

The Shift to Illicit Opioids Explains about Half of the Growth in Child Suicide Rates Since 2010



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THE ISSUE

The increase in suicide rates from 2011 to 2018 among children ages 10–17 was unprecedented in duration and magnitude. After decades of near-continuous declines in child suicide rates, the United States experienced eight years of continuous increases from 2011 to 2018, swelling child suicide rates by 83 percent. But little is known about why child suicide rates have increased so sharply, leaving policymakers and clinicians without critical information to help address a burgeoning mental health crisis.



STUDY FOCUS

Introduction of the reformulated abuse-deterrent version of OxyContin in 2010 triggered a shift to illicit opioids, including heroin and fentanyl. Areas of the country in which OxyContin misuse was higher before the reformulation were more affected by the shift to illicit opioids. The OPTIC team leveraged this geographic difference to compare changes in suicide rates in areas more impacted by the shift to suicide rates in less exposed areas.



KEY FINDINGS

- Reformulation of OxyContin and the accompanying shift to illicit opioids explain about half of the growth in child suicide rates since 2010.
- States more affected by the shift to illicit opioids had disproportionately higher growth in child suicide rates.
- Adolescents did not increase their use of illicit opioids after the reformulation, but they were likely affected by the broader consequences of the illicit opioid crisis, especially greater rates of child neglect and altered household living arrangements, which can heighten suicidal risk for children.



IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The suffering caused by the opioid crisis is not limited to those who misuse opioids. Efforts to address the crisis, such as expanding access to buprenorphine treatment, will likely engender additional benefits such as reducing mistreatment of children. But to date, few policies have proven effective in quickly combating the crisis, providing little optimism that the effects of the opioid crisis on child suicide rates can be contained in the near term.

Powell D. (2023) Growth in Suicide Rates Among Children During the Illicit Opioid Crisis. *Demography*, 11077660. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/00703370-11077660>

