

Pain in the Nation: Alcohol, Drug, and Suicide Epidemics

**SPECIAL FEATURE:
COVID-19 AND TRAUMA**

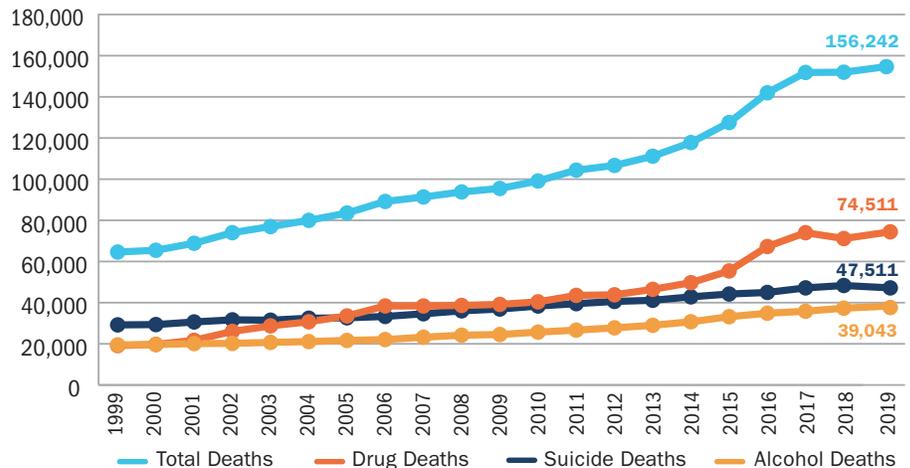
In 2019, over 156,000 Americans died from alcohol, drugs, and suicide, a slight increase over 2018. The COVID-19 pandemic created additional stressors in 2020—from direct effects of illness to indirect effects like financial stress, social isolation, and the disruption of school, healthcare, etc. The latest report in Trust for America's Health and Well Being Trust's *Pain in the Nation* series (1) examines the effect of trauma and the COVID-19 pandemic as they relate to mental health, substance use, and Americans' well-being; (2) reviews the latest mortality trends from alcohol, drugs, and suicide; and (3) outlines key policy recommendations to stem and reverse these trends. *Note: The full report, along with citations and notes on methodology, can be found at www.tfah.org/report-details/pain-in-the-nation-series-update-2021/.*

COVID-19 and Trauma

Data shows Americans struggled to cope with COVID's direct and indirect effects in 2020, including these four key findings:

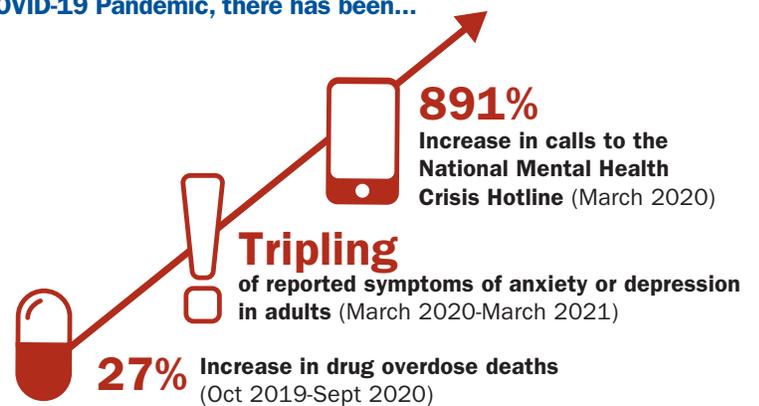
- 1) More Americans are in crisis:** In 2020, calls to crisis lines, as well as ER visits for mental health conditions, increased.
- 2) Worse mental health:** The U.S. Household Pulse Survey found one in three adults reported symptoms of anxiety disorder or depression, three times the 2019 rate, and higher among certain populations.
- 3) More substance use:** Surveys show increases in both drugs and alcohol use.

Annual Deaths from Alcohol, Drugs, and Suicide in the United States, 1999–2019



Source: TFAH and WBT analysis of National Center for Health Statistics data

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, there has been...



Source: ABC News; Household Pulse Survey, National Center for Health Statistics

- 4) Higher rates of drug overdoses:** Preliminary CDC data show a 27 percent increase for October 2019–September 2020 as compared with the prior year. This is a much larger annual increase than typical—for example, 2018 to 2019 saw a 5 percent increase in drug deaths.

Without urgent action, mental health and substance issues—already on a grim trajectory—may continue to rise in the coming years and lead to more deaths from alcohol, drugs, and suicide.

