

Fentanyl Overdose Deaths: A Summary Report Multnomah County



2018-2023

Summary information to help understand
fentanyl overdoses in Multnomah County

This document gives a summary of the [Overdose Mortality Report](#) released in May 2024. The purpose of this summary is to share information from the report that is most helpful to understanding fentanyl in our community. The full report has additional data, context, and analysis.

The Overdose Mortality Report shows overdose deaths involving fentanyl in Multnomah County between 2018 and 2023. The data show a dramatic rise in fentanyl-related overdose deaths during this time period.

It is important to note that no amount of data can describe the person who was lost to their family and friends. Each death counted in this report represents a real person, the grief and heartbreak of those close to them, and the trauma felt throughout our community as a result of their loss.

The Data Gives Us a Picture of Fentanyl Deaths

This report uses death certificate information from 2018 through 2022, and partial information for 2023. Death certificates have information about how the person died, including information from police reports and toxicology testing (testing for different kinds of drugs or other substances). It also includes information such as their race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, and age.

Death certificates are the most accurate way to gather information for research, but are not perfect. The information may come from records, observations by the death investigator, or information provided by someone close to the person. Death certificates also have limited options for race and ethnicity. This means the death certificate may not reflect the individual's own sense of identity or how they would have described themselves.

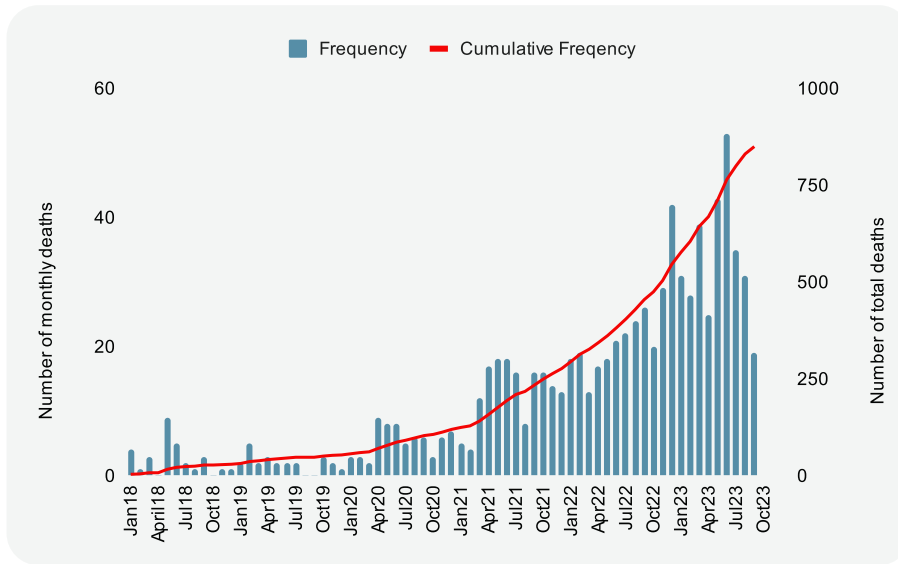
Where and How Often

There were a total of 868 confirmed deaths in Multnomah County between 2018 and 2023 due to fentanyl-related overdose.

This table shows the average number of fentanyl deaths each month in Multnomah County.

Fentanyl overdose deaths, Multnomah County by month, 2018-2023

(The dotted line box indicates provisional and partial data for this time period.)



Overdose deaths occurred across the county, though Portland's city center had an especially high number of them. In 2023, most overdoses happened downtown, particularly in the Old Town and Pearl District neighborhoods.

Overdoses Involving Fentanyl Mixed with Other Drugs Have Increased

Many of the fentanyl overdose deaths also had at least one other drug involved, most often methamphetamine. In 2018, just over 1 in 4 (27%) deaths involved both fentanyl and another drug. In 2023 it increased to almost 2 in 3 (63%) deaths. Combining a stimulant like methamphetamine with a opioid like fentanyl is dangerous. Using fentanyl and methamphetamine at the same time can increase the likelihood of an overdose by three times, compared to using methamphetamine by itself.

People Who Died of Fentanyl-Related Overdose

Looking at the shared traits of people who have died of overdose can help us understand who is experiencing the effects of fentanyl. Understanding the differences between affected groups is very complex.

Highlighting the differences in outcomes between racial and ethnic groups can cause its own harm. The information in this report must be considered in the context of all the social influences that contribute to unequal and unfair outcomes, including racism, colonialism, intergenerational trauma and poverty.

