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BRIEF19

A daily review of covid-19 research and policy

RESEARCH BRIEFING

Non-fatal opioid overdoses on the rise during the pandemic.

In a new paper [published](#) in the *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, researchers investigated the rate of non-fatal opioid overdoses arriving at emergency departments (EDs) during 2020. In a collaborative effort, researchers from 6 different institutions came together to study this question, using data from their respective hospital systems.

In total, data on opioid overdoses from January 2018 to December 2020 was collected from 25 different hospitals across 6 states. Data from 2018-2019 were used to model and predict non-fatal opioid overdose rates for 2020, and this model was then compared to actual data reported from 2020.

Emergency department treatment of opioid overdoses increased substantially in 2020 compared to 2018-2019 in four of the six health systems. The overall non-fatal overdose visit rate increased by 28.5 percent in 2020 compared to 2018-2019. Meanwhile, across these health systems, there was a 14 percent decline in ED visits for all reasons in 2020.

Massachusetts and Rhode Island saw an overall *decrease* in non-fatal opioid overdoses in 2020 by 6.8 percent and 11.6 percent, respectively. However, substantial increases in non-fatal opioid overdoses were observed in 2020 in EDs located in North Carolina (+51.1 percent), Alabama (+47.3 percent), Colorado (+34.6 percent), and Connecticut (+25.3 percent).

Although this study is limited by being a non-nationally representative sample, the data are impressive given the number of hospitals included in several states. Although the way physicians document opioid overdoses may have changed over the time period, the researchers leveraged a longstanding collaboration focused on substance use research. This likely helped to minimize variability in documentation.

Overall, the results of this study strongly support the need for expanded emergency department and community-based interventions to support individuals with opioid use disorder during the covid-19 pandemic, and likely even after it ends.

—Joshua Niforatos, MD, MTS

POLICY BRIEFING

US drops below 1,000 daily covid-19 deaths. But variants are taking over.

For the [first](#) time since November, daily covid-19 deaths have dropped below 1,000 in the United States. Nearly 70 percent of Americans 65 or older have received at least one dose of an authorized coronavirus vaccine in just the three months that vaccinations have been available. Many states plan to open vaccinations to all adults in the next few weeks if they have not done so already.

While new cases remain above 50,000 per day, causing some pause among policymakers, the situation in the United States is far more encouraging than that of countries such as Brazil or parts of Europe that are seeing increases in case counts as well as fatalities. However, the encouraging signs in the United States are not yet definitive evidence that the virus that causes covid-19 has been defeated, health experts warn. Many states have relaxed social distancing and masking ordinances and Americans are beginning to travel again with airports in the United States seeing more than 1 million travelers per day on average in the past week. Several large employers have also announced that they will be encouraging employees to return to physical

office space soon as well. There are also concerns that the United Kingdom variant of the virus (B.1.1.7) which has been shown to be more contagious and slightly more deadly has now been found in all 50 states.

—*Jordan M. Warchol, MD, MPH*

Kimi Chernoby, MD, JD, Policy Section Founder, Joshua Niforatos, MD Research Section Editor, Frederick Milgrim, MD, Editor-at-Large, Joshua Lesko, MD Lead Policy Analyst, Barb Cunningham, Copy-editor, Benjy Renton, Thread-of-the-Week, Anna Fang, Week-in-Review. Megan Davis, social media. Kane Elfmán PhD, Publishing and Design. Jeremy Samuel Faust MD MS, Editor-in-Chief: <http://www.brief19.com/> Twitter: [@brief_19](https://twitter.com/brief_19) submissions@brief19.com. Brief19 is a daily executive summary of covid-19-related medical research, news, and public policy. It was founded and created by frontline emergency medicine physicians with expertise in medical research critique, health and public policy.