

Dozens of US adolescents die from drug overdoses every month. An expert unpacks the grim numbers

November 28 2023, by Ty Schepis

Adolescent boys more likely to die from a drug overdose than girls

From July 2019 to December 2021, 2,231 U.S. adolescents ages 10 to 19 died of a drug overdose



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Credit: The Conversation

Drug overdose deaths in the United States continue to rise.

Overdoses claimed more than [112,000 American lives from May 2022 to May 2023](#), according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a 37% increase compared with the 12-month period ending in May 2020.

The vast majority of those who died were adults. But [drug overdoses](#) are killing young Americans in unprecedented numbers: The monthly total rose from [31 in July 2019 to 87 in May 2021](#), the period with the most

recent data.

As a [scholar of substance use who focuses](#) on [patterns](#) that vary between age groups, I'm struck by how adolescents' [overdose](#) deaths differ from adults' in terms of gender, race and ethnicity and the drugs causing these fatalities.

These differences mean that the groups considered to be at high risk and the strategies needed to prevent [overdoses](#) in adolescents should not be the same as for adults.

Who is dying?

When the CDC examined data for Americans 10 to 19 years old, it found that, [as is the case for adults, most adolescents dying from drug overdoses are male](#). However, the share of girls among these fatalities is larger than the share of women.

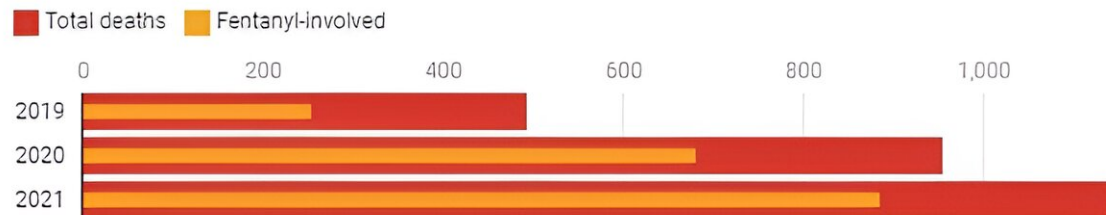
More than twice as many boys who are tweens or teens are dying of a [drug overdose](#) for every girl in that age group.

Among adults, three men die of a [drug](#) overdose for every two women.

The share of fatal overdoses of [white, non-Hispanic adolescents is vastly greater](#) than for their nonwhite peers—[more so than for adults](#).

Fentanyl increasingly involved in US adolescent deaths from drug overdoses

The number of Americans age 10-19 who are dying from a drug overdose that involves fentanyl is growing. While in 2019, only 253 of these deaths were recorded, there were 884 in 2021.



Credit: The Conversation

Fentanyl's often to blame

Another difference is what's causing these fatal overdoses.

Among adults, those who use [more than one drug are more likely to die from an overdose](#) than those who use a single drug. The most common combinations are fentanyl with another opioid, like a [prescription medication](#), and [fentanyl with a stimulant](#), like cocaine or methamphetamine.

Fentanyl on its own is the key culprit in [adolescent](#) overdoses. [For teens](#), 84% of fatal overdoses involved fentanyl, and 56% of all overdoses involved only fentanyl.

This is consistent with my team's research indicating that [rates of prescription opioid misuse fell](#) from 2015 to 2019 in both adolescents and young adults. It also squares with other data that shows deaths from [heroin-involved overdoses have declined](#) in recent years.

Fentanyl is among the most potent opioids available. It's estimated to be roughly [100 times more potent than morphine](#)—a very strong opioid typically used in hospital settings. Teens and tweens usually have little tolerance to opioids because they often have not been exposed to them before, and fentanyl's high potency makes them [more likely to overdose](#).

Many adolescents accidentally take fentanyl when they ingest counterfeit pills that they believe are prescription opioids or stimulants, or other [illicit drugs](#) that are laced with the drug.

This unintentional use can make an overdose even more likely, because people who are unaware they are taking fentanyl are less likely to have the overdose-reversal medication naloxone or [fentanyl test strips](#) on hand.

