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Drug-related deaths in England & Wales reach highest figure on record, Government policy directly contributing to public health crisis

Deaths relating to cocaine and fentanyl highest on record

LONDON (August 6, 2018) – Office for National Statistics (ONS) data released today shows that there were 3,756 drug-related deaths registered in England and Wales in 2017. It is the sixth year in a row that the ONS has registered an increase. 2017 is now the year with the highest number of registered drug-related deaths since records began.

Heroin and/or morphine deaths were involved in 1,985 of the deaths that took place. These deaths have increased by 30% since 2010 when 1,527 were registered. Deaths related to fentanyl, a powerful opioid, have reached 75 – the highest figure on record.

Release’s executive director, Niamh Eastwood, said:

“The government is driving this devastating public health crisis by punishing people for their drug use instead of implementing compassionate, evidence-based policies. By criminalising people for drug possession, the government is dissuading people who want help from seeking it. This, in turn, is fuelling drug-related deaths.

To make matters worse, the government is actively blocking the opening of life-saving drug consumption rooms, despite calls for their introduction from treatment service users, health professionals, and even the Scottish Parliament.

This is a national crisis, and it requires a coordinated, national public health response. Instead we are seeing a disconnected, localised approach that fails to protect vulnerable people, and an overarching national strategy that primarily harms people who already marginalised. The government has also slashed funding to essential treatment services, leaving thousands of people left at the mercy of a postcode lottery as to whether their local authorities will provide the support that they need.

The government must establish safer drug consumption rooms, scale-up access to naloxone, and allocate central funding to heroin-assisted treatment. Instead, it has opted to perpetuate criminalisation - an approach that *increases harm and causes deaths*”.

Deaths related to cocaine are at their highest since records began with 432 fatalities in 2017. This marks a 16% rise since 2016, and a staggering 200% increase since 2010. This may be due to the recent increase in powder cocaine use that was seemingly driven by higher purity and cheaper street prices. Whether it comes to reducing drug use, or reducing drug deaths, it is evident that the government is unable to achieve any of its key goals.

England and Wales have one of the highest rates of drug-related deaths in the EU – over 17 times higher than the rate of Portugal, which decriminalised all personal drug possession in 2001.

While the rate of drug-related deaths was higher among older people, there were 406 such deaths among people in the 20-29 age range in England and Wales in 2017. As a result, one in seven deaths of people in their twenties were registered as drug-related deaths.

The new data also shows that the rate of drug-related deaths is significantly higher in northern regions of England than elsewhere, while London's rate is significantly lower. The rate in the North East (83 per million deaths) is over three times higher than that of London (24 per million deaths).

People across the country are needlessly dying because of the government's ideological abstinence-focused approach and its refusal to implement evidence-based policies that have been tried and tested elsewhere.

Note to the editor:

[Release](#) is the UK's centre of expertise on drugs and drug laws, providing free and confidential specialist services to professionals, the public, and people who use drugs. Release also campaigns for the reform of UK drug policy, particularly the removal of criminal sanctions for possession offences, in order to bring about a fairer and more compassionate legal framework to managing drug use in our society.

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