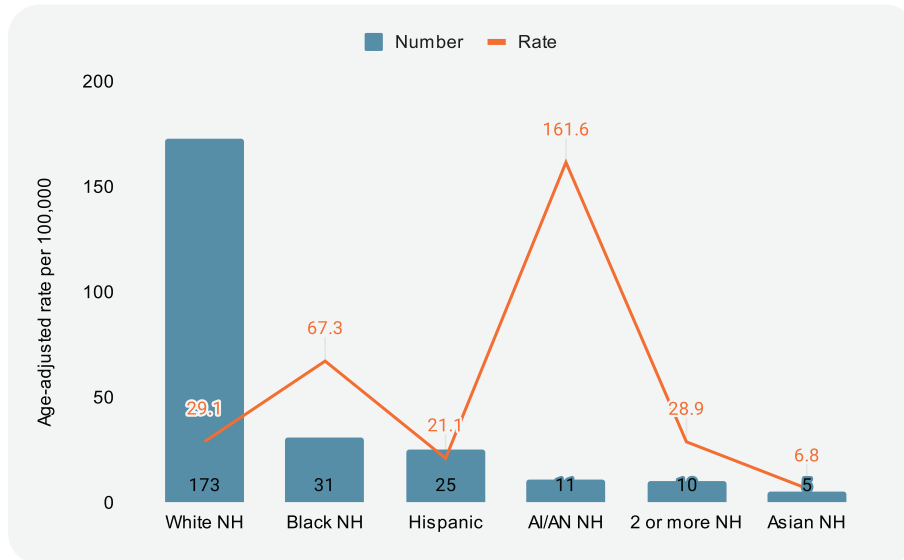
Key Demographic Findings

Race/Ethnicity

More than 3 out of 4 (77%) of the overdose deaths during the report time period were among White men aged 35 to 44. Among communities of color, the highest number of deaths occurred in the Black community.

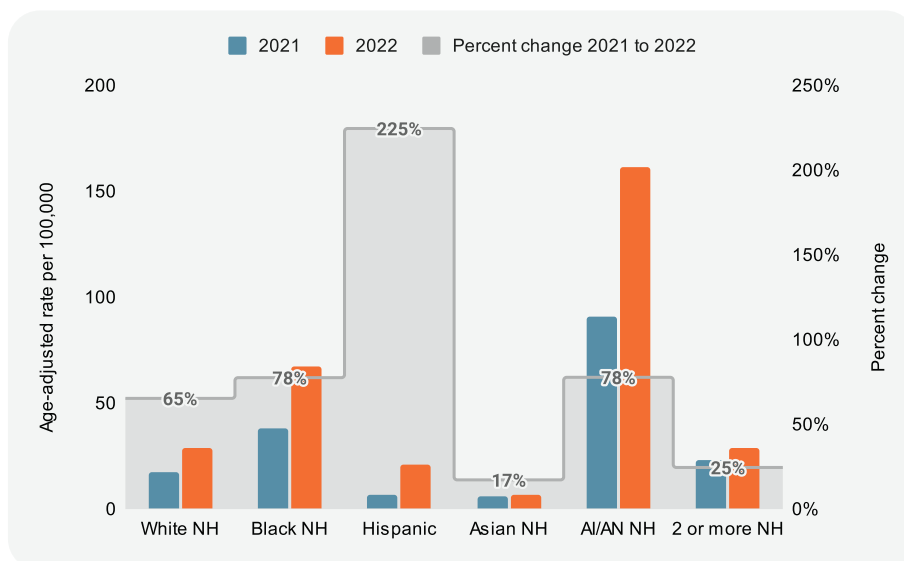
Also, taking into account population sizes, the rate of overdose was much higher for American Indian/Alaska Native and Black/African American communities compared to other communities. The rate describes the number of deaths per 100,000 people in a certain population. This gives us an idea about which communities are experiencing greater impacts from fentanyl.

Age-adjusted rate of fentanyl overdose deaths by race and ethnicity (single non-Hispanic races), 2022



People with Hispanic ethnicity experienced the biggest increase in overdose deaths of any racial or ethnic group between 2021 and 2022. The rate of overdose increased by 225% between these two years. Though the number of overdose deaths among people with Hispanic ethnicity remains lower than some other groups relative to population size, this sharp increase in deaths is worrying.

Age-adjusted rate of fentanyl overdose by race and ethnicity (single and two or more non-Hispanic races), 2021-2022



Gender, Age, and Housing Status

Males accounted for almost 3 out of 4 (74%) overdose deaths. The data suggest the gap between male and female deaths has grown over time.

