



## San Francisco Department of Public Health

Grant Colfax, MD  
Director of Health

City and County of San Francisco  
London N. Breed  
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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Fentanyl Drove Steep Increase in Overdose Deaths in San Francisco in 2019**

*San Francisco Department of Public Health releases verified data confirming earlier projections*

Community prevention work included at least 2,600 life-saving overdose reversals

SAN FRANCISCO, CA – The San Francisco Department of Public Health today released data showing that the very strong opioid fentanyl contributed to a sharp increase in overdose mortality in the City in 2019.

The [annual report](#) on substance use trends also shows that methamphetamine continues to be a factor in a majority of overdose deaths.

“Long before COVID-19, another epidemic was profoundly affecting the lives of people in San Francisco,” said Dr. Grant Colfax, Director of Health. “As we grieve the losses of 2019, we also celebrate the compassion and decisive, life-saving action of community members, first responders and health care providers who work every day to prevent and reverse drug overdose.”

In all, 441 San Franciscans were lost to overdose in 2019. At the same time, community members reversed at least 2,600 overdoses with the life-saving opioid antidote naloxone, and San Francisco paramedics responded to nearly 2,000 overdose incidents in which naloxone was used.

Also in 2019, while fewer people were admitted into residential substance use treatment, San Francisco saw more people using medications such as buprenorphine to treat their substance use and prevent overdose.

The highest rates of overdose mortality in 2019 were among men, people in their 50s, and Black/African American residents of San Francisco. Black/African American San Franciscans have higher rates of overdose death and higher rates of admission to substance use treatment programs for almost every class of substance use.

Based on preliminary data for 2020, these trends are expected to continue. The San Francisco Department of Public Health (DPH) is developing a new set of metrics to guide the City’s health leaders in a data-driven response to this worsening crisis, with a particular focus on reducing the burden of drug use and overdose mortality on Black/African American San Franciscans.

“San Francisco has many innovative ways to care for people who use drugs, but no American city has been able to withstand the arrival of fentanyl without increases like these,” said Dr. Phillip O.



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Coffin, Director of Substance Use Research at DPH and lead author of the annual report. “We are saving lives, preventing disease, and helping people access treatment. We also know that we can do more, and these data show us where we can target our efforts to make the greatest impact.”

DPH expects that Mental Health SF, the comprehensive package of reforms passed in December 2019, will be an important tool in preventing overdose and lowering barriers to substance use treatment. DPH is planning for implementation of Mental Health SF, which includes drug sobering centers, expanded buprenorphine access, street crisis response teams staffed with behavioral health clinicians and peers, and enhanced care coordination. Funding for Mental Health SF is largely contingent on voter approval of a business tax measure on the November 2020 ballot.

DPH strongly supports the creation of overdose prevention sites and will continue advocating at the state level to bring these life-saving programs to San Francisco.

### **Harm reduction and treatment efforts**

DPH also will build upon existing programs that save lives, reduce the harm of drug use, and help people access treatment, recovery and wellness.

DPH funds expanded naloxone distribution and training through the Drug Overdose Prevention and Education (DOPE) Project. In 2019, the program furnished more than 47,000 doses of injectable naloxone and more than 5,000 nasal naloxone kits in San Francisco. The DOPE Project has trained more than 15,000 San Franciscans in how to identify and respond to overdose.

“People who use drugs, people experiencing homelessness, and frontline harm reduction workers successfully reversed at least 2,600 overdoses in 2019 and more than 1,600 so far in 2020,” said Kristen Marshall, DOPE Project Manager at the Harm Reduction Coalition. “Even during a pandemic, this community is saving lives and working to address the root causes of overdose like homelessness, poverty and systemic racism. Though our city's overdose death numbers have been steadily increasing since fentanyl became a staple in our street drug supply, it is because of the work of people who use drugs that more people survive their overdoses in San Francisco than pass away from them.”