In 67% of adolescent overdose deaths, [a bystander was present who could have intervened](#). Naloxone was administered in less than half of cases where a bystander was present.

Little to no prior drug history

Opioids are behind the vast majority of adolescent overdose deaths in US

From July 2019 through December 2021, 2,231 adolescents ages 10 to 19 died of an overdose. Percentages don't add to 100 because some categories overlap, and in many overdose deaths multiple drugs are involved.

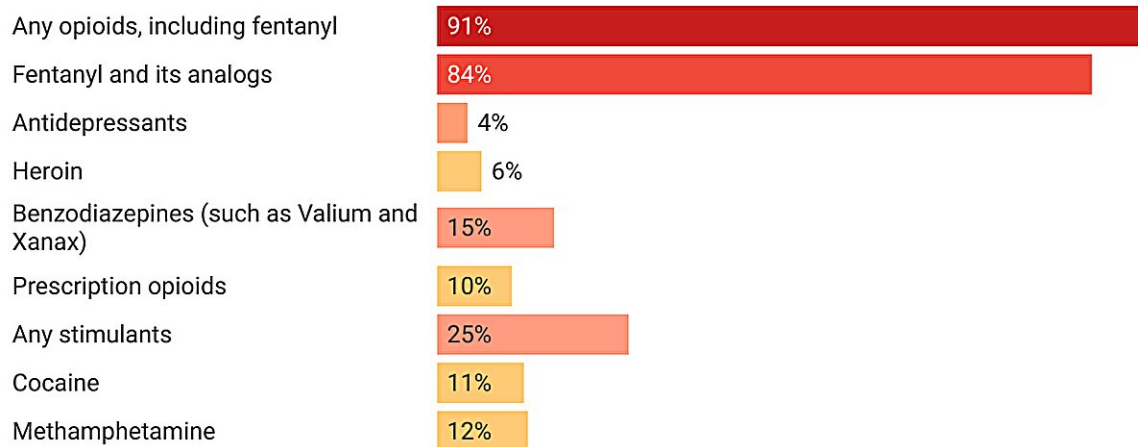


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Only 1 in 10 teens and tweens who died from a drug overdose had a [history of treatment for a substance use problem](#), and only 1 in 7 had ever experienced a prior nonfatal overdose. Adolescents who fatally overdose do not necessarily show the [warning signs generally expected](#) beforehand, such as problems with alcohol or other drugs or prior substance use treatment.

This pattern underscores the importance that all parents proactively talk with their children about substance use [by the time they are 12 years old](#).

Parents who express their disapproval of substance use tend to [prevent or delay it in their kids](#). Having children who never use substances may be

an unnecessary and unrealistic goal—after all, [most adults drink alcohol at least occasionally](#).

However, parents can emphasize that their [child's brain is changing rapidly and significantly](#) and that not using drugs or alcohol while young [helps promote healthy development](#).

What parents can do

Having naloxone available can also be important. It prevents [fentanyl](#) and other opioids from causing an overdose by blocking access to [opioid](#) receptors in the brain. This potentially lifesaving drug is easy to use, but the [cost of the over-the-counter version](#), which [can exceed \\$50 for two doses](#), makes it out of reach for some of the people who need it most.

Think of naloxone like car insurance: You don't want to use it, but it's important to have in case something goes wrong.

Even if your child never tries an illicit drug, they may be able to intervene and save a friend who overdoses. Everyone should know the [signs of an opioid overdose](#)—they include shallow or no breathing, problems staying conscious, and cold, clammy skin—and be ready to intervene when they see someone of any age who appears to be experiencing one.

Finally, more than 4 in 10 adolescents who died from an overdose [had a history of mental health conditions](#). That's consistent with [research from my colleagues and me](#) linking [poorer mental health and opioid misuse](#) in adolescents.

There's also a strong link between [mental health conditions and drug overdoses](#) among adults.

For this reason and many others, such as the [rising rates of adolescent depression](#), I recommend that all adults—whether caregivers or other people in an adolescent's life—check in on their mental health regularly and recommend or seek treatment for any concerns as early as possible.

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