

Unintentional Drug Overdose Fatalities in Philadelphia, 2020

In Philadelphia, PA, unintentional drug overdoses contribute to significant premature mortality. In 2020, there were 1,214 drug overdoses in Philadelphia, an increase of 9% and 6% from 2018 and 2019, respectively. Eighty-six percent of overdose fatalities involve opioids, a class of drugs that include pharmaceutical opioids, heroin, and fentanyl, a strong synthetic opioid that is the main driver of fatal overdoses. While fentanyl was involved in less than 10% of drug overdose deaths in Philadelphia in 2010, it was involved in 81% of all drug overdose deaths in 2020.

Prior to 2020, unintentional overdose deaths were highest among non-Hispanic White individuals. However, in 2020 the number of overdoses among non-Hispanic Black individuals increased 29% while the number of overdoses among non-Hispanic White individuals decreased 10%. The shift in demographics first occurred in the second quarter of 2020.

This issue of CHART summarizes trends in unintentional drug overdose fatalities through 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic, and its impact on drugs trends, access to drug treatment, and harm reduction services should be considered when examining the number of fatal overdoses from 2020. All data shown are from the Philadelphia Medical Examiner's Office.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

In 2020, there were 1,214 unintentional drug overdose deaths in Philadelphia

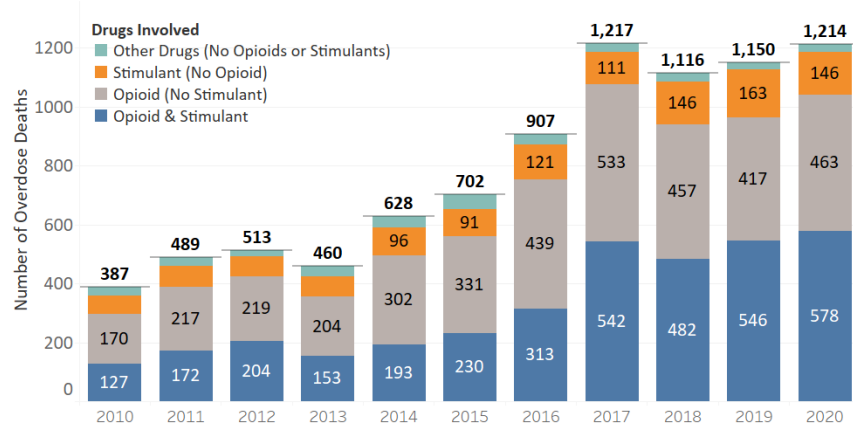
Fentanyl is increasingly present in all drug-related deaths, including those involving pharmaceutical opioids, methamphetamine, and PCP

Deaths among non-Hispanic Black individuals increased while deaths among non-Hispanic White individuals declined

CHART

Unintentional drug overdose deaths increased by 6% from 2019 to 2020

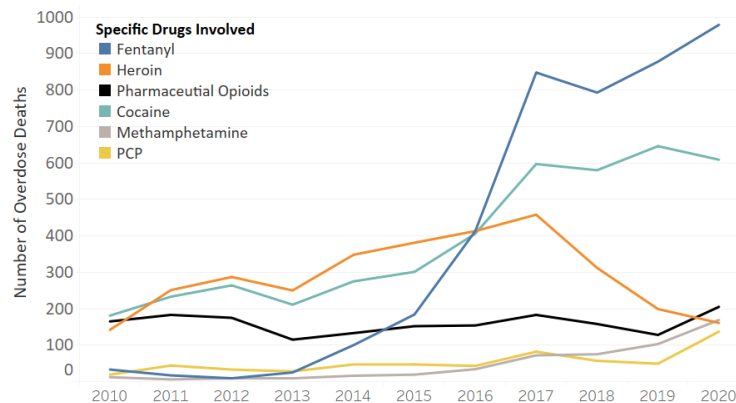
Number of Unintentional Overdose Deaths by Drugs Involved, 2010 - 2020



- In 2020, 1,214 people died of an unintentional drug overdose. This represents a 9% and 6% increase in fatal drug overdoses from 2018 and 2019, respectively.
- Opioids, both with and without stimulants, were detected in 86% of deaths in 2020, representing an 8% increase from 2019.
- Stimulants such as cocaine and methamphetamine were detected in 60% of overdose deaths, increasing 2% from 2019. While stimulant-only deaths decreased 10% from 2019, those involving stimulants and opioids together increased 6%, accounting for 48% of the 2020 overdose deaths.

