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Fentanyl Fuels Surge in Deaths Among Those Who Are Homeless

New data also show overall deaths among those without homes climbed markedly during pandemic

By *Jon Kamp* [Follow](#) and *Dan Frosch* [Follow](#)

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The nation's drug-overdose crisis is taking a heavy toll on homeless people, with data from hard-hit places such as Los Angeles and New York showing a surge in deaths, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic.

The potent synthetic opioid fentanyl is a major factor, heightening the overdose risk among homeless drug users who researchers say are often disconnected from treatment and other health services. New national data also show that overall deaths among homeless people, who have for years suffered a higher mortality risk than the broader population, climbed markedly during the pandemic.

"Fentanyl has devastated our community," said Eileen Loughran, who directs the overdose prevention office for the public health department in San Francisco, which saw a climb in fentanyl-related deaths among homeless people after the pandemic began. For "someone that's living on the streets without a phone, without connections, it's that much harder to get into treatment," Ms. Loughran said.

The surge in drug-related deaths among those who are homeless comes as drug fatalities for the entire population hit record levels, nearly 107,000 in 2021, the last full year measured. The proliferation of illegally made fentanyl is fueling the crisis as the opioid spreads into all corners of the U.S. and the illicit drug supply.

Fentanyl was a significant factor as deaths among the homeless rose during the pandemic in places such as King County, Wash., which includes Seattle. The public health department there recorded 308 deaths among those who were homeless last year, around a 64% jump from 2021, and said more than half involved fentanyl.

Among many other places beset by fentanyl, Orange County, Calif., and Multnomah County, which includes Portland, Ore., also said the drug was involved in a rising number of deaths among the homeless during the pandemic.



Police officers in downtown Seattle last year checked on a man who said he had been smoking fentanyl.

PHOTO: JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES

New York City saw 684 deaths among people without housing during the city's 2022 fiscal year, the highest figure since at least fiscal 2006, according to the city's Department of Homeless Services. Accidental drug-overdose deaths jumped 37% to 321 from 235 in fiscal year 2021 with fentanyl being the primary driver.

Homeless people have long faced a disproportionate risk of death, according to new national data on homeless mortality from University of Chicago researchers. Their findings were published online Monday by the school's Becker Friedman Institute.

The researchers tracked 140,000 homeless people between ages 18 and 54 from 2010 through March 2022, comparing them with a similarly sized group from the same age range in the housed population. They found that nearly 16% of this non-elderly homeless population died during the study period, above 3.9% among people with homes.

The discrepancy worsened when Covid-19 hit: The researchers say this homeless group saw roughly 2,500 deaths a year during the pandemic, up from about 1,900 deaths in the last year before the pandemic. This increase for the homeless population was more than three times the increase in deaths among people with homes, the researchers found.

"There was a big increase in mortality among this very deprived population that already has a high mortality rate," said Bruce Meyer, a professor of public policy at the University of Chicago, who researched the issue with doctoral student Angela Wyse.

Their study, which hasn't been peer-reviewed, didn't include causes of deaths among those who are homeless. Other researchers who study homelessness say living in stressful environments without safe housing and uneven access to doctors raises health risks in many ways. Chronic health conditions are a leading reason for deaths among those who are homeless, though substance abuse is driving an increase, said Bobby Watts, chief executive at the nonprofit National Health Care for the Homeless Council.

Drug abuse can lead people down a path toward homelessness, but losing a home can also cause relapses and new drug problems, researchers said. The overdose crisis intensified as the pandemic increased isolation and stress, and as fentanyl broadly infiltrated the nation's drug supply.

Opioid dependence was a longstanding challenge for David Acuna Jr. He died from a fentanyl and methamphetamine overdose in April last year, alone near a fast-food restaurant and strip mall in Eastvale, Calif., while planning to begin treatment. He had been living on the streets for about six years, his family said, though he tried to hide it from them.



David Acuna Sr. shows photos of his son, whose ashes are displayed along with some photos. David Acuna Jr. with his mother, Patricia Lyle, in 2016.

JESSICA PONS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (2); PATRICIA LYLE

“I think in his mind he felt if we didn’t know it would protect us from getting hurt,” his father, David Acuna Sr., said. “I wanted to believe he was not homeless, I really did.”

David was compassionate and always ready to help another person on the street, his parents said. When he was 4 years old he persuaded his father to have them sleep a night in the car, so that he could see what it felt like to be homeless. He had a strong faith in God and would help his father’s nonprofit, God’s Love, which aids the needy. He wanted to recover from addiction and had stretches of improvement, but also dealt with anxiety and depression, his mother, Patricia Lyle, said.

“The opiates—it just grabbed him by the throat and wouldn’t let go,” she said.

Health officials are trying to lower the risk of fentanyl overdoses for those who are homeless through steps such as widespread distribution of the overdose reversal drug naloxone. New York City, which expanded a naloxone training

program in homeless shelters, saw a 35% jump in fiscal 2022 from the prior fiscal year in the number of times naloxone was administered inside shelters. New York City and San Francisco have response teams that follow up after suspected overdoses to try to help the people involved access medical care, including treatment.

A recent study in Minnesota covering 2017 to 2021 showed 20-year-olds experiencing homelessness died at the same rate as 50-year-olds in the general population. State data also show those who are homeless represented a growing share of fentanyl deaths after the pandemic began.

Jonda Crum, a former drug user and peer recovery specialist in St. Paul, Minn., spent 10 years without a home as she dealt with substance problems, including fentanyl. Sober and housed for six years, she said she has lost many friends to the opioid.

“I still have nightmares from being homeless,” Ms. Crum said.

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