

Opioid Crisis Has Disproportionately Affected Individuals Without Any College Education



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THE ISSUE

As the opioid crisis evolves and intensifies, understanding how overdose death rates vary by education, race, and ethnicity can suggest how prevention and treatment efforts might be focused most effectively.



STUDY FOCUS

This descriptive analysis examined overdose deaths, aggregated by year and education, for ages 25+ in the United States, from January 2000 to December 2021. Data were drawn from the National Vital Statistics System Mortality Multiple Cause-of-Death records.



KEY FINDINGS

Increasingly, the opioid crisis differentially impacts those without any college education.

- For those without any higher education, the overdose death rate increased more than 6 times, rising from 12.4/100,000 in 2000 to 81.6/100,000 in 2021.
- For the population with at least some college, the rate quadrupled, rising from 4.6/100,000 in 2000 to 18.6/100,000 in 2021.

More granular data available from 2018–2021 show a similar pattern.

- Those without a high school degree experienced an 81 percent increase in overdose deaths.
- The growth rate per 100,000 for those with or without a high school degree was more than 9 times higher than the rate for those with some college or with a college degree.
- Much of this differential growth was due to overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids.

There were racial and ethnic disparities even within education categories.

- American Indian and Alaska Native populations had substantially higher overdose rates than the rest of the population for every educational group.
- Among those with high school degrees, Black individuals had especially high rates.
- Overdose rates declined at higher education levels among all racial and ethnic groups.
- Men had higher overdose death rates than women in all education groups and experienced faster growth at every education level.



IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Understanding which groups are most impacted by overdose deaths provides critical information about how resources such as access to treatment and naloxone can be allocated most effectively. It also underscores the critical role of socioeconomic status in addressing the crisis and the potential effectiveness of “social policy as health policy.”

Powell D. Educational Attainment and US Drug Overdose Deaths. *JAMA Health Forum*. 2023; 4(10): e233274. doi:10.1001/jamahealthforum.2023.3274

