

US drug overdose deaths surge amid fentanyl scourge

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US drug overdose deaths surged to nearly 72,000 last year, as addicts increasingly turn to extremely powerful synthetic opioid fentanyl as the supply of prescription painkillers has tightened.

Fresh estimates from the Centers for Disease Control showed Thursday that overdose deaths jumped in 2017 nearly seven percent to a record 71,568, far more than traffic accident deaths, gun-related deaths or suicide.

That was up from 67,114 in 2016 and just over 54,207 the previous year, according to the CDC.

Deaths increased in all but 12 of the 50 states, with the most deaths occurring in Florida, California, Pennsylvania and Ohio.

The largest surges, percentage-wise, were in the southeastern state of North Carolina, up 22.5 percent, and the midwest farm state of Nebraska, up 33.3 percent.

The overdose crisis began in the early 2010s mostly rooted in the overprescription of Oxycontin and other legal painkillers, leading to more than two million people becoming addicted.

But in the past three years addicts have been forced to turn to heroin and the cheaper, far more potent fentanyl as authorities have cracked down on prescription painkiller sales.

Data shows that synthetic opioids like fentanyl are involved now in nearly half of the overdose deaths, up from about one-third in just a year.

President Donald Trump declared the problem a national public health emergency last year, boosting funds for communities fighting addiction and the social impact, like children left without support after parents die from overdoses.

Despite the overall rise in deaths, the CDC data suggested that some intervention programs might be working. Overdose deaths fell in Massachusetts, one of the states with a high toll in recent years.

Communities across the country have expanded the use of overdose kits with Naloxone, a drug which can help revive victims of overdoses.

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