



Overdose Victims and the Criminal Justice System 2017 Report

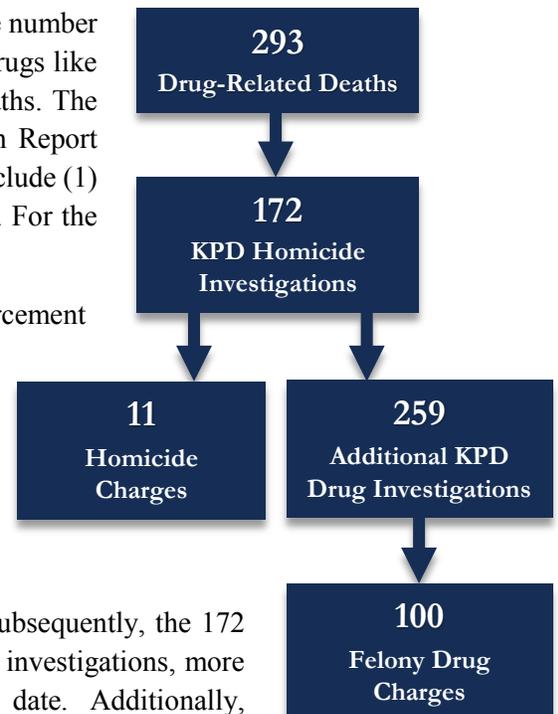
To address the rising number of drug-related deaths in Knox County, District Attorney General Charme Allen helped spearhead the Drug Related Death Task Force in 2017 with Appalachia HIDTA, Knox County Regional Forensic Center, Knox County Sheriff's Office, Knoxville Police Department, and United States Drug Enforcement Administration. Through this inter-agency effort, data is shared to reduce the number of drug overdoses and, ultimately, stop traffickers from supplying dangerous drugs in our community. The District Attorney's Office is committed to attacking our community's drug problem from all angles with a "Tough on Crime, Smart on Prevention" approach. This report outlines the Drug Related Death Task Force's progress and provides additional data relating to individuals who fatally overdosed and interacted with the criminal justice system.

TOUGH ON CRIME: *Task Force Tactics and Results*



In 2017, nearly 300 people died in Knox County due to a drug overdose. The number of overdoses countywide has increased 33 percent in a single year. Lethal drugs like Fentanyl continue to be the most frequently found drug in drug-related deaths. The Knox County Regional Forensic Center's most recent Drug Related Death Report indicates that the top four drugs found through autopsies in Knox County, include (1) Fentanyl & Analogues, (2) Methamphetamine, (3) Cocaine, and (4) Heroin. For the full report visit the Knox County Regional Forensic Center's website.¹

The Drug Related Death Task Force initiated a concerted effort for law enforcement and other community agencies to treat overdose deaths as criminal investigations. By initially treating the location of a fatal drug overdose as a crime scene, investigators are able to swiftly collect evidence, such as cell phones, that is necessary in tracking down dangerous drug dealers operating in Knox County. In 2017, the Drug Related Death Task Force opened 172 homicide investigations originating from a fatal overdose. For the first time in the history of the Knox County District Attorney's Office, these investigations led to 11 drug dealers being charged with homicide. Subsequently, the 172 homicide investigations led to 259 additional investigations. Out of the 259 investigations, more than 100 people have been charged with felony drug offenses to date. Additionally, approximately 50 percent of nuisance injunctions served by the District Attorney's Office were investigated by the task force after the task force became operational.



As a result of the task force treating overdose deaths as criminal investigations, the District Attorney General's Felony Drug Unit caseload increased by 118 percent. The new avenues for data sharing and collaboration created by the task force are helping to stem the drug epidemic at the street level by shutting down supply sources and hotspots known for drug activity. By collectively reviewing and investigating drug-related deaths, a significant amount of drug-related crime which otherwise would have fallen through the cracks is being detected and is resulting in successful prosecution.

