



U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

HEALTH CARE CAPSULE TREATMENT FOR DRUG MISUSE

October 2024

In 2023, about 105,000 people died of a drug overdose, according to CDC's provisional count. While the provisional count shows a slight decrease in overdose deaths from 2022, it remains more than twice as high as the number in 2013.

OVERVIEW

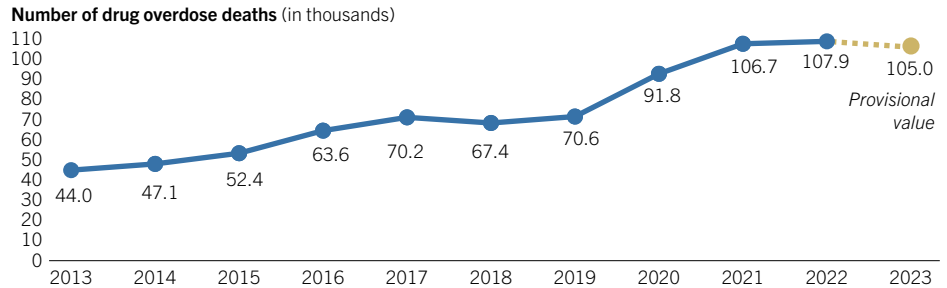
Drug misuse—the use of illicit drugs and the misuse of prescription drugs—has been a long-standing and persistent problem in the United States. It represents a serious risk to public health and has resulted in significant loss of life and effects to society and the economy, including billions of dollars in costs. National efforts to prevent, respond to, and recover from drug misuse is on GAO's High-Risk List ([GAO-23-106203](#)).

In 2023, almost 49 million people aged 12 or older had a substance use disorder in the past year. This included 27 million with a drug use disorder, according to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) survey data. Additionally, drug overdoses are one of the leading causes of death in adults, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Opioids were involved in about 87 percent of all overdose deaths in 2023, according to CDC's provisional data. About 80 percent of those deaths involved synthetic opioids other than methadone, such as fentanyl.

TREATMENT FOR DRUG MISUSE

The Office of National Drug Control Policy's 2024 National Drug Control Strategy includes a "National

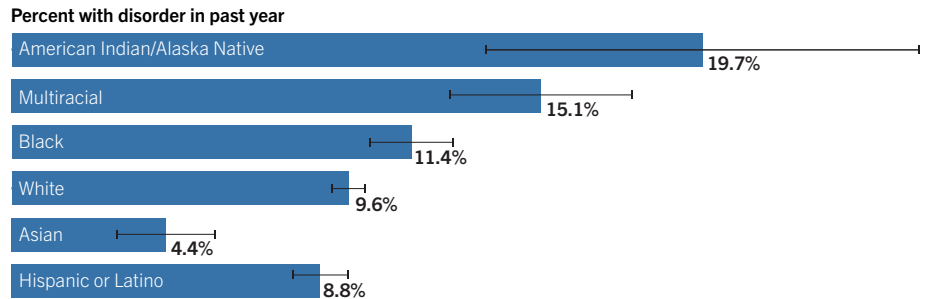
Figure 1: Drug Overdose Deaths in the United States, 2013-2023



Source: National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, mortality data file and CDC WONDER (provisional data). | GAO-25-107640

Note: The provisional drug overdose death count for 2023 was obtained from CDC WONDER on September 5, 2024. Provisional data for 2023 may differ from published reports using final data.

Figure 2: Drug Use Disorder in the Past Year by Race and Ethnicity, People Aged 12 and Over, 2023



Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2023. | GAO-25-107640

Notes: Bars represent 95 percent level confidence intervals, which provide information on the relative precision of the estimate. Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander estimates are not reported due to low precision. American Indian/Alaska Native, Multiracial, Black, White, and Asian estimates only include non-Hispanic or Latino respondents.

Treatment Plan" that aims to increase access to treatment for drug misuse. We have previously reported on the continuum of care for treatment of drug misuse ([GAO-21-58](#)). Such treatment aims to help people reduce or stop harmful drug misuse, improve

health and social functioning, and manage the risk of relapse. Based on an individual's needs, treatment may occur in a variety of settings—including outpatient, residential, and hospital inpatient. The level of treatment can vary both within

and across setting types. Treatment generally involves diagnostic services to determine the nature and extent of the condition, clinical and therapeutic treatment services, and may include medications.

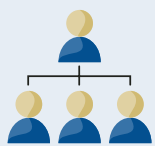
BARRIERS TO TREATMENT

According to SAMHSA data, in 2023 only about 24 percent of people aged 12 or older who needed treatment for

a substance use disorder in the past year received treatment. SAMHSA survey data from 2023 indicate the following were reasons adults cited for not receiving substance use treatment:

- ☒ Thought they should have been able to handle their alcohol or drug use on their own.
- ☒ Not being ready to start treatment.
- ☒ Thought it would cost too much.
- ☒ Did not know how or where to get treatment.
- ☒ Health insurance would not pay enough of the costs for treatment.
- ☒ Did not have health insurance coverage for alcohol or drug use treatment.

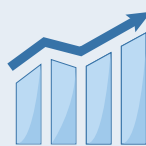
AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT



Build capacity for behavioral health workforce

We previously reported on gaps in the behavioral health workforce, including that about one-third of U.S. counties had no facilities that offered any level of drug misuse treatment as of May 2020 ([GAO-21-58](#)). Further, it is projected that demand for certain providers, such as addiction counselors, will outpace the supply of those providers by 2030 ([GAO-23-105250](#)).

The Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) noted in its 2024 National Treatment Plan that growing the behavioral health workforce is essential to address provider shortages and support individuals who need treatment.



Increase access to treatment for vulnerable populations

We previously reported that certain populations are at high risk of substance use disorder, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, but may not have access to treatment. This includes people from certain racial and ethnic groups, children and adolescents, and people living in rural areas ([GAO-22-104437](#)). In addition, we reported rural veterans face challenges in accessing substance use disorder care, including difficulties with transportation ([GAO-20-35](#)).

ONDCP noted in its 2024 National Treatment Plan that using mobile treatment units is a practical approach to increase access to treatment for vulnerable populations.



Reduce insurance barriers for treatment

We previously reported that low insurance reimbursement rates, reimbursement for only certain treatment services, and prior authorization requirements for some medication assisted treatments were barriers to offering the full continuum of care and expanding treatment capacity ([GAO-21-58](#) and [GAO-20-233](#)).

ONDCP noted in its 2024 National Treatment Plan that encouraging health plans to no longer require prior authorization is an important step to reduce remaining barriers for access to medication.



Leverage non-provider treatment options

We previously reported that 37 state Medicaid programs covered peer support services as of 2018. These services leverage individuals using their own personal experiences recovering from substance use disorder to support others in their recovery, and can be provided in both clinical and nonclinical settings ([GAO-20-616](#)).

ONDCP noted in its 2024 National Treatment Plan the importance of expanding the nation's peer support services workforce and integrating peer support specialists into primary care settings.

Source: GAO and ONDCP (information); GAO (icons). | GAO-25-107640

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This document is based on GAO audit products and is subject to update. For more information about this Capsule, contact:

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