

Time for action: UK drug deaths continue to rise

August 15 2019, by Ian Hamilton



Credit: Nataliya Vaitkevich from Pexels

Every year since 2013, the UK's Office for National Statistics has reported an [increase](#) in drug-related deaths in England. Last year, we reported that drugs had overtaken traffic accidents as a leading cause of

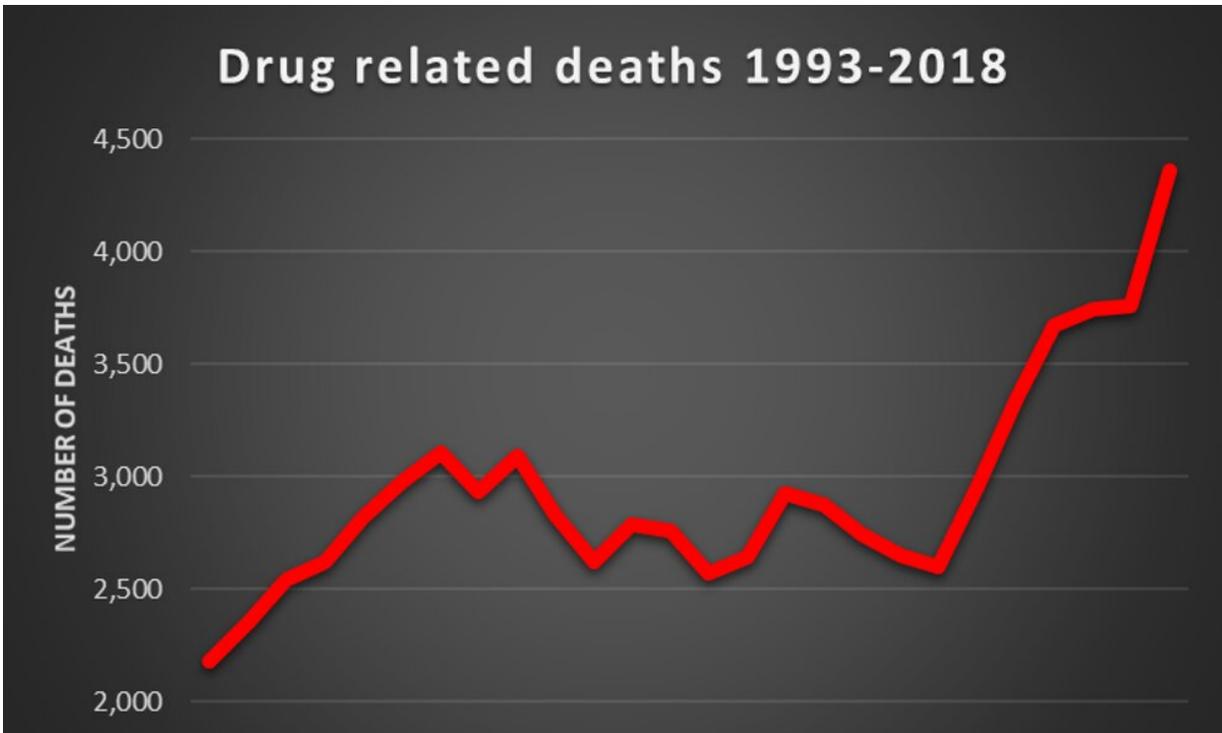
death. This year, they have [outstripped suicides](#) among men aged 35-49. As these deaths continue to rise ever higher, the government continues to cut funding for drug treatment and actively blocks services that would save people's lives.

Just this week, prime minister Boris Johnson promised to spend billions of pounds on [ineffective criminal justice policies](#), including [£2.5 billion](#) a year to expand the prison population by another 10,000 people. It is highly doubtful whether these pledges will be any more real than [previous unfulfilled promises](#), but they stand in stark contrast to sharp cuts in investment in preventing people from dying from drugs.

[Government figures](#) show a 27% reduction in spending on [drug treatment](#) services for adults since 2015-16. In some places with very high rates of [drug-related deaths](#)—such as Blackpool, Hartlepool, Liverpool and North Tyneside—the budget for [drug](#) treatment has been cut by more than half.

Drug-related deaths are not spread equally among British communities. The greatest burden is among those living in the most [deprived](#) areas. Until recently, the media has largely ignored communities which lose middle-aged opiate users on a daily basis. More attention has been paid to young people dying as a result of party drugs, such as ecstasy.

As the deaths mount, this is beginning to change. Heartbreaking stories of deaths, such as [Kevin Lane](#), are getting more coverage. Lane had struggled with drug dependency for several years. He also had [mental health problems](#)—an all too common combination for people who have problems with drugs. His life ended prematurely when he was found in a shop toilet having overdosed on heroin aged just 32.



Drug deaths chart. Credit: ONS

The shocking practice of "[cuckooing](#)"—where drug dealers take over the homes of vulnerable people—also shows that people who use drugs deserve protection, not just blame.

Ignoring the evidence

In Scotland, record levels of drug deaths have been recognized as a symptom of [entrenched poverty](#). Deaths both north and south of the Scottish border are a [public health crisis](#) triggering calls for a [different approach](#) by bereaved families, advocacy groups and many others. But Westminster has failed to implement evidence-based measures, recommended by the [Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs](#), for reducing deaths.

Instead of investing in effective opioid-substitution treatment, it has slashed the available funding. It has left it to cash-strapped local authorities to provide [heroin-assisted treatment](#). And it has refused to support [drug consumption facilities](#). These facilities save lives, but they need political support and funding—not easy when the [public](#) perceive these as facilitating drug use rather than a means to reducing drug-related harm.

All drug-related deaths are avoidable. We know how to reverse this dreadful trend in mortality, but this knowledge needs to be acted on by politicians. Unless this happens, we fear that next year yet another record in drug-related deaths will be reported.

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