

# Drug Overdose Deaths Are Surging Among Black Americans

July 1, 2021 By Casey Halter

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Not so long ago, the [U.S. opioid crisis](#) was associated with rural white Americans. But recent studies show the demographics are increasingly shifting to Black Americans. In fact, one study in Missouri showed that Black men in the state are now four times more likely to die of an overdose than white men, [The Associated Press \(AP\) reports](#).

In Philadelphia, overdose cases increased by more than 50% for Black people, while decreasing for whites. In Massachusetts, health administrators documented overdose death increases of nearly 70% among Black men, and scientists from the University of California, Los Angeles noted an uptick of more than 50% in overdose deaths among Black people.

According to experts, COVID-19 appears to have accelerated the trend. The pandemic that emerged last year, they say, caused a significant [increase in addiction, overdoses and mental health issues](#). In recent years, the danger of overdose soared as fentanyl—a synthetic opioid that is up to 50 times more potent than heroin or prescription painkillers—flooded the U.S. drug supply.

The crisis is also hitting Black communities much harder than white communities, with much higher arrest and incarceration rates for African-American drug users. Many advocates attribute this to the 1980s “[war on drugs](#),” which demonized Black drug users and resulted in severe prison sentences for tens of thousands of Black people. Meanwhile, their white counterparts received more lenient treatment, with some individuals eventually benefiting from the notion that [addiction is a public health crisis](#), not a moral failing.

Kanika Turner, MD, a physician and community activist in Missouri who spoke to the AP, cited the police killing of George Floyd as a prime example of how law enforcement treats Black drug users. After the medical examiner found fentanyl in Floyd’s system, some officers tried to blame his death on drug use. The inhumane treatment of Floyd led to protests against [police violence](#) across the country.

“That incident on top of the pandemic rocked the boat and shook all of us,” said Turner. “We’re undoing history of damage, history of trauma, history of racism.”

In response, community advocates started to enroll incarcerated drug users in treatment and

teach them survival skills for when they are released. (Some Black churches established mobile treatment centers in their parking lots and urged their congregants not to cope with violence and racism by self-medicating.)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that more than 92,000 Americans died of overdose over the past year—the highest number ever recorded.

To learn more about this ongoing health problem, read “[What America Got Wrong About Painkillers, Addiction and the U.S. Opioid Crisis.](#)”

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