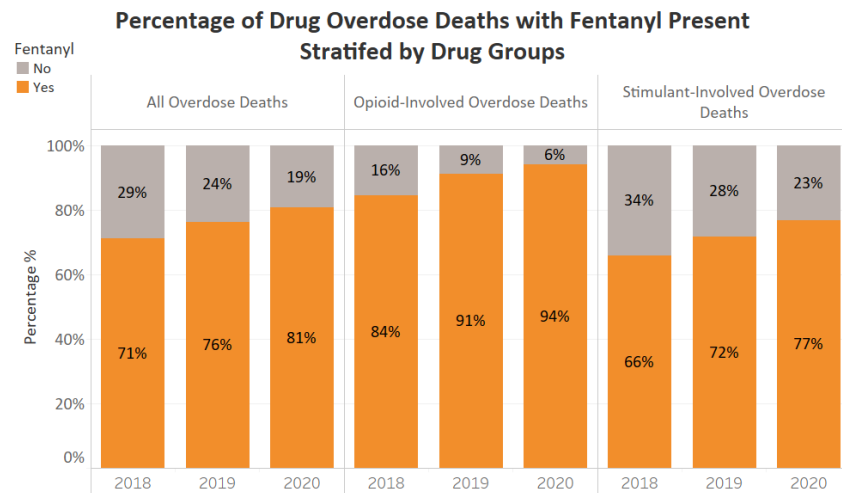
81% of 2020 overdose deaths involved fentanyl

Number of Overdose Deaths by Specific Drug Involved, 2010 - 2020



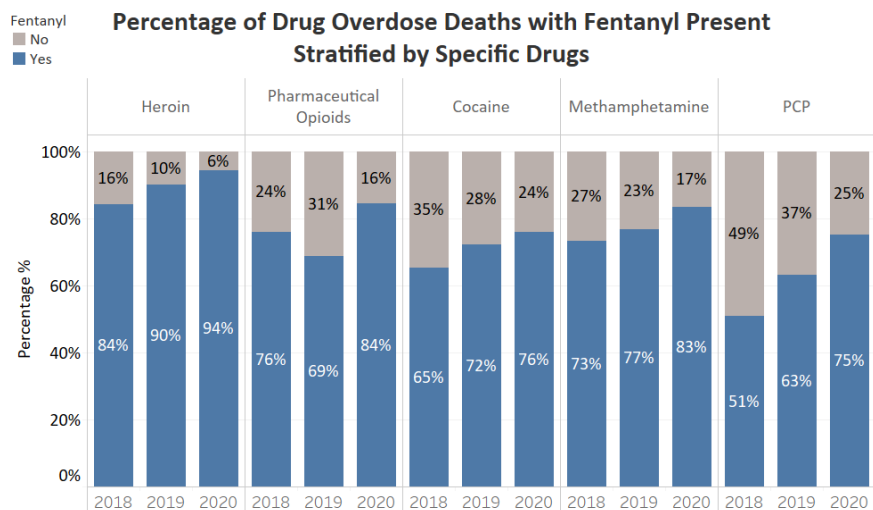
- From 2019 to 2020, the number of deaths involving fentanyl and pharmaceutical opioids increased while the number of deaths involving heroin and cocaine decreased.
- During the same time period, the number of deaths involving methamphetamine and PCP increased 64% and 180%, respectively.

