

DRUG ABUSE

Kentucky ranks fifth for overdose deaths

More than 70,000 died nationwide

By Linda Blackford
Lexington Herald-Leader

A record 70,237 people died from drug overdoses in the United States in 2017, a 10 percent rise from the year before, according to a new report from the Centers for Disease Control.

Kentucky's death rate was ranked fifth in the nation behind West Virginia, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C. Twenty states, mostly in the upper Midwest, had death rates above the national average.

Nationally, deaths from synthetic opioids known as fentanyls rose 45 percent in that one-year time frame. Fentanyl and its analogues, which are narcotics mostly used in end-of-life care, are frequently put in heroin, and in Kentucky they've been a leading factor of overdose deaths since 2015. Fentanyl, which is made in laboratories, can be 50 times stronger than heroin.

The CDC report ranked states by deaths per 100,000 in population. For example, in 2017, West Virginia lost 974 people to drug overdoses, which gave it an overdose death rate of 57.8 per 100,000. Kentucky lost more people, 1,566 in all, but had a death rate of 37.2 per 100,000. In Ohio, 5,111 people died for a rate of 46.3 per 100,000.

The national report

echoes many trends found in Kentucky's annual overdose report for 2017, especially the increase in deaths due to fentanyl.

"That is really driving the increases in Kentucky and the nation," said Van Ingram, executive director of the Kentucky Office of Drug Control Policy. "We're closely following the national averages, but of course we want to be below them."

The report does not document a new trend found in Kentucky in recent months, a rise in methamphetamine use. In Kentucky, meth was found in 29 percent of overdose deaths in 2017. Unlike opioid use, meth addiction cannot be addressed with medication assisted treatments, such as buprenorphine.

Ingram said national attention to the crisis has caused Congress to send much-needed federal dollars to the states to aid in helping addicted people. Kentucky has implemented several new programs to link people with services, such as FindHelpNowKY.org, an online service to link people with treatment centers in their areas.

"But those dollars and changes don't make an impact overnight," Ingram said. "They often take years to see the major impact we want. I'm hopeful we've reached the apex of this epidemic in Kentucky and will start to decline."

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