

Health x Housing Lab Research Summary: Homelessness and Mortality

Several studies have looked at overdose and other causes of mortality among people experiencing homelessness. Here, we summarize two recent studies from Boston, MA and Los Angeles County, CA.

The first study (Fine et al. 2022) examined trends in overdose mortality among people using Health Care for the Homeless services in Boston from 2003 to 2017.

KEY FINDINGS:

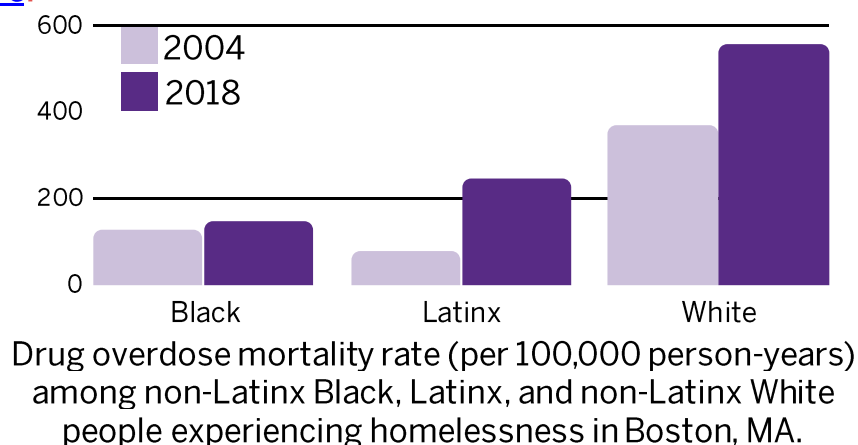
- Drug overdose caused nearly 1 in 4 deaths. Drug overdose-related mortality increased by 81% between 2004 and 2018.
- Over 90% of overdose deaths involved opioids. Many of these deaths also involved other drugs (polysubstance use), most commonly cocaine.
- People experiencing homelessness were 12 times more likely to die from drug overdose than the general adult population in Massachusetts.
- Drug overdose mortality patterns varied based on race, ethnicity, and gender. Since 2010, Black and Latinx individuals have experienced faster relative increases in drug overdose mortality compared with White individuals, following national trends.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

The authors of this study suggest that improving access to supervised injection facilities, fentanyl testing strips, naloxone, and other opioid overdose prevention resources will help reduce mortality among people experiencing homelessness. Health x Housing Lab Director Dr. Kelly Doran gave additional recommendations in a commentary on the study, available [here](#).



1 in 4 deaths among people experiencing homelessness in Boston were caused by opioid overdose.



The second study (Nicholas et al. 2021) presented mortality rates among people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County, California between 2015 and 2019, using local homeless services authority and medical examiner data.

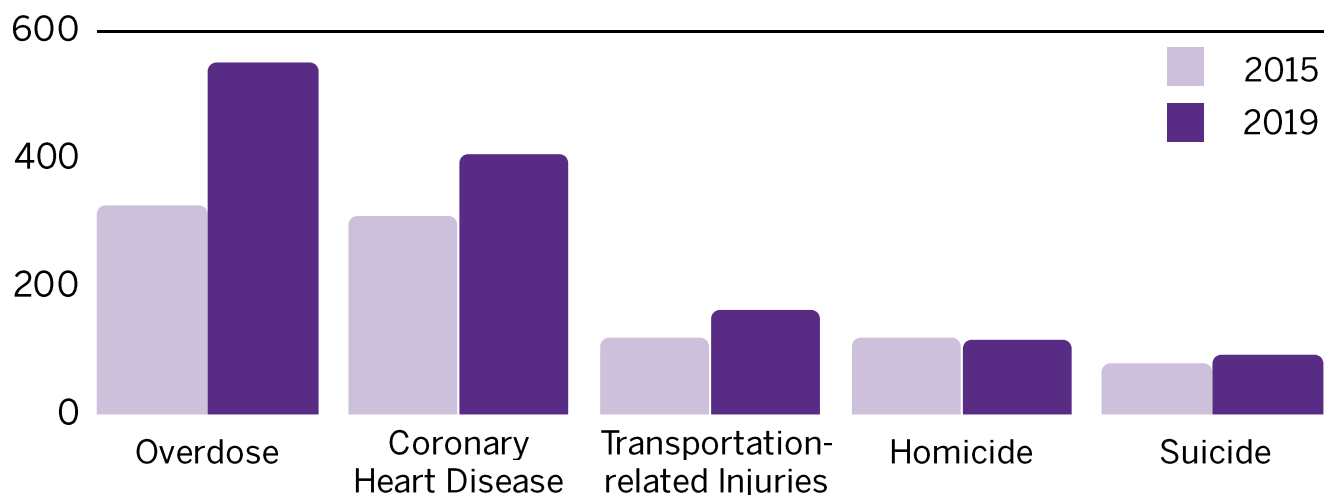
KEY FINDINGS:

- Between 2015 and 2019, the yearly number of deaths among people experiencing homelessness nearly doubled from 741 to 1267.
- Deaths increased more among females than males from 2015 to 2019. Black people experiencing homelessness had the largest increase in mortality (40%) from 2015 to 2019, but White people experiencing homelessness still had the highest mortality rates overall.
- The top five causes of death were drug overdose, coronary artery disease, traffic injury, homicide, and suicide.
- Drug overdose deaths have increased over time. In 2019, about 1 in 4 deaths were caused by overdose.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

The authors state that their model for calculating mortality rates among people experiencing homelessness can be applied in different counties. Counties can then use this data to help develop programs that address root causes of mortality.

Crude Death Rate* by Cause of Death Among People Experiencing Homelessness in LA County, 2015 and 2019



$$\text{Crude Death Rate} = \frac{\text{Total Number of Deaths}}{\text{Total Population}} * 100,000$$

Reference: Nicholas W, Greenwell L, Henwood BF, Simon P. Using Point-in-Time Homeless Counts to Monitor Mortality Trends Among People Experiencing Homelessness in Los Angeles County, California, 2015–2019. *Am J Public Health*. 2021 Dec;111(12):2212–2222. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2021.306502. PMID: 34878861; PMCID: PMC8667842. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306502>