Over time, fentanyl has been detected in a greater proportion of drug overdose deaths



- In 2020, fentanyl was detected in 979 of all unintentional drug deaths. This represents a 12% increase in fentanyl-involved deaths from 2019 to 2020.
- In 2020, 81% of all drug deaths, 94% of all opioid-related drug deaths, and 77% of all stimulant-related drug deaths also involved fentanyl.

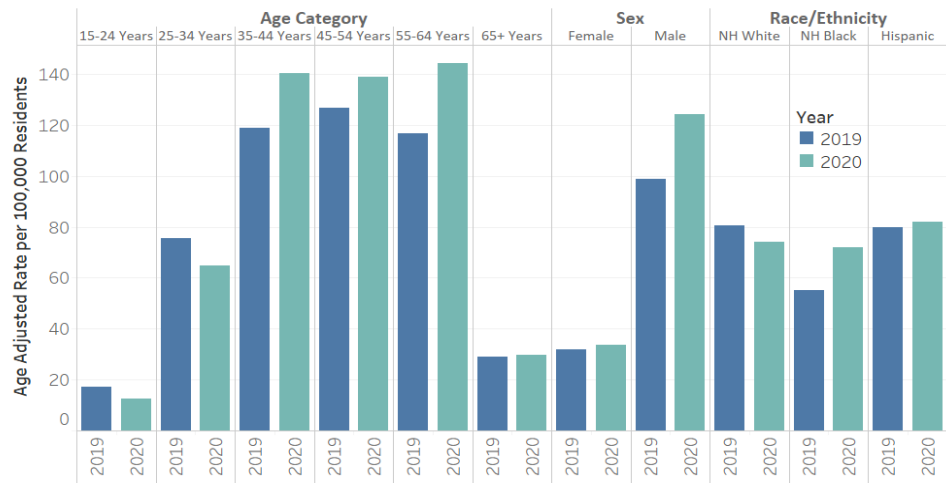
Fentanyl is increasingly being detected in drug deaths involving other specific drugs



- In 2020, fentanyl was detected in 94% of drug overdoses involving heroin, 84% of drug overdoses involving a pharmaceutical opioid, and 76% of drug overdoses involving cocaine.
- The presence of fentanyl increased to 83% and 75% in methamphetamine- and PCP-involved deaths, respectively. This is likely the primary reason for the rise in overdoses involving these drugs.

Overdose death rates increased among those who were aged 35 and older, male, and non-Hispanic Black

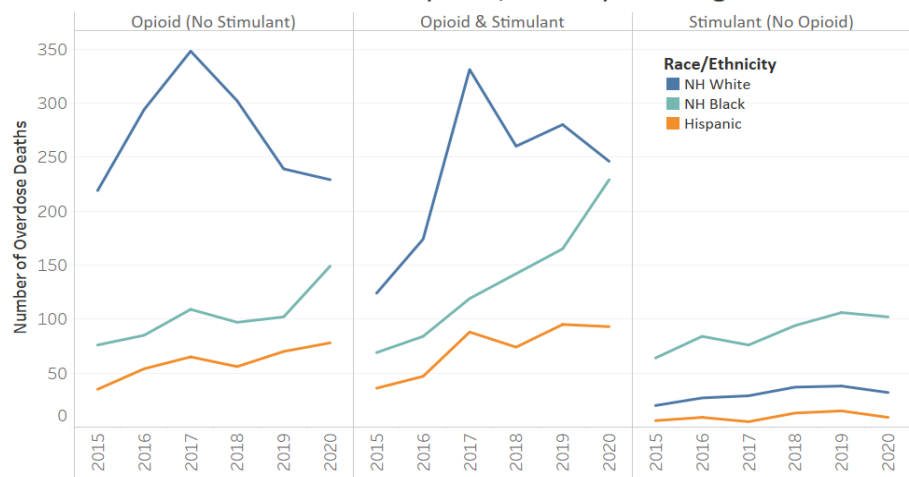
Overdose Death Rates by Age, Sex, and Race/Ethnicity, 2019-2020



- In 2020, drug overdose rates were highest among those aged 55-64 years old, male, and Hispanic.
- From 2019 to 2020, drug overdose rates increased among those aged 35 and older and decreased among those aged less than 35.
- Rates of overdose deaths increased 26% among males and were similar among females from 2019 to 2020.
- Overdose rates increased 31% among non-Hispanic Black individuals and decreased 9% among non-Hispanic White individuals. Rates among Hispanic individuals were similar from 2019 to 2020.

