

Ohio drug overdose deaths decreased in 2022, though an increase is expected in 2023

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COLUMBUS, Ohio – A staggering 4,915 people died from unintentional drug overdoses in Ohio in 2022, a 5% decrease from the previous year's all-time high but still a higher level than before the pandemic, [according to a recent report from the Ohio Department of Health](#).

That number includes 554 people who died in Cuyahoga County, a figure that's down from 574 in 2021 but up from 255 in 2013. But figures for 2023 are expected to rise significantly in Cuyahoga County.

It remains to be seen whether voters' decision to legalize recreational marijuana will have any immediate impacts on overdose deaths in coming years.

Statewide, deaths involving stimulants increased in 2022 from the previous year. Deaths after cocaine use were up 8% and was associated with 33% of all of 2022's deaths. Deaths involving psychostimulants, such as methamphetamine increased 1%, the report states.

Notably, overall opioid-related deaths decreased 5% between 2021 and 2022 across the state. Although opioids still make up the majority of deaths. Fentanyl-related deaths decreased 4%, but still accounted for 81% of 2022's overdose deaths. Deaths involving natural and semi-synthetic opioids, such as such as oxycodone, dropped by 7%. Heroin deaths were down 43%.

Benzodiazepine-related deaths decreased 16% year over year.

Non-Hispanic Black Ohio males continued to have the highest rates of unintentional drug overdose deaths with 1,021 dying last year. Numerically, more non-Hispanic white men died, 3,662. But the gap between the death rates of Black and white men continued to widen, the report states.

Black and brown Ohioans don't use opioids as a primary drug of choice at the levels that white people use it. Since fentanyl is being increasingly mixed into non-opioids, the challenge is to educate these populations to carry Naloxone, a medicine that can reverse overdoses, said AmandaLynn Reese, chief program officer of Harm Reduction Ohio.

Users can also carry strips to test for fentanyl in their drugs. A positive test for fentanyl won't necessarily convince an addict to throw out the drugs. But many will use the drugs at lower levels and more slowly than they normally would. That can save lives, Reese said.

The following numbers of people died of drug overdoses in Northeast Ohio:

-Cuyahoga County: 554, down from 574 in 2021 but up from 255 in 2013

-Summit County: 230, up from 213 in 2021 and 76 in 2013

-Lorain County: 126, down from 144 in 2021 but up from 69 in 2013.

-Lake County: 87, up from 73 in 2021 and 43 in 2013.

-Medina County: 25, down from 38 in 2021 but up from 14 in 2013.

-Portage County: 38, down from 45 in 2021 but up from 22 in 2013.

-Geauga County: 9, down from 15 in 2021 but lower than 11 in 2013.

Despite the drop in Cuyahoga County in 2022, the number for 2023 is expected to increase to 726 or more, said Daniel Flannery, director of the Begun Center for Violence Prevention Research and Education at Case Western Reserve University, who studies drug overdose death data.

"Fentanyl is still driving the train in terms of fatalities and use," said. "We've seen a pretty significant uptick in cocaine-fentanyl mixtures. Methamphetamine is coming back in Cuyahoga County. And we've seen a significant uptick in minority population in overdose fatalities, particularly among African American and Hispanic populations."

Statewide for 2023, preliminary numbers show that overdose deaths will continue to decrease. By late November 3,396 people died of drug overdose deaths in the state. Projections show there could be about 4,875 deaths for the year, according to Harm Reduction Ohio.

Flannery and Reese of Harm Reduction Ohio had different perspectives on whether the new voter-approved initiated statute legalizing recreational marijuana for adult use will have any impact on deaths.

“There is a concern about legalization of marijuana because it is considered to be a gateway drug to potentially more illicit substances,” Flannery said. “There are plenty of individuals who have experimented with marijuana and don’t go on to use illicit drugs. But we don’t know who that is. You’re sort of taking the risk. So that’s one factor from the progression from alcohol and other things to marijuana to illicit drugs.”

On the other hand, fentanyl isn’t being added to marijuana supplies like it is to other substances, he said.

Reese believes adult-use cannabis will give people safe, regulated alternative to illicit substances. She’s known people who have made the switch from opioids to marijuana and muscle relaxers for chronic pain.

“It will in my opinion create alternative methods for harm reduction,” she said.