

BY BRIANNA EHLEY AND TUCKER DOHERTY

## PRO POINTS

- **Pockets of the country have reported a rise in drug overdose deaths during the coronavirus pandemic, though an official nationwide accounting won't be available until next year.**
- **Under the federal public health emergency declaration for the coronavirus pandemic, the DEA lifted federal restrictions to dramatically expand the use of telemedicine for addiction treatment services.**
- **The drug crisis has shifted dramatically in the past few years, with misuse of prescription drugs shifting to heroin and now powerful synthetic opioids like fentanyl. There are also rising rates of methamphetamine-related fatalities in western states.**
- **While the opioid crisis had disproportionately impacted rural and white communities, recent CDC data shows climbing death rates for all racial minorities, with the black population seeing the largest spikes.**

## HOW WE GOT HERE

Federal health officials are deeply concerned that the coronavirus and resulting economic crash could exacerbate the nation's addiction crisis. The combination of social isolation, stress and rising unemployment rates threaten to undermine progress made in recent years.

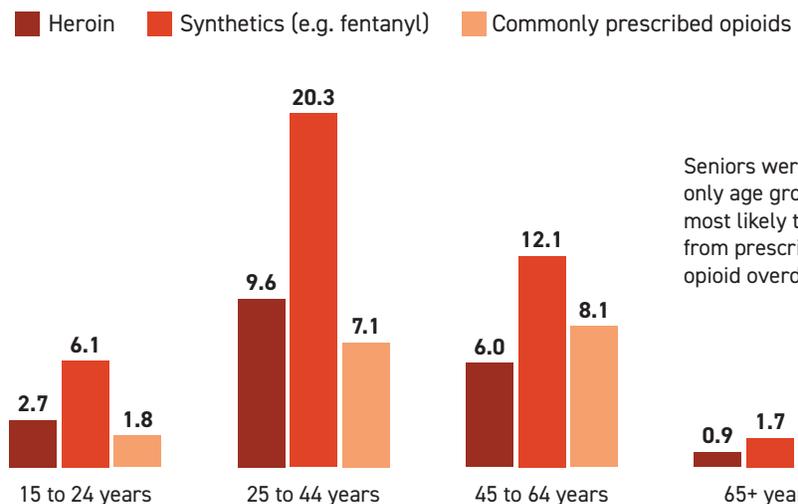
President Donald Trump declared the opioid crisis a national public health emergency in October 2017 and that declaration has been renewed 10 times. But the pandemic has scrambled public health priorities and forced state and local health departments to put their opioid work aside and focus on containing the stubbornly spreading coronavirus.

That has left millions with addiction issues vulnerable.

The federal government, states and the medical community shifted to telehealth services for addiction and mental health treatment while social distancing orders and lockdowns popped up across the country. Though that's expanded care, it's created deeper disparities in treatment, as certain populations can't access the technology needed to utilize telehealth services. Likewise, some individuals tend

## Illicit drugs cause most youth overdose deaths

Drug overdose death rate per 100,000 population by age group, by drug type, 2018



Seniors were the only age group most likely to die from prescription opioid overdoses.

Source: CDC

to prefer in-person, group therapy and have a more challenging time with remote care.

Though it's too early to assess the fallout and federal data for 2020 won't be available until next year, there are early signs that overdoses have risen in the first six months of the year.

