

Opioid-related overdose deaths in 2017 fell by more than 8 percent

Baker-Polito Administration Releases 4th Quarterly 2017 Report on Opioid Epidemic

BOSTON (February 14, 2018) - Opioid-related overdose deaths in Massachusetts declined in 2017 by an estimated 8.3 percent compared to 2016. This is the first time in several years there has been a year over year decline, [according to the quarterly report released today](#) by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH). This is the third consecutive quarterly report where the number of estimated and confirmed opioid-related deaths declined.

“While there is still a lot of work to do, this report is encouraging news that gives us hope that we are beginning to bend the curve of this epidemic,” said **Governor Charlie Baker**. “As a Commonwealth, we must continue our aggressive efforts to combat the opioid and fentanyl crisis. And I urge the legislature to pass our CARE Act which expands access to treatment and ask lawmakers to take swift action on legislation to crack down on the fentanyl trade. The data makes clear that we must give law enforcement every possible chance to track down this terrible drug and hold accountable those who sell it.”

The total number of estimated and confirmed opioid-related overdose deaths in 2017 was 1,977, which is 178 fewer deaths than the 2,155 estimated and confirmed deaths in 2016, or an 8.3 percent decrease. In previous years, the year over year comparisons showed increases in opioid-related overdose deaths; the estimated opioid-related overdose death rate in 2016 increased by 22 percent from 2015; there was a 30 percent increase in 2015 from the prior year; and in 2014, there was a 39 percent increase from 2013.

“We continue to take affirmative steps to address the opioid crisis in Massachusetts. It is a promising trend that for the first time last year we saw overdose deaths actually decrease,” said **Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders**. “Today’s report is a welcome development, however, there is so much more work to do to increase access to treatment - particularly for individuals who are Hispanic.”

Selected Findings from the 2017 Q4 Report on Opioid-Related Deaths:

- The rate of fentanyl present in the toxicology of opioid-related overdose deaths continues to rise and reached 83 percent in 2017, while the rate of heroin or likely heroin present in opioid-related deaths declined between 2015 and 2016 and stabilized in 2017.

- The percentage of opioid-related overdose deaths where prescription drugs were present has trended downward since the beginning of 2014 when approximately 25 percent of these deaths with a toxicology screen showed evidence of a prescription opioid. In 2017, prescription opioids present in toxicology screens remained stable.
- The confirmed opioid-related overdose death rate for Hispanics doubled over a three year period, from 15.6 opioid-related overdose deaths per 100,000 people in 2014 to 31.4 opioid-related overdose deaths per 100,000 people in 2016.
- In the first nine months of 2017, the greatest number of suspected opioid Emergency Medical Services overdose incidents were among males aged 25-34, accounting for 27 percent of opioid-related incidents with a known age and gender.
- In the fourth quarter of 2017, there were approximately 594,000 Schedule II opioid prescriptions reported to the Massachusetts Prescription Monitoring Program; this is a 30 percent decrease from the first quarter of 2015 when there were 841,990 Schedule II opioid prescriptions.
- Approximately 268,000 individuals in Massachusetts received prescriptions for Schedule II opioids in the fourth quarter of 2017; this is more than a 30 percent decrease from the first quarter of 2015 when the figure was 390,532.
 - The rate of individuals with activity of concern defined as an individual who received one or more Schedule II opioid prescriptions from four or more different prescribers and four or more different pharmacies during the calendar year decreased by 56 percent from 14.3 to 6.3 per 1,000 individuals between 2013 and 2017.

“The decreases we saw in the two previous quarterly reports have been sustained but we also must remain vigilant,” said **Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel, MD, MPH**. “This is an opioid overdose epidemic, and we know that the nature of an epidemic is that you have to stay ahead of it and that’s what we are determined to do.”

In November, the Baker-Polito Administration [announced their second major legislative effort](#) targeting the opioid crisis since taking office. Their plan includes increasing access to treatment and recovery services, including addressing gaps in the care provided after detoxification; strengthening education and prevention efforts; and securing regulatory relief from the federal government to increase treatment access.

The Administration has also focused on addressing the disproportionate risk of opioid overdose deaths among incarcerated populations. The landmark [Chapter 55 Report](#) showed that the opioid

overdose death rate is 120 times higher for people recently released from incarceration compared to the rest of the adult population.

This month, the **Suffolk County House of Correction** will become the sixth correctional facility to make available medication-assisted treatment and recovery services to incarcerated individuals with an opioid use disorder within two months of their release. The program, known as the Medication-Assisted Treatment Re-Entry Initiative for Houses of Correction, already includes the **Bristol County House of Correction**, the **Franklin County House of Correction**, the **Hampden County House of Correction**, the **Middlesex County House of Correction** and the **Worcester County House of Correction**.

As part of its outreach to Latino communities, which also have been disproportionately impacted by the opioid epidemic, the state has launched a new public information campaign targeting Latino parents of teens to raise awareness about prescription opioid addiction and help them learn how to talk about the dangers of opioid misuse with their kids.

According to the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids, kids whose parents talked with them about prescription pain medications were 42 percent less likely to misuse these drugs than those whose parents didn't.

The new campaign includes a Spanish-language [television spot](#) which is airing on Spanish TV outlets in Boston and Springfield and also includes digital, YouTube, and Facebook ads. The Department has also produced a [Spanish-language version](#) of the Stop Addiction Before It Starts brochure which provides guidance to help parents get the conversation started with their teens.

All campaign materials include a call to action for parents to visit www.mass.gov/stopaddiction for more information in Spanish as well as English.

For more information on the Commonwealth's response to the opioid epidemic as well as links to the latest data, visit www.mass.gov/opioidresponse. To get help for a substance use disorder, visit www.helplinema.org, or call the Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline at [800-327-5050](tel:800-327-5050).