-202-overdose-deaths-may-have-topped-90000-2020/> April 7, 2021
- **The Spike in Drug Overdose Deaths During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Policy Options to Move Forward.** <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/blog/2021/spike-drug-overdose-deaths-during-covid-19-pandemic-and-policy-options-move-forward> March 25, 2021.
- **Latinos grapple with opioid overdose rise as pandemic triggers surge in U.S. use.** <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/latinos-grapple-opioid-overdose-rise-covid-pandemic-triggers-surge-us-rcna415> March 17, 2021
- **House reshapes approach to mental health and addiction.** <https://www.rollcall.com/2021/03/16/house-reshapes-approach-to-mental-health-and-addiction/> March 16, 2021
- **In Birth and Death, Opioid Crisis to Leave Mark Long After Covid.** <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/health-law-and-business/in-birth-and-death-opioid-crisis-to-leave-mark-long-after-covid> February 25, 2021
- **As the pandemic ushered in isolation and financial hardship, overdose deaths reached new heights.** <https://www.statnews.com/2021/02/16/as-pandemic-ushered-in-isolation-financial-hardship-overdose-deaths-reached-new-heights/> February 16, 2021.
- **As Addiction Deaths Surge, Profit-Driven Rehab Industry Faces ‘Severe Ethical Crisis’** <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/15/963700736/as-addiction-deaths-surge-profit-driven-rehab-industry-faces-severe-ethical-crisis> February 15, 2021
- **As Overdose Deaths Surge, White House Takes Steps To Build Drug Policy Team.** <https://www.npr.org/sections/president-biden-takes-office/2021/02/03/963732520/as-overdose-deaths-surge-white-house-takes-steps-to-build-drug-policy-team> February 3, 2021
- **81,230 overdoses set record for such deaths in a 12-month period, CDC says.** https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/81230-overdoses-set-record-for-such-deaths-in-a-12-month-period-cdc-says/2021/01/22/a8b29e7a-5c06-11eb-a976-bad6431e03e2_story.html January 25, 2021
- **Thousands of Northwest residents are unexpectedly dying from causes other than COVID-19.** <https://www.opb.org/article/2020/11/25/covid-19-oregon-washington-idaho-excess-deaths/> December 4, 2020
- **Overdose-Related Cardiac Arrests Observed by Emergency Medical Services During the US COVID-19 Epidemic.** <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.4218> December 3, 2020

- **“The stakes are life and death”:** Addiction treatment’s Covid-19 challenge. <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/21575602/addiction-treatment-covid-19-coronavirus-opioid-epidemic> December 1, 2020
- **Street Fentanyl Surges in Western U.S., Leading To Thousands of Deaths.** <https://www.nprillinois.org/post/street-fentanyl-surges-western-us-leading-thousands-deaths#stream/0> November 17, 2020
- **Overdose deaths appear to rise amid coronavirus pandemic in U.S.** <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/overdose-deaths-appear-rise-amid-coronavirus-pandemic-u-s-n1244024> October 20, 2020
- **The opioid crisis didn’t disappear amid the pandemic. It still calls for urgent action.** Editorial. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-opioid-crisis-didnt-disappear-amid-the-pandemic-it-still-calls-for-urgent-action/2020/10/16/7df74fd0-0d7f-11eb-b1e8-16b59b92b36d_story.html October 16, 2020
- **Drug overdose deaths on pace for record year during coronavirus pandemic, CDC says.** <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/coronavirus/article246469555.html> October 15, 2020
- **Opioid Deaths: America’s Other Fatal Health Crisis Hasn’t Gone Away.** <https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2020-10-14/opioid-deaths-americas-other-fatal-health-crisis-continues-during-covid-19> October 14, 2020
- **Sharp Rise In Drug Overdose Deaths Seen During 1st Few Months Of Pandemic.** <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/10/14/923721544/sharp-rise-in-drug-overdose-deaths-seen-during-1st-few-months-of-pandemic> October 14, 2020
- **The Opioid Crisis, Already Serious, Has Intensified During Coronavirus Pandemic.** <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-opioid-crisis-already-serious-has-intensified-during-coronavirus-pandemic-11599557401> September 8, 2020
- **Opioid overdoses on the rise during COVID-19 pandemic, despite telemedicine care.** <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/opioid-overdoses-rise-covid-19-pandemic-telemedicine-care/story?id=72442735> August 24, 2020
- **U.S. Sees Deadly Drug Overdose Spike During Pandemic.** <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/08/13/901627189/u-s-sees-deadly-drug-overdose-spike-during-pandemic> August 13, 2020
- **As overdoses rise during pandemic, 2 moms share their stories of loss.** <https://www.today.com/health/overdoses-rise-during-coronavirus-pandemic-moms-speak-out-t188420> August 5, 2020
- **AMA Urges Changes After Dramatic Increase in Illicit Opioid Fatalities.** <https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/934548> July 24, 2020
- **Drug overdose deaths jump in 2019 to nearly 71,000, a record high, CDC says.** <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/15/health/drug-overdose-deaths-2019/index.html> July 16, 2020
- **'Opioid overdoses are skyrocketing': as Covid-19 sweeps across US an old epidemic returns.** <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/09/coronavirus-pandemic-us-opioids-crisis> July 9, 2020
- **High Rate of Stimulant Use in Opioid ED Cases.** <https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/933527> July 7, 2020
- **Coronavirus Crisis Disrupts Treatment For Another Epidemic: Addiction.** https://khn.org/news/coronavirus-crisis-disrupts-treatment-for-another-epidemic-addiction/?utm_source=National+Conference+of+State+Legislatures&utm_campaign=e7504bd7d3-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_07_07_03_18&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1716623089-e7504bd7d3-377887712 July 6, 2020
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- **Don’t Forget the Other Pandemic Killing Thousands of Americans.** <https://www.thedailybeast.com/opioid-deaths-surge-during-coronavirus-in-americas-overdose-capitals> May 4, 2020
- **The pandemic may fuel the next wave of the opioid crisis.** <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/coronavirus-pandemic-may-fuel-the-next-wave-of-the-opioid-crisis/> April 21, 2020

