

US life expectancy rose overall, but overdose deaths still set records

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As the pandemic wound down, life expectancy in the United States began to bounce back in 2022, although deaths among children increased and drug overdose deaths continued to reach record highs, new

government research shows.

Final [data](#) for 2022 was published Thursday by the U.S Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It showed that a 1.1-year increase brought overall [life expectancy](#) at birth to 77.5 years.

While promising news, that increase makes up for less than half of the 2.4 years of life lost during the first two years of the pandemic, and Americans' life expectancy is still lower than it's been in nearly two decades, experts said.

"Life expectancy gives us a snapshot of the health of a population," Dr. Steven Woolf, director emeritus of the Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Society and Health, told *CNN*. "Vaccination of the population brought a welcome reduction in COVID-19 mortality, and medical care for [chronic diseases](#) has thankfully begun to return to normal and that is reflected in the rebound in life expectancy rates."

Still, many other wealthy countries have made more "substantial" recoveries in life expectancy, he added.

"Put simply, the fact that life expectancy in 2022 was lower than in 2019 means that Americans continue to die at higher rates than they did before the pandemic, despite the rebound," Woolf said. "We are hardly out of the woods."

But the report did deliver some good news.

The age-adjusted death rate for COVID-19 fell more than half between 2021 and 2022, and it was a driving factor in shrinking the overall death rate by 9%.

Heart disease remained the leading cause of death, followed by cancer.

Death rates for these two killers ticked down about 4% and 3%, respectively. Together, [heart disease](#) and cancer still caused about two out of every five deaths nationwide, the report showed.

However, a rising death rate among children is a worrying trend, experts say.

The death rate among children ages 1 to 4 jumped 12% between 2021 and 2022, while the death rate for children ages 5 to 14 increased 7% year-over-year, according to the CDC data. The [infant mortality rate](#) also increased, while the death rate for all other age groups decreased.

"This is a red flashing light about the poor health status of Americans and how it now puts our children at risk," Woolf said. "This trend does not explain decreases in life expectancy for the [total population](#), which is driven by deaths in adults, but it is alarming nonetheless because it means that our children, our most cherished population, are less likely to survive to adulthood."

Last year, Woolf co-authored an [editorial](#) in the journal *JAMA* reflecting on the crisis of increasing mortality among children and adolescents, pointing to homicides, suicides, drug overdoses and car accidents as the leading causes of deaths.

"Importantly, these are the same causes of death that have been claiming the lives of young adults in their 20s. What this means is that the causes of death that have been claiming the lives of young adults have now reached down to younger age groups, claiming the lives of teenagers," Woolf noted.

Drug overdoses fueled many of these deaths, and the devastating effects of the drug epidemic persisted into 2022, with drug overdoses killing more people than any other year on record.

Nearly 108,000 people died from a drug overdose in 2022, about 1,200 more than in 2021, according to another CDC [report](#) published Thursday.

There are a lot of factors contributing to the overdose epidemic, Susan Sherman, a Bloomberg Professor of American Health at the Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health, told *CNN*.

"It's a lot easier to go up than it is to come down without really implementing and scaling up services and understanding the drug markets and giving people the power to make informed decisions about using, or quitting using, and then having options afterwards," Sherman explained.

She noted that while the pandemic may have contributed to the overdose epidemic, it also created opportunities to better reach people with telehealth services and support.

"There are these evidence-based interventions that really need to be scaled up in a way to reduce the burden of harm in people's lives," Sherman said. "We know that this whole continuum of care is something that needs to be accessible to people, but they don't have the maximum benefit when they're not scaled up."

More information: The National Institute on Aging has more on [longevity](#).

Steven H. Woolf et al, The New Crisis of Increasing All-Cause Mortality in US Children and Adolescents, *JAMA* (2023). DOI: [10.1001/jama.2023.3517](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2023.3517)

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