Black Americans Saw Sharpest Rise in Overdose Deaths in 2020

Most overdose deaths were attributed to illicitly manufactured fentanyl.

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From 2019 to 2020, overdose death rates increased by 44% in Black communities and by 39% among American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities, according to a new report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Most of these deaths have been attributed to the powerful illicit synthetic opioid fentanyl.

The overall rate of fatal drug overdoses rose by 30%, from 21.6 deaths per 100,000 people in 2019 to 28.3 deaths per 100,000 in 2020. The CDC's acting principal deputy director, Debra Houry, MD, MPH, told NBC that this is the largest increase observed in U.S. history and called the numbers "staggering."

Black Americans experienced the greatest increase in deaths—44%—from 27 overdose deaths per 100,000 in 2019 to 38.9 deaths per 100,000 in 2020. White people experienced overdose death increases as well but at a slower rate: 22%.

Some experts ascribe the sharp increase in overdose deaths to the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted substance use treatment centers and harm reduction programs. Furthermore, isolation due to the pandemic may have ledmore people to use drugs alone, without someone to deliver the overdose-reversing drug naloxone or to call for help.

Black Americans and American Indians and Native Alaskans reported significant barriers to substance use treatment. The report showed that places with substance use treatment programs actually had higher rates of overdose deaths. Houry said access to these programs doesn't necessarily equate to active participation and that low-income areas are less likely to have nearby access to these programs.

Overdose deaths have continued to increase since 2020 but at a slower rate, according to the report.

"Overdose deaths are preventable, and we must redouble our efforts to make overdose prevention a priority," Houry told NBC. "We will continue to support and work collaboratively with communities like we do with CDC's Overdose Data to Action (OD2A). Providing tailored tools and

resources to combat overdose and address underlying risk factors will ultimately help reduce health disparities and save lives.”

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