Racial and ethnic disparities exist in drug deaths by drugs involved

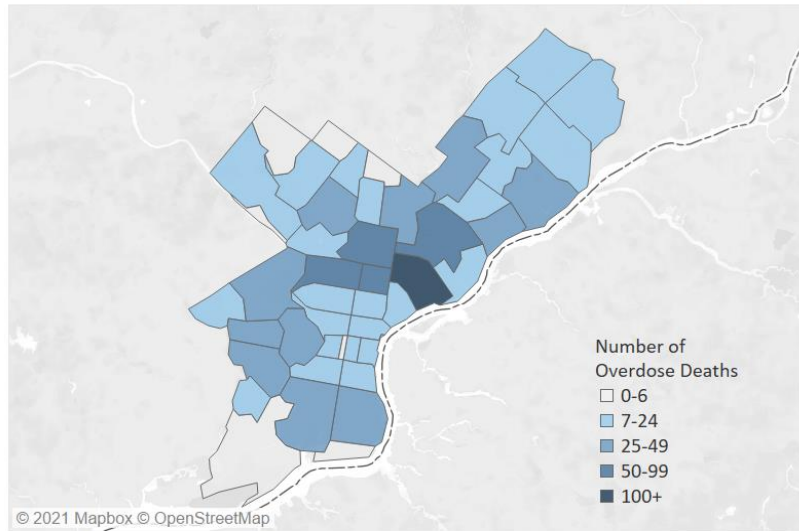
Number of Overdose Deaths by Race/Ethnicity and Drugs Involved



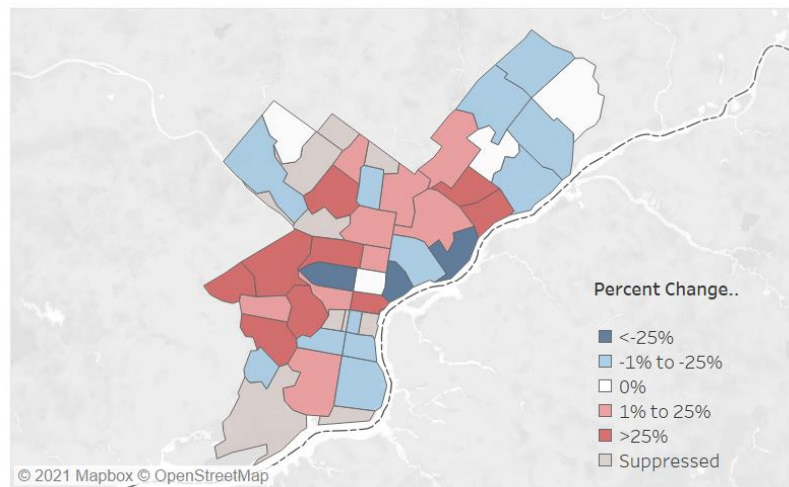
- Deaths involving opioids with and without the presence of stimulants have decreased among non-Hispanic White individuals and increased among non-Hispanic Black individuals.
- Deaths involving stimulants alone primarily impact non-Hispanic Black individuals.

Overdose deaths occur throughout the city

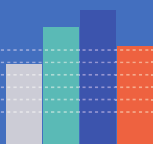
Number of Overdose Deaths by Incident Location, 2020



Percent Change in Overdose Deaths by Zip Code, 2019 to 2020



- The highest number of overdose deaths occurred in the 19134-zip code with 139 deaths; however, deaths in this zip code decreased by 22% from 2019.
- There were increases in drug overdose deaths throughout Southwest, West, and North Philadelphia zip codes.
- From 2019, the greatest percent increases were seen in the zip codes 19151 (116%), 19144 (106%), and 19123 (75%).



