Public Health's Vital Role in Drug Overdose Prevention

Preventing Overdose in Communities as Trends Shift

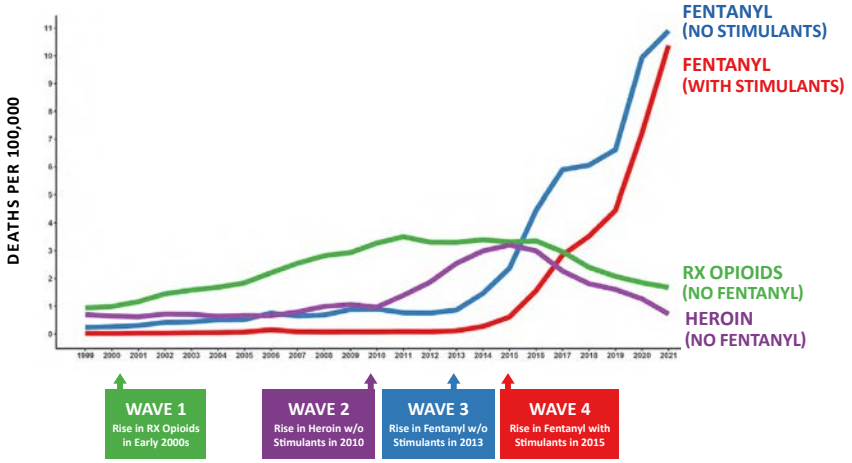
Ongoing, coordinated prevention efforts play a critical role in reducing overdose deaths. The United States continues to grapple with the devastating impacts of drug overdose, which the CDC formally classified as an epidemic in 2011. After decades of increasing rates of overdose deaths, 2023 marked the first annual decline.

But it's complicated.
The landscape is constantly changing — from the illicit drug supply and drug adulterants to the availability of interventions and medications.

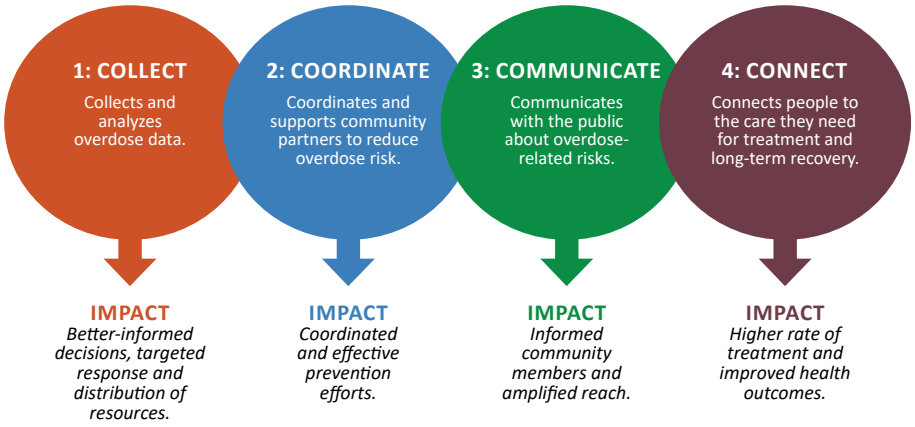
Recent declines in national drug overdose deaths are encouraging — but ongoing efforts are crucial.

2023: First drop in national drug overdose deaths since 2018, with continued decreases 2024-2026.[1]

Four Waves of Drug Overdose Deaths Identified Through Public Health Data Tracking (1999-2021)



Public Health's Role: The 4Cs of Overdose Prevention



Public Health Systems Focus on Population Health

There is no single solution to the overdose epidemic. While health care providers care for individual patients, public health workers care for the health of the entire population. Public health has been part of this work for decades, playing a unique role with a focus on four key activities (**The 4Cs**): data **Collection**, **Coordination**, **Communication**, and **Connection**.

