

Fatal Overdose Victims and the Criminal Justice System - 2018 Report -

From the desk of District Attorney General Charme P. Allen:

When I took office in 2014, our community was starting to feel the irreversible side effects of the opioid crisis in our community – overdose deaths. As the Knox County District Attorney and as a career prosecutor, I know substance misuse is not new to our community. However, the scope of the opioid epidemic is unlike anything we have experienced.

In 2017, I helped create the Drug Related Death Task Force with Appalachia HIDTA, Knox County Regional Forensic Center, Knox County Sheriff's Office, Knoxville Police Department, and United States Drug Enforcement Administration to reduce the rising number of drug-related deaths in Knox County. The task force has since grown to include other East Tennessee agencies. This partnership not only strengthened law enforcement's ability to stop dangerous drug traffickers from operating in our community but also created new avenues to gather, share, and analyze data. For the past three years, data analyzed by the District Attorney's Office has revealed connections between individuals who overdose and the criminal justice system. This data has consistently demonstrated an opportunity for prevention, intervention, and treatment either within or in step with the criminal justice system. This data has also helped other agencies in our community obtain additional resources to fight this epidemic. The criminal justice system was designed to control and prevent crime; it was not designed to treat addiction, which means we must work together to find ways to be tough on crime and smart on prevention.

In partnership with the community, we have experienced success in recent years by reducing access to dangerous drugs and the illegal distribution of prescription drugs. We have introduced innovative prevention initiatives and jail-based and community-based treatment opportunities. These efforts have taught us a great deal, and this information will help us continue to reduce the impact of substance misuse in our community. Together, we can reduce crime and victimization, and we can reclaim lives not yet lost to the drug epidemic.

The following statistics detail connections between law enforcement and individuals who passed away from a drug overdose in 2018 and includes data from 2016 and 2017 for comparison. My office will use this data to guide our current initiatives and next steps. We invite you to do the same.

Thank you for your desire to create a safer and healthier community!

Charme P. Allen

District Attorney General

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6th Judicial District



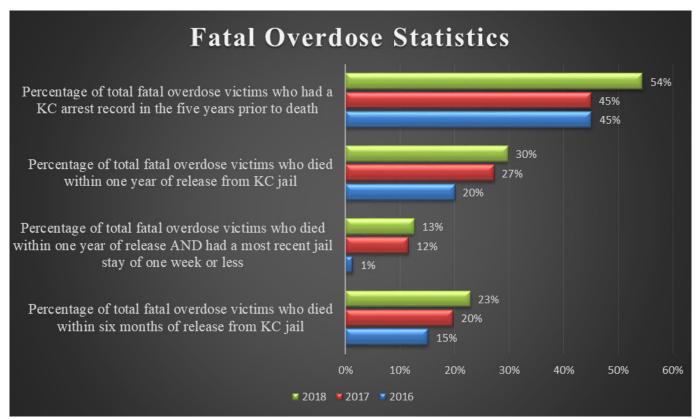
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In 2018, 325 people died in Knox County due to a drug overdose. The number of overdoses countywide has increased by 3.2% from 2017 to 2018, significantly less than the 41% increase from 2016 to 2017. Lethal drugs like Fentanyl continue to be the most 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) Heroin, and (4) Cocaine. For the full report, visit the Knox County Regional Forensic Center's website.

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The total number of fatal overdose cases reviewed by the District Attorney General's Office and the Drug Related Death Task Force in 2018 is 294. This number excludes fatal overdose cases if the cause of death is alcohol intoxication or suicide, or if the incident originated from outside of Knox County.

The following data details contact between local law enforcement and individuals who fatally overdosed in Knox County (KC). The table below includes 2016, 2017, and 2018 statistics.



Note: The algorithm for calculating the fatal overdose statistics was revised for the 2018 report. This caused the yearly statistics from previous reports to slightly fluctuate.



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As shown, more than half of people who fatally overdosed had an arrest record in the five years prior to their death, representing a 9% increase from 2017 to 2018. Additional analyzed data from fatal overdoses in 2016, 2017, and 2018 revealed that not only did the number of fatal overdoses increase in Knox County, the proportion of those who were recently released from jail also continued to increase.

In 2018, 30 percent of those who died were released from jail sometime in the year before their death. In 2017 and 2018, nearly half of those individuals had a most recent jail stay 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.

The high number of people who fatally overdosed and have recent interactions with law enforcement suggests an opportunity for intervention. 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 disorders, and as this report continues to suggest, it can save lives.²

To find the Knox County District Attorney General's Office previous reports, visit knoxcounty.org/dag.³

¹ Knox County Regional Forensic Center, 2018 Drug Related Death Statistics.

² 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).

³ Knox County District Attorney General's Office, Suspected Overdose Death Statistics.