

# Substance Abuse Trends Alert!

March 2020

## Fentanyl Deaths Continue to Rise as Opioid Deaths Slow Overall

### Drug Overdose Deaths Decline Nationally

For only the second time in nearly two decades, the rate of fatal drug overdose has declined in the US, dropping from 21.7 to 20.7 deaths per 100,000 population (age-adjusted)<sup>1,2</sup>. This significant decline was observed among men and women nationally.<sup>1</sup> Florida was among fourteen states and the District of Columbia that experienced a significant decline in these deaths from 2017 to 2018.<sup>1</sup> Though drug overdose deaths involving stimulants continued to rise nationally in the last year (2018), decreases in the rate of opioid-involved deaths, which comprise the majority of drug overdose deaths, drove the overall decline.<sup>1</sup>

### Opioid Deaths Overall Slow in the Last Year

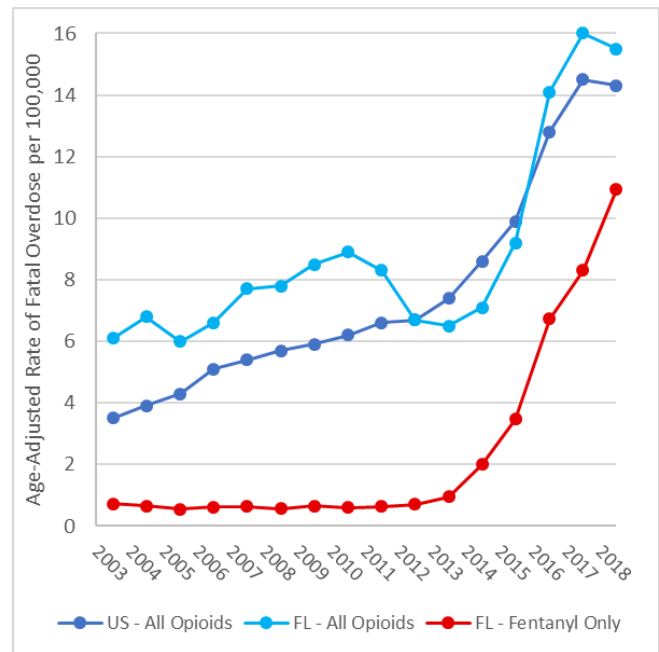
Overall, the rate of opioid overdose deaths declined nationally, following a 5-year period of annual increases (Figure 1). Rates declined for methadone, natural and semisynthetic opioids such as oxycodone, and heroin.<sup>1</sup> In Florida, a similar decline was observed for all opioids combined in the last year (Figure 1).

### Synthetic Opioid Deaths Continue to Increase

In spite of these improvements, drug overdose deaths due to synthetic opioids other than methadone continued to increase in the US, though at a slower rate from 2017 to 2018 than 2016 to 2017<sup>1</sup>. In Florida, 2018 saw the fifth year of significant increases in the rate of death due to fentanyl, a particularly potent opioid (Figure 1).

### Recommendations

Interventions have impacted opioid-related mortality, though differently by opioid type. Regardless of type, expansion of overdose education and naloxone distribution (OEND), needle exchange, and medication-assisted treatment of addiction are effective at preventing fatal overdose.<sup>4</sup> Distributing naloxone to laypeople, particularly those likely to experience or witness



**Figure 1.** Age-adjusted rate of fatal opioid overdose, US and FL, 2003 – 2018. Sources: [CDC WONDER](#) and [FROST](#).

overdose is the most cost-effective way to prevent fatal overdose, and should be done widely from community meetings; support groups for family members of people who use opioids; homeless service providers; and syringe access, drug treatment, re-entry, mobile outreach, and other community-based distribution programs that provide continuous, low-barrier access to naloxone.<sup>5-12</sup> Nonfatal overdose remains the most significant risk factor for subsequent fatal overdose. Emergency departments and in-patient hospital units have a unique opportunity prior to discharge to provide take-home naloxone kits to high-risk individuals not previously receiving OEND. Hospitals should operate under naloxone standing orders to reduce prescriber and dispenser burden and facilitate broader distribution of naloxone.<sup>13</sup> For more information:

## Additional Information Sources

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report \(MMWR\). Changes in Opioid-Involved Overdose Deaths by Opioid Type and Presence of Benzodiazepines, Cocaine, and Methamphetamine — 25 States, July–December 2017 to January–June 2018.](#)

[Drugs Identified in Deceased Persons by Florida Medical Examiners. 2018 Annual Report.](#)

[Electronic-Florida Online Reporting of Controlled Substances Evaluation \(E-FORCSE\). E-FORCSE Annual Reports.](#)

[Florida AHEC Network Opioid Project](#)

[I Save Florida](#)

[National Center for Health Statistics. Drug Overdose Deaths in the United States, 1999-2018.](#)

[National Institute on Drug Abuse. Florida Opioid Summary.](#)

[Opioid Response Network](#)

[What is the Opioid Epidemic?](#)

## References

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11. Townsend, T., Blostein, F., Doan, T., Madson-Olson, S., Galecki, P., & Hutton, D. W. (2020). Cost-effectiveness analysis of alternative naloxone distribution strategies: First responder and lay distribution in the United States. *International Journal of Drug Policy, 75*, 102536.
12. Bennett, A. S., Bell, A., Doe-Simkins, M., Elliott, L., Pouget, E., & Davis, C. (2018). From peers to lay bystanders: Findings from a decade of naloxone distribution in Pittsburgh, PA. *Journal of psychoactive drugs, 50*(3), 240-246.
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