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## **Number of drug-related deaths in England and Wales rises to highest on record, Government must declare public health emergency**

### **Deaths relating to MDMA, cocaine, and heroin highest on record**

LONDON (August 2, 2017) – Office for National Statistics (ONS) data released today shows 3,744 drug-related deaths registered in 2016 in England and Wales and a 44% increase on 2012 figures. It is the fourth year in a row that the ONS has registered an increase. 2016 is now the year with the highest number of registered drug-related deaths since records began. Increased mortality rates have been reported across all the main substances of use.

Deaths related to MDMA and cocaine are the highest since records began with 63 and 371 fatalities, recorded respectively. MDMA deaths have increased by 103% per cent and cocaine deaths by 167%, since 2012.

Release’s Executive Director, Niamh Eastwood, says:

“The government claims it wants to protect young people from the harms of drugs, yet its new Drug Strategy, released in early July, makes no reference to providing harm reduction services for people who use drugs recreationally. The government must fund the forensic testing of drugs, including at nightclubs and music festivals, so that people can be better informed of the purity and content of any pills or powder that they are taking. They must also consider reforming the laws so that people who use drugs are not treated as criminals, this acts as a barrier to seeking help. Harm reduction initiatives are the only way we can stem the flow of young people dying.”

Heroin and/or morphine deaths accounted for the majority of drug-related deaths, rising to 1,209 registered. These deaths have increased by 109% since 2012 when 579 were registered. Worryingly, there was also a significant increase in deaths related to pregabalin, a prescription drug - with a 2,675% increase from 4 deaths in 2012 to 111 in 2016. The number of fentanyl deaths were also the highest since records with 58 recorded in 2016, a 164% increase since 2012.

Eastwood comments that: “The rise in drug-related deaths is a national crisis that needs a nationally-coordinated response. The government has abrogated its responsibility by withdrawing investment from treatment services and perpetuating the failed policies that created this crisis. The Government’s new Drug Strategy continues to pursue an agenda focused on abstinence and ‘recovery’ – an approach driven by ideology rather than evidence. We expect that this approach will contribute to more needless deaths as it contains little reference to harm reduction provisions, such as those advocated by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD). The Government could take steps to prevent people dying from drug related causes but chooses to do nothing.”

In a December 2016 report, the ACMD made a series of recommendations to the government on how to reduce opioid-related deaths with well-evidenced harm reduction measures. The group said the government should invest in opioid substitution treatment (OST), scale up and ensure easier access to naloxone (an overdose antidote), establish medically-supervised drug consumption rooms (DCRs), and allocate central funding to heroin-assisted treatment (HAT). However the government has mostly disregarded these evidence-based recommendations. The new strategy makes no mention of HAT or DCRs, and seldom refers to harm reduction – aside from in relation to alcohol and tobacco.

The only way to save the lives of people who use drugs problematically is through policy reform. The government must immediately increase access to OST and establish state-funded DCRs and HAT to prevent a continued rise in opioid-related deaths.

People are dying needlessly because of the government's ideological approach to drug use and its obstinate unwillingness to acknowledge evidence-based approaches that would protect people's lives.

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**Note to the editor:**

[Release](#) is the UK 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.

**Contact:**

Niamh Eastwood – [niamh@release.org.uk](mailto:niamh@release.org.uk) - 07900 002 632

Avinash Tharoor – [avinash@release.org.uk](mailto:avinash@release.org.uk) - 07889 515 106