

Left Behind: Black Overdose Rates Surge as National Deaths Decline

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **An Urgent Health Crisis in Black Communities:** Drug overdose is the leading cause of preventable death for Black adults in the United States, more than gun violence or car crashes. Unpredictable drug supply and the presence of synthetics like fentanyl places everyone at risk regardless of frequency and type of drug use.
- **From Faring Better to Dying Disproportionately:** The overdose crisis is often portrayed as a white issue. But overdose rates among Black individuals have been rising for a decade, surpassed death rates in white communities in 2020, and have surged over the last 5 years.
- **A Widening Disparity:** While the United States saw a **24% decrease** in drug overdose deaths in 2024 (CDC), Black men—particularly those age **31 to 47 years** — are projected to experience a **doubling of overdose deaths from 2020 to 2025**.
- **An Unequal Burden:** In the vast majority of states where recent data is available by race, Black communities suffer higher fatal overdose rates than white populations. Black men age 54 to 73 years are four times more likely to die from overdose than other men in their age group.
- **An Urgent Call for Focused Solutions:** In communities with high overdose rates, increasing access to **naloxone**, the overdose-reversing medication, is an **evidence-based public health strategy** proven to save lives.
- **The Need for Culturally Specific Strategies:** Overdose prevention efforts are **most effective** when tailored to high-risk population segments. Campaigns focusing on Black communities succeed when they are **rooted in cultural institutions** and executed **in partnership with trusted community leaders**.

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OVERDOSE DEATHS ARE DECLINING NATIONALLY BUT CONTINUE TO CLIMB AMONG BLACK COMMUNITIES

Recent national data shows that overall overdose deaths are on the decline. Provisional data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows approximately 87,000 drug overdose deaths from October 2023 to September 2024, down from around 114,000 the previous year ([CDC](#)). This is the fewest number of overdose deaths in any twelve-month period since June 2020.

CDC has attributed the drop in overdose deaths to the data-driven distribution of naloxone, improved access to substance use disorder treatment, changes in the illegal drug supply, and investments in prevention and treatment programs.

However, this progress is not uniform. The decline in overdose deaths has been concentrated in the white population, while Black communities continue to see rising fatalities. The overdose crisis has long been portrayed as a white issue, leading to a lack of awareness and resources for Black communities. Without focused interventions, the overall national decrease in overdose deaths risks masking the deepening racial disparities in the crisis.

THE OVERDOSE CRISIS IN BLACK AMERICA: A GROWING DISPARITY

Black overdose rates were once significantly lower than general population overdose rates. However, this trend reversed over time. According to CDC, the age-adjusted rate of drug overdose deaths among non-Hispanic Black individuals increased by 44% from 2019 to 2020, surpassing the rate among non-Hispanic white individuals for the first time in over two decades.

Source: [CDC Vital Signs](#)

DATA FROM SEVEN FOCUS CITIES

PHILADELPHIA

Percent of Population that is Black or African American: 38%

Estimated total Black population: 614,652

- The rate of overdose death in the Black population was almost twice the rate in the white population in 2023.
- The rates of overdose death in North and West Philadelphia, both historically Black communities, are among the highest in the city, respectively.

Source: <https://philadelphiapublichealth.shinyapps.io/philastats/>

NEWARK

Percent of Population that is Black or African American: 50%

Estimated total Black population: 156,079

- In 2023, Black people accounted for more than 60% of all overdose deaths in Essex county, where Newark is located.
- In Essex county, the rate of overdose death in the Black population was three times higher than the rate of overdose in the white population in 2023.

Source: <https://www.nj.gov/health/populationhealth/opioid/sudors.shtml>

MILWAUKEE

Percent of Population that is Black or African American: 39%

Estimated total Black population: 224,957

- Despite an overall decline in overdose deaths in Milwaukee county in 2024, the overdose death rate for Black Milwaukeeans remained twice as high as the rate for white Milwaukeeans.
- In 2024, Black Milwaukeeans accounted for 42% of all overdose deaths in the county, despite accounting for 27% of the county's population.
- Overdose deaths in the city of Milwaukee are concentrated in the predominantly Black neighborhoods of the Northside.

Source: <https://county.milwaukee.gov/EN/Strategy-Budget-and-Performance/Vision/Strategy-Dashboard/Overdose-Data>

DETROIT

Percent of Population that is Black or African American: 78%

Estimated total Black population: 496,534

- In 2023, the rate of overdose death was three times higher for Black Michiganders than for white Michiganders.
- Black Michiganders account for almost half of all overdose deaths in the state, and in the five years through 2023, Black men age 60 to 69 years experienced the highest overdose rate in the state.
- In 2023, one in five Michiganders lost to overdose lived in Detroit.
- In Wayne county, where Detroit is located, the Black population is dying from overdose at twice the rate of the white population.

