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Drug deaths: England and Wales see highest number since records began

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Nearly 4400 drug poisoning deaths were registered in England and Wales in 2019, the highest number since records began in 1993, a report from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has shown.¹

While the numbers have only slightly increased since 2018 (4359 deaths v 4393), there has been a 52% increase in drug related deaths in the past 10 years.

Two thirds of the deaths in 2019 were related to drug misuse, with the rate of these deaths reaching 50.4 deaths per million people.

The ONS figures, published 14 October, reported that the north east of England had a statistically significantly higher rate of deaths relating to drug misuse than all other English regions (95.0 deaths per million people). The east of England had the lowest rate (33.6 deaths per million people).

Males accounted for two thirds of drug poisoning deaths in 2019, or 2968 of 4393 registered deaths, consistent with previous years.

The report also highlighted that while there were no statistically significant changes to age standardised rates of any specific drug mentioned on the death certificate between 2018 and 2019, deaths involving cocaine increased for the eighth successive year, by 7.7% for male deaths and by 26.5% for female deaths.

“In the past decade, rates of drug poisoning deaths have been higher in the most deprived areas of England and Wales compared with the least; this is particularly the case among those aged in their forties where rates reach peaks that are at least 5.5 times higher in the most deprived areas,” the report continued.

Niamh Eastwood, executive director of the drugs charity Release, said, “People are dying and government inaction is contributing to these deaths. In the past 12 months, two parliamentary select committees—the Health and Social Care Select Committee and the Scottish Affairs Select Committee—have called for drug policy reform in the UK in order to tackle drug related deaths, citing the need for investment in treatment and harm reduction, supporting calls for overdose prevention sites, and calling for a review of the law to end criminal sanctions for possession offences.

“If the home secretary and the prime minister continue to ignore these calls they will continue to be responsible for the deaths of thousands of people every year. It is time to stop playing politics and listen to the evidence.”

¹ ONS. Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales: 2019 registrations. www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsrelatedtodrugpoisoninginenglandandwales/2019registrations.