

Emergency room experienced a surge in opioid overdoses during pandemic

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In a paper published Friday by the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Virginia Commonwealth University researchers released data showing an alarming surge in opioid-related overdoses during the

COVID-19 pandemic.

Nonfatal opioid [overdose](#) visits to the VCU Medical Center emergency department in Richmond increased from 102 between March and June 2019 to 227 between March and June 2020. That's an increase of 123%.

The overdose increase occurred during a time when the [emergency room](#) was experiencing a lower-than-average number of visits overall. March through June visits in 2020 were down 29% from the same time last year.

The study's lead author, Taylor Ochalek, Ph.D., a postdoctoral research fellow at the VCU C. Kenneth and Dianne Wright Center for Clinical and Translational Research, analyzed the 2019 and 2020 data from VCU Medical Center's emergency department.

"Social isolation, job loss, the inaccessibility of community resources—these could all contribute to the overdoses we're observing," said Ochalek, who works in the Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology at the VCU School of Medicine.

Ochalek also examined demographic information for the opioid overdose patients. For both years, the patients mostly were male (70% in 2019 and 73% in 2020), and nearly half were uninsured (40% in 2019 and 44% in 2020). But the percentage of Black patients increased: from 63% in 2019 to 80% in 2020.

"Health disparities have been magnified during the pandemic," Ochalek said. "I hope this study provides a baseline of data for future research into reasons for the increase, mitigation efforts, longitudinal outcomes for patients and further overdose data."

"This data is from the Richmond area, but it confirms what we're

hearing anecdotally from across the U.S.," said F. Gerard Moeller, M.D., director of the Wright Center and director of the VCU Institute for Drug and Alcohol Studies. "The pandemic is more than a crisis of one disease. Its ripple effects will be felt for some time in the form of secondary health impacts like addiction."

Collaborators on Ochalek's study are Kirk Cumpston, D.O., a professor in the Department of Emergency Medicine; Brandon Wills, D.O., an associate professor in the Department of Emergency Medicine; Tamas Gal, Ph.D., director of research informatics at the Wright Center; and Moeller.

"The numbers in this study are alarming, and it's important that health providers and [community partners](#) know what we're facing," said Peter Buckley, M.D., interim CEO of VCU Health System, interim senior vice president of VCU Health Sciences and dean of the School of Medicine. "Studies like these will guide us in providing the best possible care to the Richmond community."

More information: Taylor A. Ochalek et al, Nonfatal Opioid Overdoses at an Urban Emergency Department During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *JAMA* (2020). [DOI: 10.1001/jama.2020.17477](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.17477)

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