Overdoses rose in all age groups in 2021 and 2022. Most of the overdoses were in people aged 35 to 44, but people aged 45 to 54 and 55 to 64 follow closely behind.

In 2022, 1 in 5 (20%) fentanyl overdose deaths happened in people who were likely experiencing homelessness. Early data for 2023 shows an increase to 1 in 4 (25%). These numbers may be low because housing status is not always correct on death certificates.

The data shows us that, like many health outcomes, fatal overdose from fentanyl falls unevenly on our communities. The Multnomah County Health Department offers this report as a way to provide context and inform action to prevent these deaths in the future.

Fentanyl deaths across the U.S.

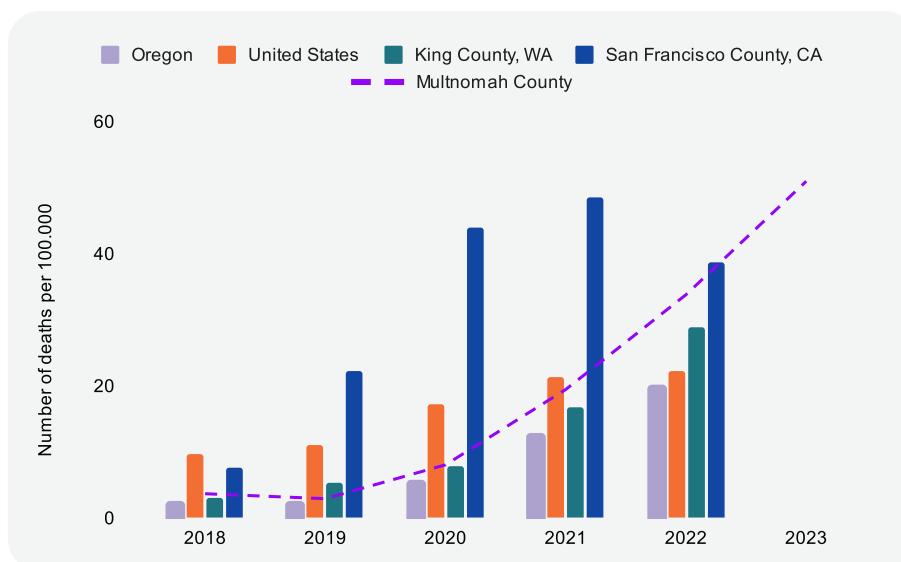
We are not alone in this crisis. Cheap and widely available illegal fentanyl has created deadly cycles of addiction and overdose that are hurting communities across the U.S.

This crisis has been building for many years. In 2021, there were more than 100,000 fatal drug overdoses in the United States and numbers for 2022 show a similar or higher number of deaths. More than two-thirds of these deaths involved synthetic opioids, mainly illegally made fentanyl.

Fentanyl overdose deaths on the west coast, including in Multnomah County, started a rapid rise around the same time as the COVID-19 pandemic. The supply of fentanyl on the west coast increased during this time, making it widely available.

The chart below shows overdose deaths in Multnomah County (the purple dotted line) compared to Oregon, the United States, King County (Seattle), and San Francisco County.

Fentanyl overdose deaths per 100,000 population, Multnomah County compared to Oregon, United States, and two west coast jurisdictions, 2018-2023



Addressing the crisis

The factors that lead to fatal overdose are numerous and complex. The deaths represented in this report, and the inequities revealed here, demand collective attention and action across our communities.

Interventions that can support people living with substance use disorder include those that promote housing stability and access to mental health care, and facilitate addiction treatment through peer-navigation. Increasing naloxone availability, increasing access to fentanyl test strips for people who are not intentionally using fentanyl, and supporting ways to help people avoid using drugs alone, can decrease the likelihood that an overdose causes death.

To respond to the rise in deaths, we must also consider causes that are upstream from the overdose itself, such as housing, access to healthcare, and economic stability. Creating opportunities for connection among communities, including culturally specific social supports, can decrease the number of people who start using drugs and reduce the harms of isolation that were made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. The stronger our connections, the better we will be able to defend against the harms of substance use and misuse, including non-fatal overdoses and overdose deaths.

Notes

All data has limitations. To see a full discussion of the limitations of the data cited here, see the [full report](#).

The report was developed by the Community Epidemiology Services team at the Multnomah County Health Department and released May 2024.

