

Drug Overdose Deaths on Rise in Black Americans

Researchers urge targeted interventions and harm reduction services to decrease unintentional drug overdoses.

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Black Americans are dying of [drug overdoses](#) at higher rates than white Americans, according to a new study by Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health researchers.

Published in [JAMA Network Open](#), the study analyzed trends among nearly 519,000 drug overdose deaths from 2010 to 2020 and found significant racial and sex disparities.

“Our goal was to identify the specific sociodemographic groups and regions that have faced the highest levels of inequality and are in urgent need of intervention,” said study lead Kechna Cadet, PhD, a postdoctoral researcher in Columbia’s Department of Epidemiology, in a [news release](#).

During the study period, both Black men and Black women were at a greater risk for a fatal overdose compared with white people.

The death rate for Black men surpassed that of white men in 2016 and was almost 60% higher in 2020. Black women also experienced a steady increase in mortality, surpassing that of white women in 2019.

What’s more, Black male mortality increased most dramatically, particularly in Maryland, which saw a 485% increase between 2015 and 2020. Conversely, white female mortality declined in states like Alaska, Wyoming and Oklahoma.

“Efforts to reduce drug-related mortality must address the specific needs of marginalized communities, especially Black men,” Cadet said. “Addressing these disparities requires a comprehensive, multifaceted approach that targets social, economic, physical and policy risk

factors.”

Throughout the 20-year study period, researchers accounted for 11,820,781 years of potential life lost. State-level data show that Black men living in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Missouri and Wisconsin lost the most years of potential life to drug overdose compared with Black men in other states.

“Our analysis of intersectional race and sex disparities over the past decade offers crucial insights for directing much needed resources, such as harm reduction services and tailored treatment programs, to the populations most in need of urgent targeted interventions to decrease unintentional drug overdoses,” said study senior author Silvia Martins, MD, PhD.

In the United States, the opioid overdose epidemic has caused nearly 1 million deaths over the past decade. In 2022, nearly 108,000 people died of drug overdose, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

[Harm reduction](#) is an evidence-based, often lifesaving approach that directly engages people who use drugs to prevent overdose, disease transmission and other harms. Researchers test strategies to connect enrolled participants to services and treatment and measure the effectiveness of these interventions in reducing overdose deaths and other adverse outcomes.

To learn more, click [#Harm Reduction](#). There, you’ll find headlines such as “[Protecting Key Populations From Abrupt Disruptions to Essential HIV Services](#),” “[Trump Turns Homelessness Response Away From Housing, Toward Forced Treatment](#)” and “[More Than 321,000 U.S. Children Lost a Parent to Drug Overdose From 2011 to 2021](#).”