San Francisco's overdose prevention efforts also include:

- DPH's own Community Behavioral Health Services Pharmacy dispensed approximately 900 naloxone kits in 2019. The pharmacy, which also has offered buprenorphine services since 2003, will expand its hours under Mental Health SF.
- San Francisco has led the country in making the opioid treatment medications methadone and buprenorphine available in clinics, hospitals and jails. DPH Behavioral Health Services is innovating with telehealth to expand the low-barrier access to buprenorphine that was pioneered by DPH Street Medicine with people experiencing homelessness. This is a key component of San Francisco's overdose prevention strategy.



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- Since 2010, San Francisco has significantly reduced the number of prescriptions for opiates written by health care providers and the amount of opiates in each prescription by 40%.
- The Addiction Care Team at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital is expanding access to addiction treatment in the hospital. In 2019, its first year, this team served 475 patients and has almost surpassed that number in the first six months of 2020.
- Project FRIEND, in which San Francisco paramedics give out naloxone to anyone at risk of overdose or witnessing one, has distributed more than 1,300 naloxone kits since it started in September 2019. Project FRIEND also partners with the Addiction Care Team at ZSFG in connecting patients to long-term harm reduction and medication-assisted treatment programs.
- [FindTreatmentSF.org](https://www.findtreatmentsf.org/), a DPH website launched in 2019 and updated daily, allows the public and health care providers to see where residential substance use treatment beds are available citywide.
- The DPH Center on Substance Use and Health conducts pharmacologic and behavioral trials to support people who use opioids and stimulants. It serves as a clinical trial site for medications including mirtazapine, which shows some benefit for people who use methamphetamine. Its REBOOT trial of motivational interviewing for opioid overdose prevention continues.

### Annual report

The [DPH Center on Substance Use and Health](#) prepares annual reports on substance use in San Francisco as part of the National Drug Early Warning System. San Francisco is one of [12 sentinel sites](#) across the country monitoring overdose mortality, treatment admissions, hospitalizations and other indicators of drug use patterns.

Overall, overdose deaths in San Francisco began a notable rise in the second half of 2018. The city saw 222 overdose deaths in 2017, and 259 in 2018. Overdose deaths continued to increase in 2019, to 441.

In 2016, 22 people in San Francisco died of fentanyl overdose, double the number in 2015. Fentanyl overdose deaths rose to 36 in 2017, then to 89 in 2018 and 239 in 2019.

In 2016, 88 people in San Francisco died of methamphetamine overdose, compared to 81 in 2015. Methamphetamine overdose deaths rose to 99 in 2017, then to 126 in 2018. In 2019, 258 overdose deaths involved methamphetamine. More than half of these also involved fentanyl.

Disparities in drug use and overdose deaths by race and ethnicity persist and in some cases worsened in 2019. Most striking, in 2019 the opiate overdose death rate per 100,000 was four times higher for Black/African Americans compared to other racial groups.



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To compile these annual reports, the San Francisco Department of Public Health extracts data from state records which reflect months of toxicology testing, investigation and verification.

The Health Department also regularly collects and analyzes data from multiple sources on substance use in the city, in order to allocate resources and invest in prevention, harm reduction and treatment programming that reflects current needs.

### **Safety tips**

All consumers of prescription opioids and street drugs should carry naloxone for their own safety and the safety of others. Naloxone is covered by Medi-Cal, Healthy San Francisco, and most health plans. It can be furnished by pharmacists registered to do so without a prescription. Naloxone can be obtained from the CBHS Pharmacy at 1380 Howard St. on a walk-in basis with no prescription required, Monday-Friday 9 a.m.-3:30 p.m.

Naloxone and other harm reduction supplies also are available at no cost at these locations:

- Glide Harm Reduction Services, 311 Ellis St.: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. and Wednesday, 9 a.m.-3 p.m.
- Sixth Street Harm Reduction Center, 117 Sixth St. (@ Minna): Monday-Friday, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. and Saturday, 4-8 p.m.
- San Francisco Drug Users Union, 170 Turk St.: Sunday-Thursday, 12:30-7 p.m.
- Homeless Youth Alliance, 558 Clayton St. (@Haight): Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 5:30-7:30 p.m.
- Hospitality House Tenderloin Self-Help Center, 146 Leavenworth St.: Monday-Friday, 8 a.m.-5 p.m.
- Tom Waddell Clinic, 230 Golden Gate Ave.: Monday-Friday, 8 a.m.-5 p.m.

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