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Number of drug-related deaths rises to highest on record, the UK Government must declare a public health emergency

Deaths relating to opiates, MDMA & cocaine are highest on record

LONDON (August 15, 2019) – Office for National Statistics data released today shows 4,359 drug poisoning (i.e. 'overdose') deaths registered in 2018 in England and Wales, of which over two thirds (2,917) related to 'drug misuse'¹. 2018 is now the year with the highest number of registered drug poisoning deaths since records began and, with a 16 per cent increase in drug poisoning deaths since last year, the highest year-on-year increase in deaths. The number of drug misuse deaths is over 3 times the number of such deaths registered when records began in 1993.

Increased overdose deaths have been reported across all the main substances of use, with over half of these deaths involving an opiate (2,208), such as heroin or methadone. Deaths related to MDMA and cocaine are the highest since records began with 92 and 637 fatalities, recorded respectively. MDMA deaths have increased by 84 per cent and cocaine deaths by 158 per cent, since 2014.

Drug-related deaths are not just a Scottish problem. The rate of drug misuse deaths was as high as 51 per million in the population across England and Wales. The North East has significantly higher rates of drug misuse deaths, with 96 per million such deaths registered in 2018, which has more than doubled since 2008. Old seaside towns have also continued to see high rates of drug misuse deaths. Once again, Blackpool had the highest rate of drug misuse deaths in England and Wales, with 177 deaths per million in the population. Blackpool is also [the most deprived](#) local authority area in England.

Release's Executive Director, Niamh Eastwood, says:

"People are dying and government inaction is contributing to these deaths. For the last 7 years we have seen drug-related deaths increase year on year and every year we have called on the Government to take action, to scale up funding for drug treatment, to support overdose prevention sites, to fund drug checking facilities, and to expand heroin assisted treatment. Each year they have ignored us, continuing to do the same whilst people die – if the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister continue to ignore these calls then they will continue to be responsible for the deaths of thousands of people every year."

Overdose prevention sites² operate in several countries across the world, with some operating for over 40 years. The evidence from the sites demonstrate they have the capacity to reduce and reverse overdoses, improve public safety, improve the health of people who use drugs and reduce risky injecting behaviour.

¹ Drug misuse deaths are defined by the ONS as deaths: where the underlying cause is drug abuse or drug dependence; or deaths where the underlying cause is drug poisoning and where any of the substances controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 are involved.

² 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.

Eastwood comments that: *“Beyond the need for funding in the treatment system and the scaling up of harm reduction responses, we cannot ignore the impact that austerity measures have had on people in some of the most deprived areas of the country. The removal of proper social safety nets as we have witnessed with benefit cuts and the introduction of universal credit are also significant contributors to these appalling statistics. These statistics are people’s lives, each person is someone’s child, someone’s parent, someone’s sibling.*

The Government must urgently act to end the criminalisation of people who use by decriminalising drug possession offences. Portugal ended criminal sanctions for drug possession in 2001, its drug-related death rate is 4 per million of the population. The Czech Republic decriminalised possession of all drugs in 2010, it also has a drug-related death rate of 4 per million. Compare these figures to the UK: 74 per million of the population has died as a result of government failures. These deaths are avoidable but this crisis will not abate unless we scale up harm reduction initiatives and pursue policies based on evidence rather than ideology and moralism.

We understand that the Government’s response today to these avoidable deaths has been to point to the independent review into drugs and serious violence that is currently underway. Yet, the Government’s own advisory body – the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs – [gave advice 3 years ago now](#) on how to prevent more of these deaths. It is tragic and hugely irresponsible that this expert advice has been largely ignored by central government.

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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.

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