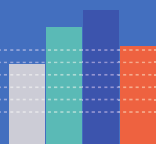
WHAT CAN BE DONE

The Health Department is:

- Coordinating a City-wide approach to reduce fatal overdoses among Black and Hispanic individuals, including:
 - soliciting input from and developing partnerships with groups serving these communities,
 - providing mini-grants to seven organizations primarily led by people of color to build harm reduction capacity and provide overdose prevention awareness among the populations they serve,
 - increasing street outreach in Black and Hispanic communities, and
 - launching an awareness campaign about the presence of fentanyl in the stimulant drug supply.
- Increasing overdose prevention approaches by:
 - distributing naloxone, the opioid overdose reversal drug, to organizations serving at-risk populations,
 - educating the public on overdose recognition and naloxone, including through free virtual trainings,
 - distributing fentanyl test strips and education about the presence of fentanyl in non-opioid drugs (<https://www.substanceusephilly.com/harmreduction>), and
 - providing training on how to test drugs before using.
- Increasing the availability of pharmacologic treatment for opioid addiction through primary care practices, specialized substance use treatment providers, and the Philadelphia jails.
- Providing health care providers with training, mentorship, technical assistance, and a 24/7 clinical consultation line to treat patients with opioid use disorder and answer questions about substance use.
- Supporting 'warm handoffs' to drug treatment from hospitals, jails, and the community.
- Raising awareness and promoting guidelines about safer substance use during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Health care providers should:

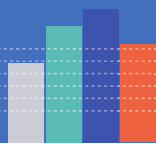
- Prescribe opioid painkillers less often, in lower doses, and shorter duration, following [PDPH guidelines](#).
- Co-prescribe naloxone with prescription opioids and buprenorphine, as well as to patients receiving methadone and extended-release naltrexone.
- Prescribe buprenorphine to opioid dependent patients or make referrals to substance use treatment providers.
- Recognize and work to reduce the racial biases and stigma towards people who use drugs that exist in health care.
- Educate patients who continue to use drugs to 1) test their drugs for the presence of fentanyl using fentanyl test strips and 2) carry naloxone, even if they use/prefer non-opioid drugs.
- Refer patients who use stimulants, including cocaine and methamphetamine, to drug treatment programs.
- Provide sterile syringes to patients who continue to inject drugs to reduce the spread of HIV and viral hepatitis.



WHAT CAN BE DONE

People can:

- Avoid taking opioids that are not prescribed for them and ask medical providers who prescribe opioids for pain about alternative, safer forms of pain control.
 - Avoid using illicit drugs such as heroin, fentanyl, and cocaine, which are extremely dangerous.
 - Seek buprenorphine or methadone treatment if dependent on opioids.
 - For those who continue to use illicit drugs, check the drugs for the presence of fentanyl using fentanyl test strips. Cocaine, methamphetamines, synthetic cannabinoids, and pills purchased on the street may contain fentanyl.
 - Obtain and get trained on how to use naloxone to prevent opioid overdose fatalities. Naloxone is available at pharmacies in Pennsylvania without a prescription under a standing order signed by the Pennsylvania Physician General.
 - The Philadelphia Department of Public Health regularly offers free, virtual naloxone trainings. Visit www.phillynaloxone.com to learn more and to register for a training.
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RESOURCES

For Citywide data related to the opioid and substance use epidemic, visit

<https://www.substanceusephilly.com/>

For resources for safer substance use during COVID-19:

<https://www.phila.gov/2020-04-16-resources-for-safer-substance-use-during-covid-19/>

For help on how to obtain and use naloxone:

phillynaloxone.com

For more information on Philadelphia's response to the opioid crisis:

<https://www.phila.gov/programs/combating-the-opioid-epidemic/>

For information on how to access treatment:

<https://dbhids.org/addiction-services/>

For harm reduction resources including syringe exchange:

<https://ppponline.org/>

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