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# How the drug overdose epidemic is evolving

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In a sharp reversal of recent trends, drug overdose deaths in the United States fell significantly in 2018, according to the latest data from CDC.

In total, 67,367 Americans died of overdose-related causes, with approximately 70 percent of those deaths attributable to opioids. For comparison, overdose deaths were nearly twice as common as traffic fatalities that year, according to estimates from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

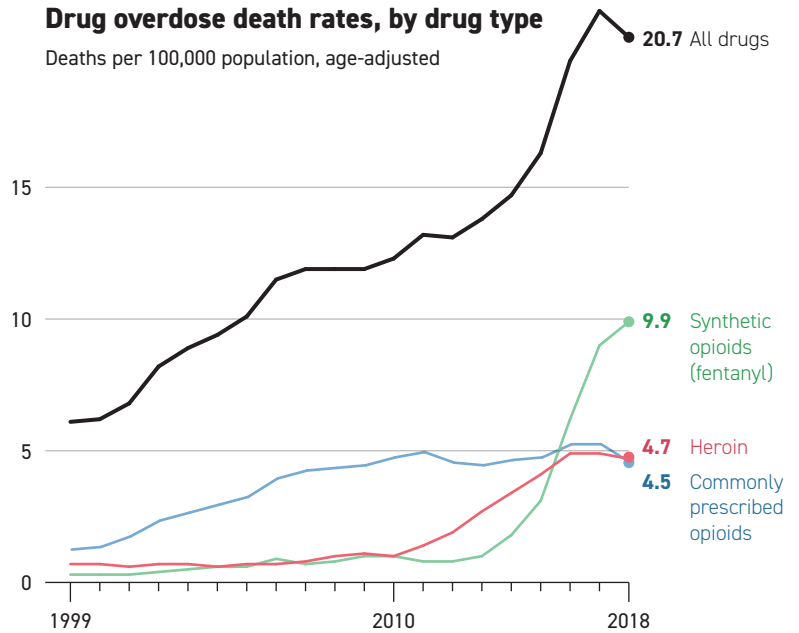
The nationwide epidemic has occurred in waves, beginning with the rise of opioid prescribing in the late 1990s. In 2010, prescription opioids were reformulated to make them harder to abuse, shifting the epidemic's focus to illicit street drugs like heroin. In recent years, the increasing prevalence of fentanyl and other powerful synthetic opioids on the black market caused another uptick in deaths.

The epidemic's shifting demographics have also attracted attention. Initially, the opioid crisis disproportionately affected rural and white communities. While that remains true to some extent, a rapid increase in overdose mortality during the past five years among black Americans has significantly reduced the disparity. In 2018, the overdose death rate fell for white Americans while rising for all other racial groups.

Some researchers say differences in access to treatment could be affecting these trends. A 2019 study published in the medical journal JAMA Psychiatry found that black patients were less likely to receive prescriptions for the anti-withdrawal medication buprenorphine.

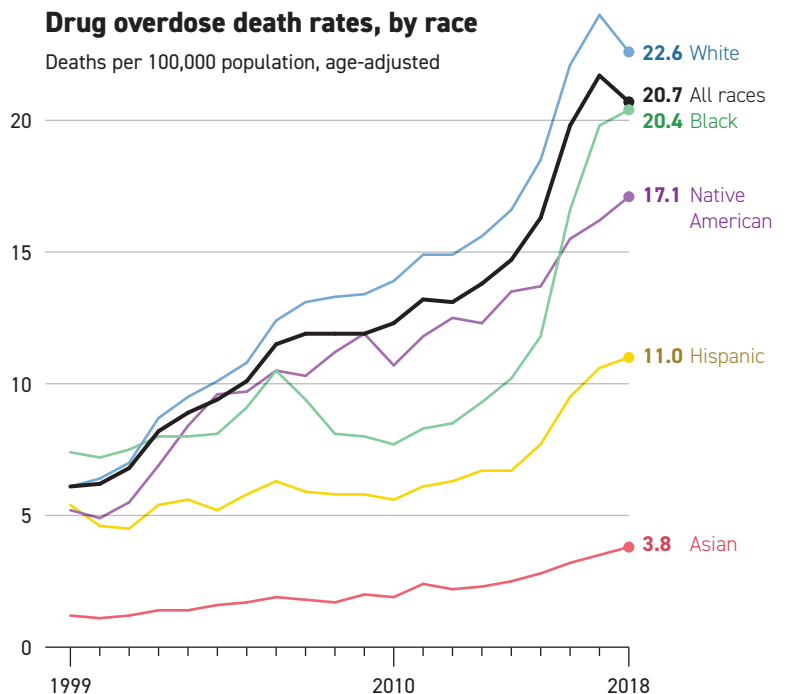
**Drug overdose death rates, by drug type**

Deaths per 100,000 population, age-adjusted



**Drug overdose death rates, by race**

Deaths per 100,000 population, age-adjusted



Sources: CDC WONDER Underlying Cause of Death files; Pooja Lagisetty et. al., "Buprenorphine treatment divide by race/ethnicity and payment," JAMA Psychiatry