2019 Trends and Takeaways

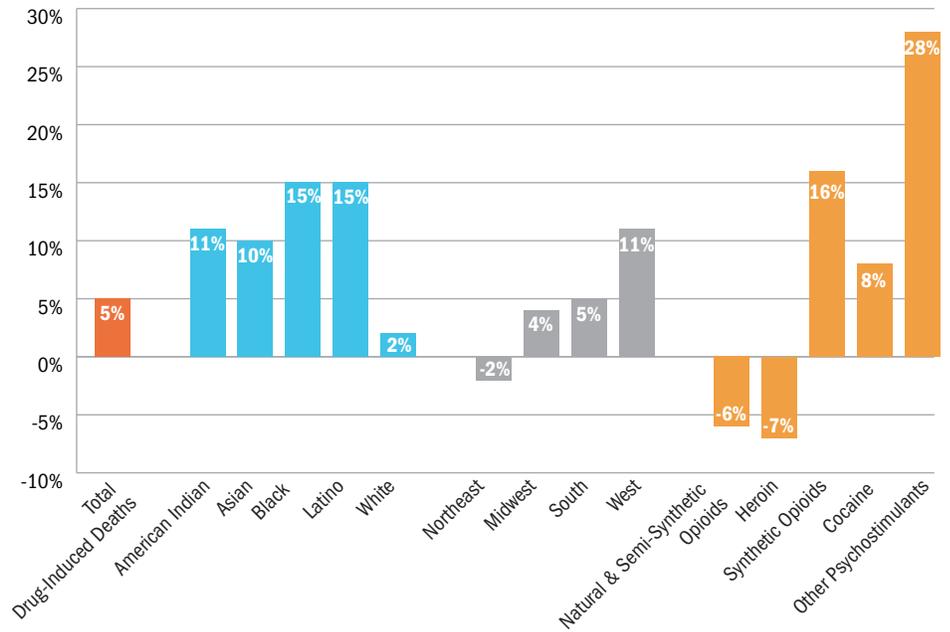
The most recent alcohol, drug, and suicide mortality data, from 2019, mostly show a continuation of recent trends, with small increases in alcohol-induced deaths and larger increases for drug deaths. One major difference in 2019 was that the age-adjusted suicide rate declined by 2 percent to 13.9 deaths per 100,000. The decline, from 2018, is statistically significant and the first decrease since 2005. Also promising is that the decline spanned many demographic and geographic groups, and preliminary data shows a further decrease in 2020, despite the COVID pandemic.

The other notable trend for 2019 is that drug-induced mortality continued to diverge by race, region, and drug type. For example, overdoses from natural and semi-synthetic opioids (includes many common prescription opioids) and heroin declined markedly while overdoses from synthetic opioids, cocaine, and other psychostimulants saw large increases. Also, while whites saw a small increase in drug-induced death rates, all other race/ethnicities saw increases four to six times the size. Blacks, as of 2019, have a higher age-adjusted drug-induced death rate than any other race/ethnicity. This is a big change from most of the decade in which Black drug deaths were substantially lower than whites.

Solutions and Recommendations

Americans need support managing emergent crises, mental health conditions, and substance use disorders with early intervention, improved medical care and treatment, and harm-reduction policies. And communities need better underlying social and economic conditions that will support and bolster residents' health, well-being, and resilience, and prevent future alcohol, drug, and suicide deaths. Trust for America's Health and Well Being Trust offers solutions and recommendations focused on actionable items in three priority areas:

Percent Change in Age-Adjusted Rates of Drug-Induced and Drug-Specific Overdose Mortality, 2018-2019



Source: TFAH and WBT analysis of National Center for Health Statistics data

Invest in Prevention and Conditions that Promote Health

- Reduce traumatic experiences, and promote resilience in children, families, and communities.
- Expand substance use prevention, mental health, and resiliency programs and staff in schools.
- Bolster crisis-intervention programs and supports.
- Reduce availability of illicit opioids and inappropriate prescriptions.
- Lower excessive alcohol use through evidence-based policies.
- Limit access to lethal means of suicide, including drugs and firearms.

Address the Worsening Drug Use and Overdose Crisis

- Implement policies targeting psychostimulant use.
- Promote harm-reduction policies to reduce overdose and blood-borne infections.
- Continue pandemic-related enhanced flexibilities in access to and rules for substance-use treatment.

- Address the secondary impact of the substance use and overdoses on children.

Transform the Mental Health and Substance Use Prevention System

- Expand efforts to combat stigma and improve social attitudes toward mental health.
- Improve data accuracy, completeness, and timeliness through innovation and additional funding.
- Increase access to mental health and substance use healthcare through full enforcement of the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act.
- Expand the mental health and substance use treatment workforce.
- Build community capacity for early identification and intervention for individuals with mental health needs.
- Promote diversity and culturally appropriate care in the healthcare system and adopt trauma-informed and culturally competent practices in youth-services programs.