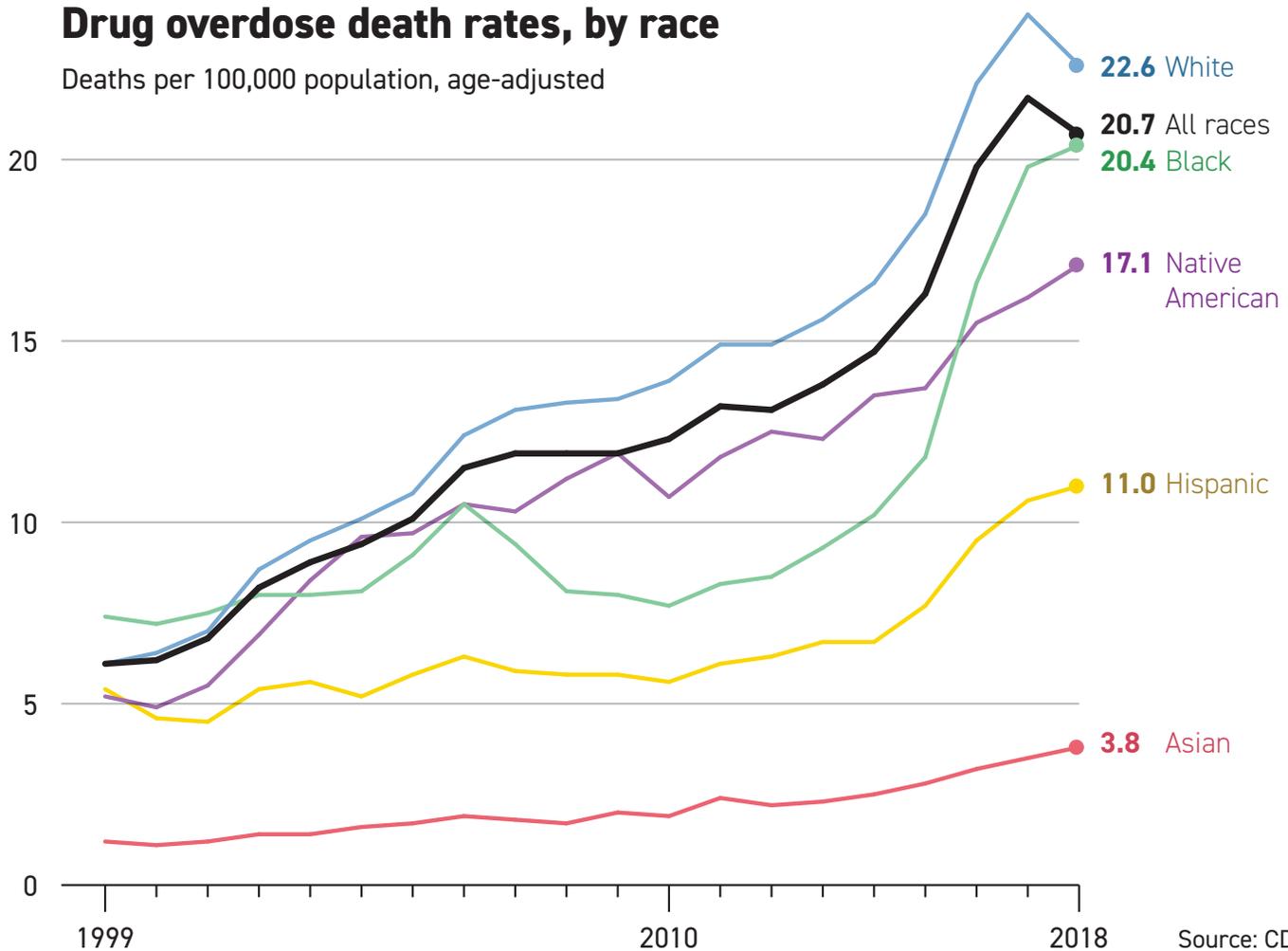
The Office of National Drug Control Policy, or ONDCP, reported an increase of overdose submissions to its overdose data mapping application program between January and May compared to a year ago.

That comes as fatal overdoses were already trending upward, according to preliminary CDC data for 2019. The most recent data shows overdose deaths climbed 3 percent between November 2018 and November 2019. Deaths are now projected to surpass 70,000, though official 2019 numbers won't be available until the end of this year.

Those anticipated increases come after fatal overdose deaths fell 4.6 percent in 2018 – the first such decline in nearly 30 years. The drop was touted as a victory by the Trump administration and Congress following three sweeping legislative packages and more than \$10 billion dollars aimed at combating drug addiction in the U.S. But experts caution that progress may have been short-lived.

## Drug overdose death rates, by race

Deaths per 100,000 population, age-adjusted



## WHAT'S NEXT

Addiction and mental health providers are expecting a crush of new patients in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and many are facing shortfalls and staffing issues because of lockdowns and social distancing measures from earlier this year. Some of the largest behavioral health groups are asking the Trump administration to designate 2 percent of the federal government's \$175 billion provider bailout fund to help shore up their losses. HHS has not yet committed to a set aside for that group.

The federal government is also restarting research into drug treatments that was put on hold earlier this year because of the coronavirus. National Institute of Drug Abuse Director Nora Volkow is also launching research into the coronavirus's impact on drug addiction, including looking at whether people with a substance use disorder have an increased risk of having serious outcomes from the coronavirus as well as how the coronavirus has impacted overdose risks and access to the opioid overdose reversal drug naloxone, among other issues.

Separately, NIDA is also conducting trials for a medication assisted treatment for methamphetamine, as deaths from meth are on the rise in pockets across the country.

The NIH is also working on developing non-addictive pain treatments in an effort to decrease the use of prescription opioids.

The opioid crisis is likely to be an issue in the 2020 presidential election, as President Donald Trump has made it a pillar of his health care agenda. Vice President Joe Biden in March unveiled his own plan to tackle the epidemic, which includes \$125 billion over 10 years, to scale up addiction treatment and prevention. Neither has specifically outlined new ways to approach the epidemic amid the coronavirus.

## POWER PLAYERS



### **Adm. Brett Giroir**

The assistant secretary of health was appointed the Trump administration's point person to coordinate the federal response to the opioid crisis.



### **Nora Volkow, *director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse***

Volkow runs the federal government's research arm focused on drug addiction. She is currently directing research into new forms of addiction treatment. She was the first federal official to go on record and warn of the forthcoming opioid crisis in 2006.

### **The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration**

SAMHSA is the federal agency responsible for distributing billions of dollars to states and organizations to address the drug epidemic.

### **Centers for Medicare and Medicaid**

CMS is in charge of Medicaid, which is the largest payer for behavioral health care in the country. Under the Trump administration, CMS has approved more than 20 waivers for states to lift federal restrictions on payments for inpatient addiction treatment — providing a vast expansion of treatment.