

Overdose deaths jump in Maryland, likely due to coronavirus pandemic, health officials say

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Hallie Miller

More Marylanders died of drug and alcohol overdoses in the first nine months of last year, a jump that health officials attribute to the coronavirus pandemic.

State health officials said Wednesday that 2,025 people suffered “unintentional intoxication deaths” between January and September, a 12.1% increase from the same period in 2019.

At least 1,829 fatalities were linked to opioids, a 14.5% jump from the same time a year earlier, according to data released by the state’s Opioid Operations Command Center and the Department of Health. Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid 50 to 100 times more potent than heroin, factored into 93.1% of opioid-related deaths.

The pandemic has disrupted daily life for most Americans, cutting off many people with substance use disorders from in-person support and treatment plans. It also has caused severe economic distress and job anxiety, [spikes in requests for mental health services](#), and acute sickness and death.

[During early coronavirus lockdown, Black suicides spiked, Johns Hopkins study finds](#) »

“The COVID-19 pandemic has created additional challenges for people suffering from substance use disorder,” Gov. Larry Hogan said in a statement. “People are hurting, and we must continue to increase access to care, particularly for our underserved communities. I am confident that, by maintaining our focus on existing programs and reinforcing our efforts to assist vulnerable populations, we can once again turn the tide on substance misuse in the state.”

Last year’s numbers mark a disappointing reversal after overdoses [dropped in 2019](#) for the first time in a decade. They also parallel national trends, with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [citing a 19.5% increase in reported fatalities from all types of drugs](#) between June 2019 and June 2020.

Lt. Gov. Boyd Rutherford, who leads the Hogan administration’s efforts to fight the opioid epidemic, said in a statement that the public health crisis has underscored the need for more targeted approaches for substance abuse in minority communities. He is creating a work group to study racial disparities related to the opioid crisis, and the availability of substance use disorder services.

The state also will partner with Morgan State University's Center for Urban Health Equity, and award it a \$3.5 million grant to study and serve in under-resourced communities and address disparities in behavioral health services and facilities.

Adrienne Breidenstine, vice president of policy and communications at Behavioral Health System Baltimore, said the overdose increase does not come as a surprise given the pandemic's unemployment casualties and its correlation to behavioral health emergencies. Suicide also has spiked, she said.



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“We should act now to make telehealth a permanent part of our health care system, giving people access to behavioral health services from their homes and addressing racial inequities that can limit access to care for people of color,” Breidenstine said. “And we must devote more resources to our behavioral health crisis response system so when people experience a behavioral health crisis, we can help them to safely stabilize in the community.”

Steve Schuh, a former Anne Arundel County executive and state delegate who leads Maryland's Opioid Operational Command Center, said the state will use its lessons learned from flattening the overdose rate in previous years to attack the current wave.

The state has outlined plans for making fentanyl test strips more available, developing a surveillance system that oversees the overdoses in each county and mailing people naloxone, the lifesaving opioid antidote.

Fighting fentanyl is difficult because many dealers mix it with heroin and even cocaine to offer users a more potent high and some users even seek it out despite its known risks.

Baltimore Sun reporter Meredith Cohn contributed to this article.

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