

More Than 321,000 U.S. Children Lost a Parent to Drug Overdose From 2011 to 2021

Lives lost from overdose crisis are felt across generations, emphasizing need to include children and families in support.

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An estimated 321,566 children in the United States lost a parent to drug overdose from 2011 to 2021, according to [a study](#) published in JAMA Psychiatry.

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 and Prevention (CDC).

Children with non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native parents consistently experienced the highest rate of loss of a parent from overdose from 2011 to 2021 – with 187 per 100,000 children affected in this group in 2021, more than double the rate among non-Hispanic white children (76.5 per 100,000) and among non-Hispanic Black children (73 per 100,000).

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, MD, 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.”

From 2011 to 2021, 649,599 people aged 18 to 64 died from a drug overdose. Despite these tragic numbers, no national study had previously estimated the number of children who lost a parent among these deaths. To address this gap, researchers used data about people aged 18 to 64 participating in the 2010 to 2019 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) to determine the number of children younger than 18 years living with a parent 18 to 64 years old with past-year drug use. NSDUH defines a parent as biological parent, adoptive parent, stepparent, or adult guardian.

The researchers then used these data to estimate the number of children of the nearly 650,000 people who died of an overdose in 2011 to 2021 based on the national mortality data from the CDC National Vital Statistics System. The data were examined by age group (18 to 25, 26 to 40, and 41 to 64 years old), sex, and self-reported race and ethnicity.

The researchers found that among the estimated 321,566 American children who lost a parent to overdose from 2011 to 2021, 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, PhD, 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, MD, MPH, 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 manage such a traumatic event.”

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call or text [988](#) or chat

at 988lifeline.org. To learn how to get support for mental health, drug or alcohol issues, visit [FindSupport.gov](https://findsupport.gov). If you are ready to locate a treatment facility or provider, you can go directly to [FindTreatment.gov](https://findtreatment.gov) or call [800-662-HELP \(4357\)](tel:8006624357).

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