

Release

Drugs, The Law & Your Rights

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Drug-related deaths are once again the highest since records began, the Home Office must urgently reform UK drug policy to save lives

LONDON (August 03, 2022) – Office for National Statistics data released today shows 4,859 drug-related deaths registered in 2021 in England and Wales, a 6.2 per cent increase from 2020. Deaths involving drugs controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 are now 3.5 times higher than the number of deaths registered when records began in 1993. 2022 is now the year with the highest number of registered drug-related deaths since records began.

Opiates account for nearly three out of four deaths where an illegal drug was involved. Cocaine deaths are the highest on record, with 840 deaths recorded this year – seven times higher than ten years ago. Deaths involving benzodiazepines are also the highest on record, increasing 13 per cent on last year's figures from 476 deaths to 538 deaths. There has been an 88.3% rise in deaths involving a novel psychoactive substance since last year (258 in 2021, from 137 in 2020). The overwhelming majority of these deaths were due to accidental overdose.

Once again, deaths are highest in the North East of England where the rate of drug related death is 15.1 per 100,000 of the population. Blackpool has the highest fatality rate at 29.8 per 100,000 of the population for all drug related deaths, and 19.4 per 100,000 for deaths involving controlled drugs (Hartlepool is second highest with rates of 17.7 per 100,000 of the population, followed by Middlesbrough at 17.5 per 100,000).

Release's Executive Director, Niamh Eastwood, says:

"It is an utter disgrace that we are again talking about record breaking drug deaths. Every single one of these tragedies could have been avoided with the wilful implementation of evidence-led, UK-wide policy reform. Drug deaths are a public health emergency across the UK that can and must be adequately addressed. Government inaction is a political choice.

"Whilst the Government may be investing in drug treatment, drug deaths will continue to rise without commitment to serious policy reforms, eradicating the harms caused as a result of drug prohibition. The Home Office must allow overdose prevention facilities to be established immediately. We need safe supply of all controlled drugs, expanding substitute prescribing to other substances beyond opiates. Decriminalisation of drug possession – which would end the criminal sanctions for possession of drugs – must be core to any policy that seeks to protect the health and well-being of people who use drugs, from young people who are experimenting to those who use drugs to cope with trauma and mental health problems."

Overdose prevention facilities operate in several countries across the world, with some operating for over 40 years. The evidence from these sites demonstrate they have the capacity to reduce and reverse overdoses, improve public safety, improve the health of people who use drugs problematically and reduce high risk injecting behaviours. Many European countries that have

decriminalised drug possession offences – Germany, Spain, Italy, Portugal and Czechia – have much lower rates of drug related deaths. Portugal’s rate is 14 times lower than England and Wales, whilst Czechia’s is 16 times lower.

Eastwood comments that:

“The Home Office will often criticise the Scottish government for its high rates of overdose deaths, but they must also look at their own backyard. The tragic reality is that deaths in parts of the North East are almost as high as Scotland’s figures and are increasing year-on-year. Any Conservative leadership candidate talking about levelling-up needs to address the decade long impact of Conservative government austerity, as well as the legal and policy framework that is leading to the deaths of thousands of people across the UK. These statistics are people’s lives. Each person is someone’s daughter, son, brother or sister.”

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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 - 07900 002 632

[1] An Overdose Prevention Site is a facility that allows people to consume drugs in a safer environment under medical supervision. It also provides an opportunity for to reduce public consumption of drugs thereby reducing drug related litter. These sites are also called drug consumption rooms or safer injecting facilities.