

Drug Crisis Waves Over Time

The opioid epidemic is a severe public health crisis that has spanned decades in the U.S. and was officially declared a public health emergency in 2017. Due to the evolving nature of the drug supply and drug use, coordinated response has been difficult. Patterns in opioid-related overdose deaths over the years have shown distinct waves influenced by different types of opioids (prescription pills, heroin, synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, and polysubstance use). While future waves are uncertain, strengthening local drug surveillance and rapid data sharing can enhance understanding of the current drug supply, reduce harm, and prevent overdoses and deaths.

1990s - Prescription Opioids

- Driven by increased opioid prescriptions following undertreatment of pain and misunderstanding around addictive properties, prescription Opioid Use Disorder tripled (non-medical use of prescription opioids doubled) from 1991-2013 (*Mol Psych, 2021*).

2013 - Synthetic Opioids (i.e. Fentanyl)

- Illicitly made fentanyl saturated the drug supply due to low production costs and high potency.
- In 2020, synthetic opioids were involved in overdose deaths twice as often as prescription opioids or heroin (*Mol Psych, 2021*).
- From 2018 to 2019, the age-adjusted rate of drug overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids (other than methadone) increased by more than 50% in Washington state (*MMWR 2021*).

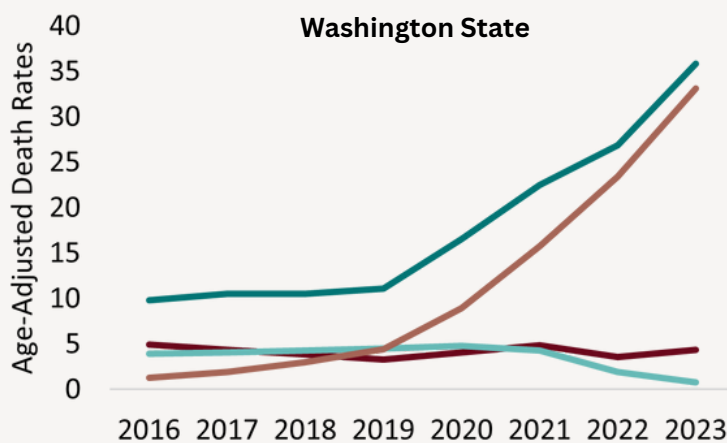
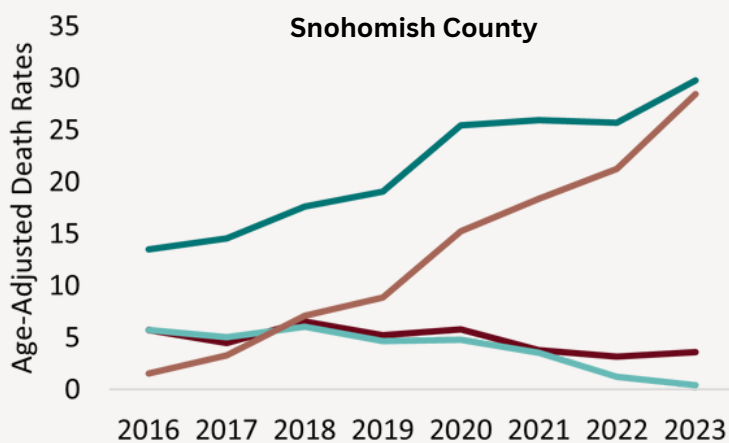
2010s - Heroin

- Some people who use heroin reported opioid dependency began with opioid pills. The switch to heroin may be due to its decreased price and increased availability.
- Heroin overdose deaths outnumbered deaths from opioid pills in 2015 (*Int J Drug Policy, 2020*).

Present - Polysubstance Use

- Sometimes referred to as the opioid/stimulant wave. Opioids remain the primary drug of use, with cocaine, amphetamine, and benzodiazepine also used. About 43% of overdose deaths now involve a mix of opioids and stimulants (*CDC*).
- About 1/3 of adults with a mental illness also have a substance use disorder, and this is highest in young adults aged 18 – 25 (*Preventative Med., 2021, SAMHSA*).

Drug Overdose Death Rates per 100,000 Population



— Prescription Opioid* — Heroin — Synthetic Opioids* — Multiple Drugs*

*Prescription Opioid: Overdose deaths involving prescription opioid pain relievers that include methadone but not synthetic opioids like fentanyl.

*Synthetic Opioids: Overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids other than methadone.

*Multiple Drugs: Overdose deaths involving more than one drug category (including stimulants, heroin, prescription & synthetic opioids).

Death data from DOH's Center for Health Statistics (Death Certificates). For more information and resources, visit snohomishoverdoseprevention.com