

Children of the Overdose Crisis

A federal study draws attention to the estimated 321,566 children in the United States who lost a parent to drug overdose from 2011 to 2021. How this mind boggling number of impacted young people has gone largely overlooked is troubling to say the least. A look at some recent, related studies provides a deeper perspective.

According to the [study](#) recently published in *JAMA Psychiatry*, lives lost from the overdose crisis are felt across generations emphasizing the need for children and family support. The rate of children who experienced this loss more than doubled during this period, from approximately 27 to 63 children per 100,000. The highest number of affected children were those with non-Hispanic white parents, but communities of color and tribal communities were disproportionately affected. The study was a collaborative effort led by researchers at the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

While the number of affected children increased from 2011 to 2021 across all racial and ethnic populations, children with young non-Hispanic Black parents (18 to 25 years old) experienced the highest – roughly 24% – increase in rate of loss every year. Overall, children lost more fathers than mothers (192,459 compared to 129,107 children) during this period.

“It is devastating to see that almost half of the people who died of a drug overdose had a child. No family should lose their loved one to an overdose, and each of these deaths represents a tragic loss that could have been prevented,” said Nora Volkow, M.D., NIDA director. “These findings emphasize the need to better support parents in accessing prevention, treatment, and recovery services. In addition, any child who loses a parent to overdose must receive the care and support they need to navigate this painful and traumatic experience.”

Researchers found that among the estimated 321,566 American children who lost a parent to overdose during this time period, the highest numbers of deaths were among parents aged 26 to 40 (175,355 children) and among non-Hispanic white parents (234,164). The next highest numbers were children with Hispanic parents (40,062) and children with non-Hispanic Black parents (35,743), who also experienced the highest rate of loss and highest year-to-year rate increase, respectively. The racial and ethnic disparities seen here are consistent with [overall increases in overdose deaths](#) among non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native and Black Americans in recent years, and highlight disproportionate impacts of the overdose crisis on minority communities.

“This first-of-its-kind study allows us to better understand the tragic magnitude of the overdose crisis and the reverberations it has among children and families,” said Miriam E. Delphin-Rittmon, Ph.D., HHS Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use and the leader of SAMHSA. “These data illustrate that not only are communities of color experiencing overdose death disparities, but also underscore the need for responses to the overdose crisis moving forward to comprehensively address the needs of individuals, families and communities.”

Based on their findings, the researchers emphasize the importance of whole-person health care that treats a person with substance use disorder as a parent or family member first and foremost,

and provides prevention resources accordingly to support families and break generational cycles of substance use. The study also points to the need to incorporate culturally-informed approaches in prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction services, and to dismantle racial and ethnic inequities in access to these services.

“Children who lose a parent to overdose not only feel personal grief but also may experience ripple effects, such as further family instability,” said Allison Arwady, M.D., M.P.H., director of CDC’s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. “We need to ensure that families have the resources and support to prevent an overdose from happening in the first place and to manage such a traumatic event.”

This overlooked cohort of children may be at risk for developing an alcohol or substance use disorder as well when you factor in genetic and environmental factors. It may be wise to keep an eye on this at risk group of young people. Families, school systems local government units and community groups need to be mindful and should work together to initiate some proactive steps to engage these young people as early on as possible.

For every person who actually dies, there are usually lots of people involved in that person’s life. “Every year, more than 100,000 people fatally overdose in the United States, while for every person who actually dies, there are lots of people involved in that person’s life,” said Dr. Anita Everett, who directs the Center for Mental Health Services within SAMHSA.

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When someone overdoses and dies, surviving loved ones can feel as if they’ve been thrown into a crater of grief. Since 2000, 1.1 million people have fatally overdosed in the United States, and a new study helps quantify the profound depth of suffering. According to a nationally representative survey conducted by the RAND Corporation, 42 percent of U.S. adults said they have known someone who died from drug overdose. That amounts to an estimated 125 million. The study, published in the American Journal of Public Health May 8, 2024, serves as an urgent call to action for addressing the ripple effects of overdose deaths within communities. Overdose bereavement is neglected in both scientific literature and “in our conversations about the broader overdose crisis,” Alison Athey, the study’s lead author reports. This neglect is “the product of good intentions” saving lives, but stigma, as well as a lack of resources tailored to meet survivors’ sometimes complex grief continue to shape the experiences of the people left behind.

Some insights from Dr. Alejandra Vasquez a noted Certified Grief Counselor

The long-term effects on children who lose a parent to overdose can be profound and multifaceted. While each child's experience is unique, here are some common effects:

1. Emotional Impact:
 - Grief and Loss: Children may experience intense grief, sadness, and feelings of abandonment. The sudden loss of a parent can be traumatic.
 - Anxiety and Depression: Children may develop anxiety disorders or depression due to the loss and the associated stress.
 - Anger and Guilt: Feelings of anger toward the deceased parent or guilt for not preventing the overdose can arise.
2. Behavioral Changes:
 - Regression: Some children may regress in their behavior, such as bedwetting or clinging to caregivers.
 - Withdrawal: Children might withdraw from social activities, friends, or school.
 - Risk-Taking Behaviors: Adolescents may engage in risky behaviors as a coping mechanism.
3. Academic Challenges: Lower Academic Performance: The emotional toll can affect concentration, leading to lower grades.
 - School Absenteeism: Children may miss school due to grief-related symptoms.
4. Social and Relationship Impact:
 - Difficulty Trusting Others: Losing a parent can erode trust in relationships.
 - Isolation: Children may feel isolated or different from peers who haven't experienced such loss.
 - Attachment Issues: Insecure attachment patterns may develop.
5. Physical Health Consequences: Stress-Related Illnesses: Chronic stress can impact physical health, leading to conditions like headaches, stomachaches, or weakened immune systems.
6. Financial Strain: Economic Hardship: Losing a parent can strain family finances, affecting housing, food security, and access to healthcare.
7. Substance Use Risk: Higher Risk of Substance Use Disorder: Children who've lost a parent to overdose may be more vulnerable to substance use themselves.

It's crucial to provide support, counseling, and resources to help children cope. Early intervention and a strong support network can mitigate some of the long-term consequences.

There are local family support groups connected to related resources here on Long Island. Contact any of the 3 THRIVE Recovery and Outreach Centers

www.thrivelife.org

For help with an alcohol or substance use disorder call:

LECSA EAP/MAP 631-851-1295