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Significant drop in drug overdose deaths brings optimism, but crisis persists

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The Buzz This Week

Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show a significant drop—over 12%—in overdose deaths nationwide. Experts predict that even more significant declines will be revealed in upcoming data, available as soon as federal surveys are updated and analyzed.

This is a significant trend reversal after several years of dramatic, double-digit increases in drug-related deaths, particularly for opioids like fentanyl, which accelerated during the height of the pandemic. Some are incredibly encouraged by this recent data. Brad Finegood, who oversees overdose crisis response efforts in Seattle, was recently quoted in a National Public Radio report saying, "A year ago when overdose deaths continued to rise, I was really struggling with hope...Today, I have so much hope." Dr. Rahul Gupta, the White House drug czar, said that the drop in drug deaths implies a positive path forward, stating, "this is the largest decrease on record and the fifth consecutive month of recorded decreases."

Despite these positive developments, some experts remain cautious because trends that typically impact the rate of drug use and overdoses have not suggested such a dramatic drop. For example, the declining price of street drugs is a concern because, based on the economics of supply and demand, it can lead to an increase in consumption and potentially more overdose deaths. Dr. Nabarun Dasgupta, an expert on street drugs at the University of North Carolina, produced an in-depth analysis of the recent decline in illegal drug-related deaths and trends in related drivers. His concluding thought: "We don't have anything that would predict this magnitude of effect this quickly." Some experts are calling it a "mystery."

Others have underscored that while the overall trend may be encouraging, certain states (e.g., the mountain region and Pacific northwest) and demographic groups (e.g., Blacks and Native Americans) are still experiencing a distressing incline in the rate of drug overdoses, and their death rates remain incredibly high.

Why It Matters

The drop in drug-related deaths may indicate a positive turn in the tide of this unfortunate trend, and a potentially positive outlook for the future. However, the US still faces a major drug overdose crisis. Other countries have significantly lower rates of overdose deaths, highlighting the need for continued action. Europe, for example, has seen barely one-tenth the number of deaths in recent years as in America.

Efforts that may contribute to a drop in drug overdoses and deaths should continue to be a top priority. These include:

- Increasing the availability and distribution of the drug overdose countermeasure Naloxone, and education on its life-saving potential and how to administer it.
- Identifying drug cartels and disrupting illegal drug importation.
- Determining the right restrictions on fentanyl shipments to the US. While used appropriately in clinical settings, some fentanyl inevitably makes it onto the street supply of opioids.
- Removing barriers to drug use and addiction treatment, which could involve increasing the number of government- or privately-sponsored low cost / free treatment clinics, broader insurance coverage for all aspects of related medical and behavioral health treatment, and broader education and training for healthcare professionals to screen for and treat substance use disorders.

Only through continued efforts from public health and community organizations, healthcare providers, law enforcement, and policymakers will this nascent drop in overall drug overdose deaths be extended to all states and demographic groups, and bring deaths down to less catastrophic levels.

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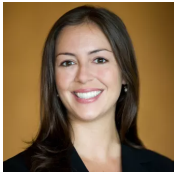
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