State reports

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- **Overdose deaths are up 31.3% in Alabama.** <https://whnt.com/news/overdose-deaths-are-up-31-3-in-alabama/> May 21, 2021
- **Opioid overdoses increased 20% in Ala. in 2020.** <https://www.wbrc.com/2021/04/21/opioid-overdoses-increased-ala/> May 4, 2021
- **Health officials raise the alarm over overdose deaths in Birmingham area.** <https://www.al.com/news/2021/05/health-officials-raise-the-alarm-over-overdose-deaths-in-birmingham-area.html> May 4, 2021
- **Opioid deaths increased in Jefferson County in 2020.** <https://www.wbrc.com/2021/02/25/opioid-deaths-increased-jefferson-county/> February 25, 2021
- **Drug overdoses climbed in Alabama during pandemic.** <https://www.al.com/news/2021/01/drug-overdoses-climbed-in-alabama-during-pandemic.html> January 25, 2021
- **Overdoses on the rise in pandemic.** <https://mountaineagle.com/stories/overdoses-on-the-rise-in-pandemic,28650> September 30, 2020

- **Opioid overdoses on the rise since pandemic began.** <https://www.wbrc.com/2020/08/18/opioid-overdoses-rise-since-pandemic-began/> August 18, 2020
 - **Drug Overdoses Increase During the Pandemic.** <https://wbhm.org/feature/2020/drug-overdoses-increase-during-the-pandemic/> July 20, 2020
 - **Madison County seeing a spike in overdoses, deaths amid pandemic.** <https://www.rocketcitynow.com/article/news/local/madison-county-seeing-a-spike-in-overdoses-deaths-amid-pandemic/525-021e43d6-44de-4c50-99ee-a326f2394a22> May 13, 2020
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- **Alaska reports increase in drug-related overdoses.** <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/northwest/alaska-reports-increase-in-drug-related-overdoses/> May 22, 2021
 - **Overdose deaths in Alaska have been on the rise since the pandemic began, report says.** <https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/2020/12/23/overdose-deaths-in-alaska-have-been-on-the-rise-since-the-pandemic-began-report-says/> December 23, 2020
3. **Arizona**
- **Tragedies Pile up With Drug Overdoses Surging Amid Pandemic.** <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/arizona/articles/2021-05-08/tragedies-pile-up-with-drug-overdoses-surging-amid-pandemic> May 8, 2021
 - **‘Lost in Phoenix’ gives raw glimpse into Phoenix’s opioid epidemic.** https://www.azfamily.com/news/investigations/opioid_crisis/lost-in-phoenix-gives-raw-glimpse-into-phoenixs-opioid-epidemic/article_4ebe7b06-8e96-11eb-b810-f7545cc89522.html March 26, 2021
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 - **Pima County reaches of overdose deaths this year.** <https://www.kgun9.com/news/coronavirus/pima-county-reaches-record-of-overdose-deaths-this-year> December 4, 2020
 - **1/4 of Arizona voters say the opioid crisis has become less important to them following the pandemic, reveals survey.** <https://prescottnews.com/index.php/2020/10/28/1-4-of-arizona-voters-say-the-opioid-crisis-has-become-less-important-to-them-following-the-pandemic-reveals-survey/> October 28, 2020
 - **Amid COVID-19 pandemic, the opioid epidemic rages on: Here are resources to get help.** <https://www.abc15.com/news/rebound/keeping-you-safe/amid-covid-19-pandemic-the-opioid-epidemic-rages-on-here-are-resources-to-get-help> September 16, 2020
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- **Number of overdose saves tops 500 through Arkansas program.** <https://www.fox16.com/news/local-news/number-of-overdose-saves-tops-500-through-arkansas-program/> June 10, 2020
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- **New Research Sends Stark Warning of Rise in Overdose Deaths Among Latino Population in California.** <https://yubanet.com/california/new-research-sends-stark-warning-of-rise-in-overdose-deaths-among-latino-population-in-california/> March 18, 2021
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- **Report on Accidental Overdose Deaths. Office of the Chief Medical Examiner.** https://sf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-01/2021%2001_OCME%20Overdose%20Report.pdf February 17, 2021
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- **Attorney General Xavier Becerra, law enforcement: 25% spike in opioid overdose deaths amid COVID-19.** <https://fox40.com/news/california-connection/attorney-general->

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 - **Colliding epidemics: Need for ‘safe consumption sites’ more dire in COVID era, scientists and lawmakers say.** <https://missionlocal.org/2020/07/colliding-epidemics-need-for-safe-consumtion-sites-more-dire-in-covid-era-scientists-and-lawmakers-say/> July 20, 2020
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7. Connecticut

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