[1] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC Reports Nearly 24% Decline in U.S. Drug Overdose Deaths. Published February 25, 2025. Accessed June 23, 2026. https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2025/2025-cdc-reports-decline-in-us-drug-overdose-deaths.html

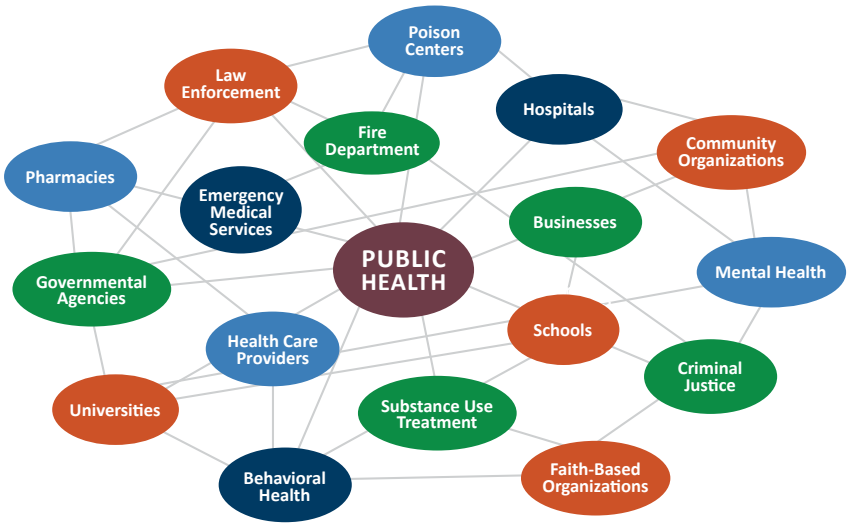
Data-Driven Coordination Is Crucial to Our Community Well-Being

A well-resourced, comprehensive and cross-sector response is the most effective strategy for overdose prevention. While health care providers care for individual patients, public health workers care for the health of the entire population. By continuously monitoring for health spikes, outbreaks, or epidemics at a local, state, and national level, public health systems help us protect the health and wellbeing of our communities.

Research shows that comprehensive public health actions can result in 37% fewer fatal overdoses.

2024 JAMA study [2]

The Overdose Prevention Cross-Sector Response



Federal Funding for Data Systems Is Essential

Public health data collection and analysis power a comprehensive view of the impact of overdose in communities across the country. Stable and sustained federal funding of these data systems informs population-level actions that prevent and protect.

For example, CDC's Overdose Data to Action (OD2A) cooperative agreement delivers funds directly to state, local, and territorial health agencies, supporting overdose monitoring and prevention activities that have reduced overdoses.

90 health departments benefit from OD2A funding.

49 state health departments, the District of Columbia, and 40 city, county, and territorial health departments in urban, rural, and frontier areas across the country.

We All Play a Part in the Response to Overdose

While we're seeing some progress, the overdose crisis isn't over yet. In fact, the ecosystem is changing yet again. While synthetic opioids continue to be the main cause of overdose deaths, as of 2025, public health is now grappling with a "fourth wave" — a complicated landscape of emerging substances, stimulants, and polysubstance use (when two or more drugs are taken together).

What you can do to support public health and help save lives in communities across our nation:

➡ LEARN MORE

Read the ASTHO report and contact your state and local public health departments to learn about their overdose prevention work.

➡ REFLECT

Consider how you and your department can create new opportunities for inter-agency coordination, collaboration, and community partnership.

➡ CONNECT

Invite a colleague into this conversation, and share this information with someone you think should know about overdose prevention efforts in your community.

This work was supported by Cooperative Agreement Number 6 NU38PW000018-02-01, funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the Department of Health and Human Services.

If you have questions about these materials, please reach out to ASTHO at od2a@astho.org.

[2] Nataraj N, Rikard SM, Zhang K, et al. Public Health Interventions and Overdose-Related Outcomes Among Persons With Opioid Use Disorder. JAMA *Netw Open*. 2024;7(4):e244617. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.4617