Sources:

<https://www.michigan.gov/opioids/category-data>

LOUISVILLE



Percent of Population that is Black or African American: 24%
Estimated total Black population: 158,827

- Residents of Louisville Metro-Jefferson county accounted for one-quarter of all overdoses in the state in 2023.
- In 2023, overdose fatalities in Kentucky’s Black population were 50% higher than for the state’s white population, although Black people account for only 9% of the state’s population.
- From 2021 to 2023, overdose deaths increased by 12% in the Black population while decreasing by 11% in the white population.
- Fentanyl and cocaine, usually together, are the top drugs involved in overdose deaths in the Black population in Kentucky.

Source:

<https://governor.ky.gov/attachments/2023-Drug-Overdose-Fatality-Report.pdf>

DURHAM

Percent of Population that is Black or African American: 39%
Estimated total Black population: 107,516

- Although Black people account for one-third of Durham County’s population, they accounted for almost two-thirds of all overdose-related hospital admissions in 2024.

Source: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1kSGLLgnUKFTQHyqEk8pBoyyrXgn739II>

ALBUQUERQUE

Percent of Population that is Black or African American: 3%
Estimated total Black population: 18,630

- New Mexico's drug overdose death rate has been one of the highest in the nation for most of the last two decades.
- In Bernalillo County, where Albuquerque is located, there were 70 overdose deaths per 100,000 Black residents from 2017 to 2021.

Source: <https://ibis.doh.nm.gov/indicator/view/DrugOverdoseDth.Cnty.RacEth.html>

WHY THIS CRISIS EXISTS: SYSTEMIC BARRIERS AND POLICY FAILURES

HISTORICAL NEGLECT AND STRUCTURAL RACISM

Over the past two decades, the opioid overdose crisis has often been framed as affecting predominantly white populations, and as a consequence, inadequate resources and attention for overdose prevention have been focused in Black communities. This oversight has resulted in delayed recognition and response to rising overdose rates among Black individuals, and a persistent misperception that opioid-related initiatives are not relevant in Black communities. Structural racism, manifesting through policies and practices that systematically disadvantage Black populations, exacerbates these disparities. For instance, from 2019 to 2020, overdose death rates increased by 44% among non-Hispanic Black individuals, surpassing the rate among non-Hispanic White individuals for the first time in over two decades.

Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7129e2.htm>

LACK OF CULTURALLY SPECIFIC OUTREACH PROGRAMS

Traditional harm reduction and substance use disorder treatment programs often fail to effectively engage Black individuals due to a lack of cultural tailoring. The absence of culturally specific outreach results in lower utilization of these services by Black communities. Among those who died from overdose in 2020, Black individuals were least likely to have ever participated in substance use disorder treatment, although they were most likely to die in communities with a high availability of treatment providers.

Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/overdose-death-disparities/index.html>

MISINFORMATION, STIGMA, AND DISTRUST IN HEALTHCARE

Misinformation and stigma surrounding substance use disorders contribute to reluctance within Black communities to seek help. Historical and ongoing experiences of discrimination and mistreatment in healthcare settings have fostered deep-seated distrust of providers among Black individuals. This distrust is compounded by fears of legal repercussions, as drug policies have historically criminalized drug use in Black communities more harshly than in others. Consequently, Black individuals may be less likely to seek life-saving interventions or participate in substance use health services and overdose prevention programs. The percentage of Black individuals who received substance use disorder treatment was lower compared with White individuals.

Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/overdose-death-disparities/index.html>

URBAN-RURAL DISPARITIES

Geographic disparities also exist, with non-Hispanic Black individuals experiencing higher rates of drug overdose deaths in urban counties compared to rural ones. In 2020, the rate of drug overdose deaths among non-Hispanic Black individuals in urban counties was nearly double that in rural counties.

Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db440.htm>



SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Addressing these systemic barriers requires comprehensive strategies that include:

- Developing and implementing culturally specific outreach, overdose prevention, and treatment programs.
- Building trust between Black communities and healthcare providers.
- Ensuring equitable access to medication treatment and substance use health services.
- Addressing socioeconomic inequities that contribute to health disparities.

By acknowledging and actively working to dismantle these structural barriers, we can move toward reducing overdose deaths and achieving health equity in Black communities.

