

CURRENT DATA REGARDING USE AND OVERDOSE

Over 90,000 people died from opioid overdose in 2020. The U.S. had a 31% increase from 2019, indicating the opioid epidemic remains a grave public health issue affecting our nation.¹ The current opioid epidemic and overdose deaths resemble a three-phase process. Initially, fatalities from prescription opioids, including natural and semi-synthetic types, began to climb in 1999 and reached their highest point in 2017. This also correlated with a notable rise in heroin overdoses starting around 2010, which also reached the highest point in 2017. Since 2014, there has been a sharp and ongoing rise in overdoses linked to synthetic opioids, particularly fentanyl.

Several factors drive the opioid epidemic among youth.² The youth opioid crisis is closely associated with the improper use of prescription opioids, characterized by taking medication in ways or doses not prescribed or without a doctor's prescription. While opioid misuse and dependence are highest among young adults who are between 18 and 25 years old, a recent analysis of data from the Monitoring the Future³ showed that 31% of high school seniors misuse prescription drugs. Even legitimate use of prescription opioids before high school graduation was found to be independently associated with a 33% increase in the risk of future opioid misuse after high school.

The diversion of prescription opioids is a significant problem because youth are subjected to peer and social pressures to share their prescription opioids for nonmedical use. Recent studies show that 14%–35% of high school students divert their prescription opioids. Elevated rates of misuse are especially troubling, given that individuals who misuse prescription opioids are more prone to transitioning to heroin and fentanyl use.

While most youth do not use substances, illegal drug use has become a lethal problem among students, and fentanyl was responsible for making up over 77% of all overdose deaths among adolescents in 2021. According to research by Friedman et al. using a CDC database, among teenagers aged 14-18, there was a staggering 169% increase in mortality associated with fentanyl and other illicit synthetic opioids from 2019 to 2020 (from 1.21 to 3.26 per 100,000), followed by a 30% rise from 2020 to 2021 (from 3.26 to 4.23 per 100,000).⁴

This rise is particularly concerning given the decline in adolescent drug use rates overall from 30.4% in 2020 to 18.7% in 2021, suggesting that the highly potent and often unrecognized presence of fentanyl in counterfeit pills may be a key factor. The rate of overdose deaths linked to counterfeit pill use has more than doubled from 2019 to 2021. Illicitly manufactured fentanyl and synthetic opioids are progressively contaminating the illegal drug supply. Those who succumbed to these counterfeit pills were generally younger and more likely to have a history of prescription medication misuse compared to individuals who died from other drug overdoses. These behaviors have resulted in more than 6,000 deaths among youth and young adults (ages 15-24) in 2021. Illicit drug producers often mix fentanyl with other substances, like methamphetamine, to enhance the potency and effects of their products. However, fentanyl tends to clump together, resulting in uneven distribution within a batch of pills and dangerously high levels of fentanyl in some pills. Even if users are aware that their pills are contaminated, the unpredictable amount of fentanyl in each pill significantly increases the risk of overdose.

A broader issue of growing racial and ethnic disparities potentially contributes to patterns of overdose deaths among adolescents, warranting deeper investigation and targeted intervention. American Indian and Alaska Native adolescents experienced the highest overdose death rates (11.79 per 100,000) in 2020, a trend that mirrors the high rates observed among adults in these groups. In contrast, while Latinx adolescents also have high overdose rates (6.98 per 100,000), these are notably higher compared to Latinx adults.⁴

Therefore, the current epidemiological data underscores a critical need for targeted harm-reduction strategies, including education about the dangers of misuse and diversion of prescription drugs, fentanyl use, and counterfeit drugs, as well as broader access to life-saving interventions like naloxone.