

Early Prevention Works to Stop Fentanyl and Other Opioid Use

Why It Matters

Lives are being lost to opioid overdose and poisoning deaths.

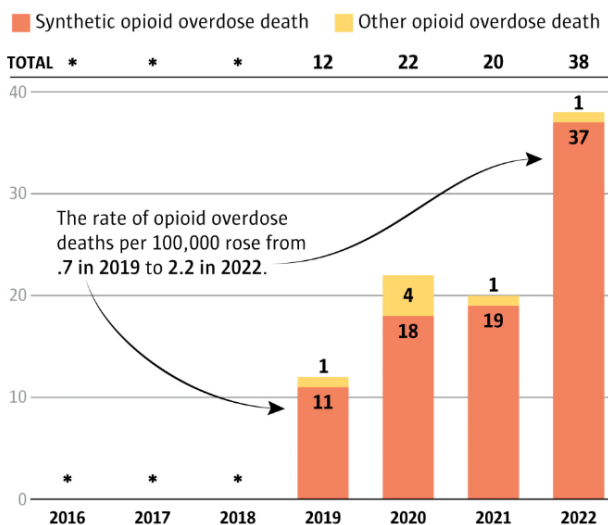
Between July 2022-2023, over 108,000 people in the U.S. have died from drug-related overdose. Over 87% of those deaths involved synthetic opioids, like fentanyl.¹

Between 2021 and 2022, Washington state had a 22% increase in age-adjusted overdose deaths; one of the highest percent increases in the nation.² In fact, in the last 10 years, Washington experienced a 198% increase in opioid-related deaths.³

Despite increases in funding for treatment and law enforcement over the past 10 years, opioid overdose deaths continue to increase. Programs that prevent people from using opioids intentionally and/or accidentally are needed.

Opioid overdose deaths in Washington youth triple

The number of youths 17 and younger who've died from an opioid overdose has tripled since 2019; at least 109 youth died from 2016 to 2022. A vast majority of deaths are tied to synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl.



* Fewer than 10 deaths. State guidelines require all counts between 1 and 9 be suppressed to maintain privacy.
Source: Washington State Department of Health

AILEEN CLARKE /
THE SEATTLE TIMES

What We Know

Communities make a difference

- When communities implemented **evidence-based early prevention programs** community-wide, young people's opioid use was substantially reduced, demonstrating the potential to impact larger public health outcomes.⁴
- **Communities** with youth at higher risk for substance use in Washington State have the opportunity for funding by the **Community Prevention and Wellness Initiative (CPWI)** to engage in evidence-based early prevention programs.
- Over time, CPWI communities have consistently demonstrated a smaller increase in overall risk for youth substance use (including opioid use: e.g., peer substance use, early initiation) compared to non-CPWI communities.⁵

Youth and young adults are at increased risk

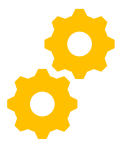
- **Rates of opioid-related deaths tripled among Washington's young adults (18-24 years old) between 2019 and 2022.** Over 97% of those deaths involved synthetic opioids.⁶
- Youth who use synthetic opioids are at greater risk of overdose and death than their peers.⁷⁻⁹
- Due to ongoing brain development, young adults are at an increased risk of addiction and relapse.^{10,11}
- Young adults who use fentanyl are more likely to perceive themselves as invincible to overdose.¹²
- Consequently, early substance use prevention efforts are important and needed.

Addressing the predictors works

Early prevention efforts and the science of **Risk and Protective Factors** are an essential piece of reducing opioid overdose and deaths, as well as promoting positive health outcomes for our youth.

These upstream efforts help avoid problems before they start rather than reacting after an overdose has occurred. Prevention efforts are cost-effective.

- Common predictors underlie opioid and other substance use disorders. For example, partner/peer substance use or perceiving substance use as low risk.
- The risk factors that lead to opioid use often overlap with risk factors that lead to general substance use among young adults.¹¹
- Existing programs combining information and skill-building that have been tested and shown evidence of preventing use of other substances (like alcohol and cannabis) can be helpful in preventing opioid (including fentanyl) use.^{4,13}
- Substance use shares risk factors with other problem behaviors. When these factors are effectively addressed early in life, we can simultaneously reduce substance use and other adolescent problem behaviors including: delinquency, violence, school dropout, and early pregnancy.¹⁴



What Can Be Done

Early prevention, harm reduction and treatment: A three pronged approach

We can use early prevention to address underlying factors that research has demonstrated lead to opioid use. In doing so, **we can stop addiction and overdose before they start.**

Dr. Nora Volkow, Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), notes that effective prevention strategies address early upstream predictors (risk factors, such as social neglect and peers who use substances, and promote protective factors, such as, parental support and education).¹⁵ NIDA’s review of the prevention literature calls for increased funding for early prevention interventions to reduce pressure on an overburdened treatment system.

“The urgency of this public health crisis and the escalating danger of the illicit drug supply point to a need for a greatly expanded focus on prevention.”¹⁵

As these experts suggest, using early prevention to address the predictors of substance use and other problematic behaviors in combination with treating opioid problems can be more effective than either strategy alone.



Early prevention works! Sustainability and infrastructure capacity building

- Sustain and support CPWI infrastructure to reduce predictors of substance use disorders and save lives.
- Maintain and expand evidence-based prevention programs in Washington State to reduce youth substance use, including fentanyl.
- Expand effective prevention efforts to young adults, particularly those who are most at risk (non-college students).¹⁶



Low cost investment

Early prevention is cost-effective over time by reducing the need for treatment and law enforcement responses to substance use.¹⁷⁻¹⁹

- Increase funding for early prevention efforts. Federal drug control spending has been steadily increasing since 2008. Despite demonstrated cost-effectiveness, prevention funding remains under 10% of the overall budget.²⁰
- **Fully fund** evidence-based prevention efforts adding resources to communities to provide evidence-based prevention approaches.
- State and Federal funding is needed for Prevention as well as outreach/engagement, treatment and recovery support services.

Resources

[WA Health Care Authority: Athena Forum Prevention 101](#)

[WA State Department of Health Stop Overdose](#)

[WA Health Care Authority: Opioid Misuse Prevention](#)

[Starts with One Campaign](#)

Acknowledgements

Washington State Prevention Research Collaborative

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Figure citation

Fentanyl is killing more kids, but treatment isn't keeping pace | The Seattle Times.
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