PROMOTING ACCESS TO NALOXONE IN BLACK COMMUNITIES IS AN EVIDENCE-DRIVEN WAY TO REDUCE OVERDOSE

[Community-based naloxone distribution programs](#) have demonstrated effectiveness in mitigating overdose deaths. For instance, in states that have adopted naloxone access laws and Good Samaritan laws, overdose deaths have decreased, especially among Black people.

However, disparities in naloxone distribution persist. A study [evaluating equity in community-based naloxone](#) access in Massachusetts found that naloxone distribution rates for racial/ethnic minorities were lower than the rate for white residents.

To address these inequities, it is essential to implement culturally tailored naloxone distribution programs that effectively engage Black communities. By increasing access to naloxone and ensuring its distribution aligns with the specific needs of Black populations, we can make significant strides in reducing overdose deaths and promoting health equity.

The You Can Save Lives campaign is a national initiative designed to address the alarming rise in overdose deaths among Black communities. Through targeted media investments in seven high-burden cities, the campaign will increase awareness, expand local access to naloxone, and mobilize community leaders. By partnering with Black-led community groups, health organizations, and local government, the campaign ensures overdose prevention strategies are culturally relevant and widely adopted. This campaign is a direct response to the racial disparities in overdose deaths, empowering communities with the knowledge and tools to save lives.

To learn more, please visit [YouCanSaveLives.org](https://www.youcansavelives.org)



ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is produced as part of the You Can Save Lives campaign, a collaborative initiative developed and launched by Vital Strategies with the National Black Harm Reduction Network.

Vital Strategies is a global health organization that believes every person should be protected by a strong public health system. Our overdose prevention program works to strengthen and scale evidence-based, data-driven policies and interventions to create equitable and sustainable reductions in overdose deaths. Work across seven U.S. states is supported by funding from the Bloomberg Philanthropies Overdose Prevention Initiative, launched in 2018, and by targeted investments from other partners.

The National Black Harm Reduction Network is dedicated to advancing harm reduction principles that optimize health and wellness for Black people who are disproportionately harmed by public health initiatives, the criminal legal system, and drug policies.

REFERENCES

Below is a collection of the sources that informed this report.

National & Government Data Sources

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):**
 - CDC National Overdose Data: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db457.pdf>
 - CDC Overdose Disparities Report: <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/overdose-death-disparities/index.html>
 - CDC Urban-Rural Overdose Data: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db440.htm>
 - CDC Mortality and Morbidity Weekly Report (MMWR): <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7129e2.htm>

City & State Health Departments

- **Philadelphia Department of Public Health:** <https://philadelphiapublichealth.shinyapps.io/philastats/>
- **New Jersey Department of Health – Opioid Mortality Data:** <https://www.nj.gov/health/populationhealth/opioid/sudors.shtm>
- **Milwaukee County Overdose Data Dashboard:** <https://county.milwaukee.gov/EN/Strategy-Budget-and-Performance/Vision/Strategy-Dashboard/Overdose-Data>
- **Michigan Department of Health and Human Services – Opioid Data:** <https://www.michigan.gov/opioids/category-data>
- **Kentucky Department of Public Health – Opioid Data:** <https://uk01.z.antigena.com>
- **North Carolina Opioid Overdose Data (Durham County):** <https://injuryfreenc.dph.ncdhhs.gov/DataSurveillance/StatewideOverdoseSurveillanceReports/OpioidOverdoseEDVisitsMonthlyReports/CountyReports/durhamcountyopioidoverdoseedvisit.pdf>
- **New Mexico Department of Health – Overdose Mortality Data (Albuquerque):** <https://ibis.doh.nm.gov/indicator/view/DrugOverdoseDth.Cnty.RacEth.html>

Public Health & Drug Policy Information

- **Vital Strategies – Naloxone Access Report:** <https://www.vitalstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/Access-Naloxone OPP OnePager pdf.pdf>
- **CDC Stacks – Naloxone Access Disparities Study:** <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/123525>
- **Drug Policy Alliance – Harm Reduction Strategies:** <https://drugpolicy.org/harm-reduction>

Demographic Data – U.S. Census Bureau

- **Louisville, KY:** <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/louisvillejeffersoncountymetrogovernmentbalancekentucky/PST045219>
- **Durham, NC:** <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/durhamcitynorthcarolina/PST045219>
- **Milwaukee, WI:** <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/milwaukeecitywisconsin/PST045219>
- **Newark, NJ:** <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/newarkcitynewjersey/PST045219>
- **Albuquerque, NM:** <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/albuquerquecitynewmexico/PST045219>
- **Philadelphia, PA:** <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/philadelphiacitypennsylvania/PST045219>
- **Detroit, MI:** <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/detroitcitymichigan/PST045219>