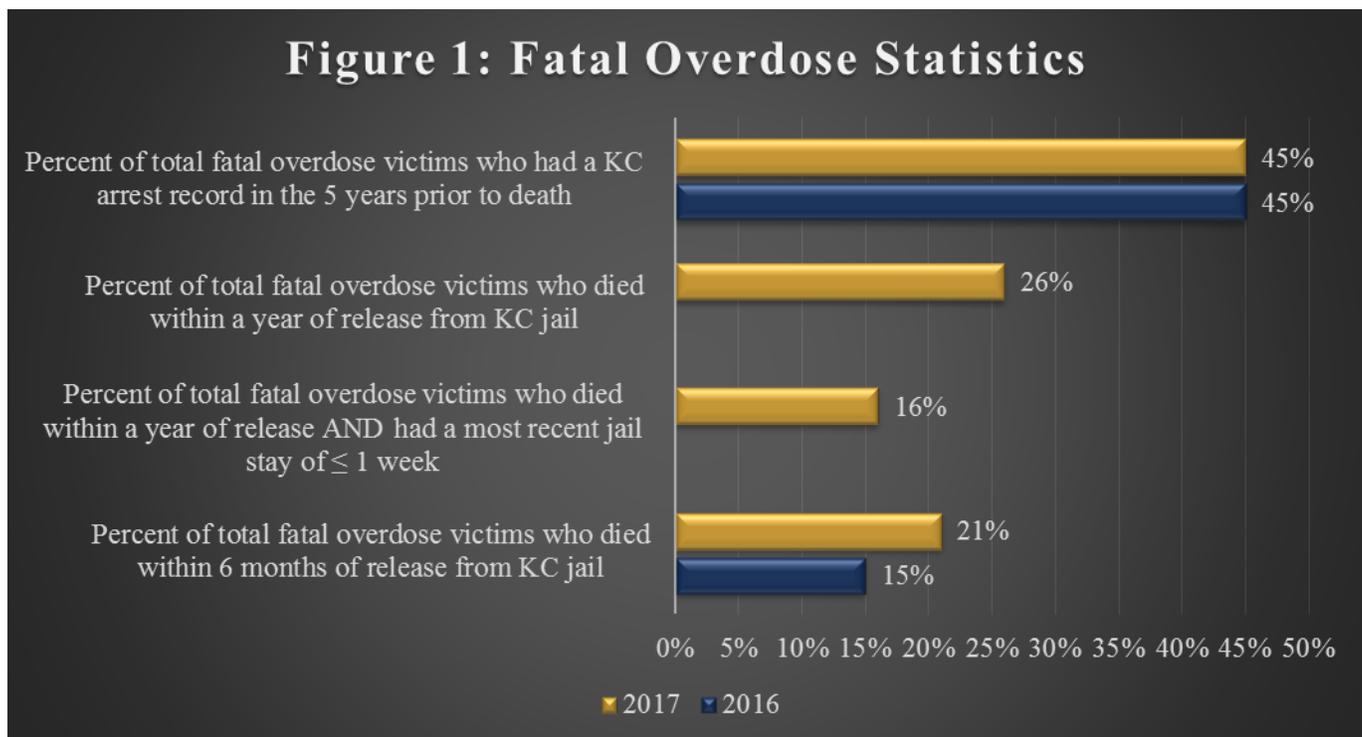
¹ [Knox County Regional Forensic Center, 2017 Drug Related Death Report.](#)

SMART ON PREVENTION: *Overdose Victims and the Criminal Justice System*

While the Drug Related Death Task Force investigations and prosecutions are helping address the supply of drugs in our community, it is also necessary to address the demand for drugs. Intervening through or within the justice system is a proven, cost-effective method of reducing recidivism rates and increasing recovery rates for individuals with substance use disorders², and as this report suggests, it can save lives.

After a two-year collaborative effort, the District Attorney's Office has gathered substantial data that was never collected or analyzed prior to the task force. Further analysis of the data shared among the task force partners reveals staggering connections between individuals who overdose and the criminal justice system, supporting the need for prevention and intervention within the system.

The following data sets detail connections and intersect points between law enforcement and individuals who fatally overdosed in Knox County. Below is a table comparing 2017 statistics to 2016 statistics. The Knox County District Attorney General's 2016 report on overdoses can be found at knoxcounty.org/dag.³



As shown in Figure 1, the same proportion of people who fatally overdosed and died in 2016 and 2017 had an arrest record in the five years prior to their death. However, the percent of people who died soon after release from Knox County jail increased. Not only is the number of fatal overdoses increasing in Knox County, the proportion of those who have been recently released from jail is also increasing.

Additional data from fatal overdoses in 2017 revealed that more than a quarter of those who died had been released from jail sometime in the year before their death. The majority of those had most recent jail stays of seven days or less, indicating that many people who fatally overdose and are involved in the criminal justice system have short-term jail stays.

² Criminal justice continuum for opioid users at risk of overdose. Brinkley-Rubinstein et al., 2018.

³ [2016 Fatal Overdose Victims and the Criminal Justice System](#).

The high number of people who fatally overdosed and had recent contact with law enforcement or the court system suggests an opportunity for intervention. There are many intersects that are worth exploring further, especially for potential partnerships beyond law enforcement. Figure 2 shows various intervention points and their rationale based on the collected data.^{4 5}

Figure 2:



As demonstrated, the criminal justice system frequently interacts with those who are at risk of overdosing on drugs. The system was designed to control and prevent crime; it was not designed to treat addiction. Yet, our jails and courtrooms are overrun with people who have substance use disorders. Data collected and analyzed by the Drug Related Death Task Force illuminates that it will take more than incarceration to eradicate drug abuse and its consequences in our community. Strategic prevention and intervention measures, in addition to law enforcement, should be utilized to reduce crime, recidivism, and overdose deaths in our community. General Allen and her office will continue to be “Tough on Crime, Smart on Prevention,” in order to keep our community safe and free of drug misuse through prevention, treatment and resource intervention, and law enforcement tactics.

⁴ Fazel, Yoon, and Hayes; 2017 (likelihood of SUDs in incarcerated people). Brinkley-Rubenstein et al., 2018 (opportunities to receive treatment). Binswanger et al., 2007 (national data about post-release vulnerability).

⁵ Information on nonfatal overdoses courtesy of the Knox County District Attorney General’s Office. The DA’s Office has access to records of nonfatal overdoses in Knox County that were responded to by law enforcement.