

ILLINOIS OPIOID OVERDOSE EPIDEMIC DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Illinois is experiencing both an opioid overdose epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic. The numbers of fatal opioid overdoses have increased since 2019 with treatment and harm reduction services complicated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The goal of this publication is to provide a brief update on the state of the opioid epidemic in Illinois during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2020 fatality data are provisional, and numbers may change as cases are reviewed and only available through the third quarter of 2020.

**Overdose Deaths**

The numbers of opioid overdose deaths in Q1-Q3 increased 36% compared to Q1-Q3 in 2019 (Fig. 1) with the highest number of deaths occurring in May 2020. It is important to note that the numbers of deaths have increased since the summer of 2019, and the number of fatalities in April and May of 2020 were higher than previously observed (Fig. 1). The number of deaths decreased in the following months (June – Sept) to 2019 and early 2020 levels. Additionally, the increases observed in May 2019 and 2020 were not present in previous years. Instead, the months with the highest numbers of overdose fatalities have spanned seasons.

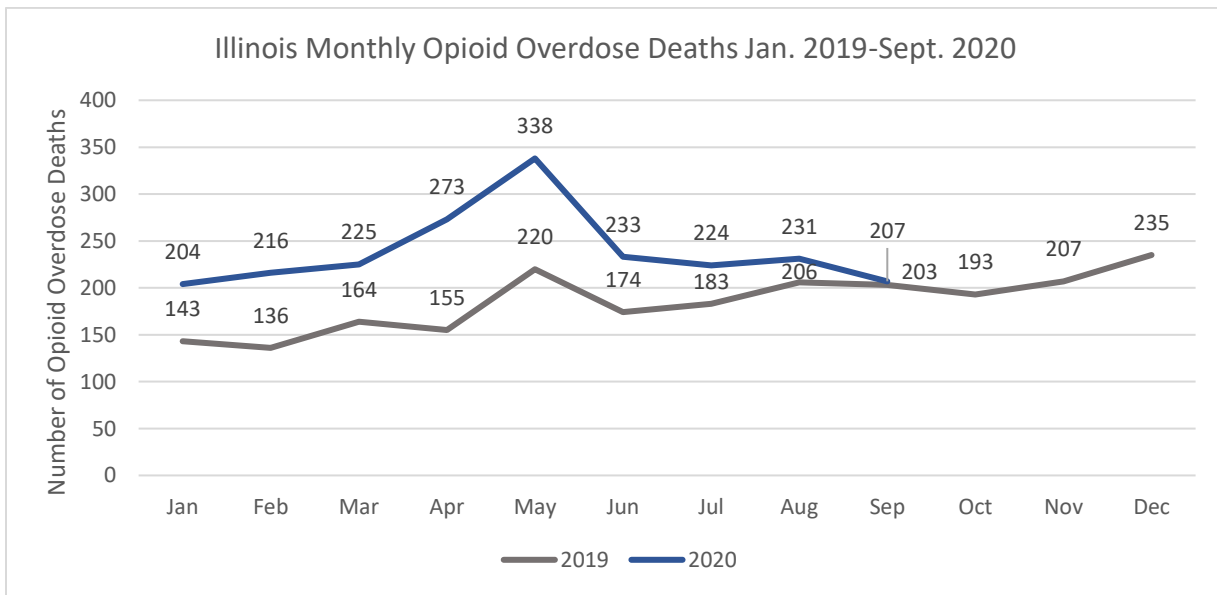


Figure 1. Monthly opioid overdose deaths for 2019 and Q1-Q3 2020. 2020 fatality data are provisional and available through Q3. Source: Illinois Vital Records System

## Non-Fatal Overdoses

The near-real time reporting of opioid overdose-related emergency department (ED) visits and emergency medical services (EMS) encounters allowed for current data to be reported. The annual number of opioid overdose-related ED visits increased 16.8% and EMS encounters increased 20.9% in 2020 compared to 2019 (Fig. 2). The trend for overdoses had increased since 2019, with the peak for ED visits, EMS encounters, and fatalities in May 2020. Since then, monthly totals have trended downwards.

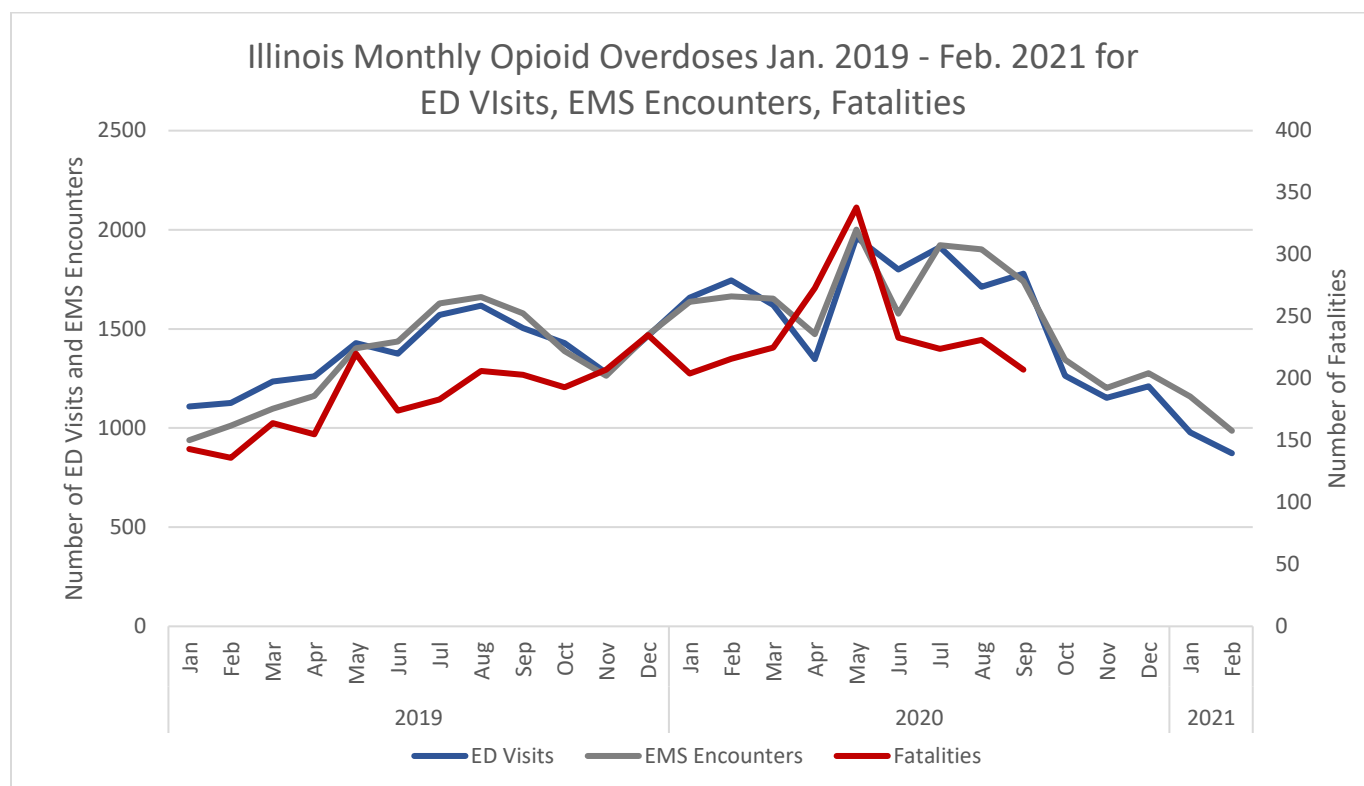


Figure 2. Monthly opioid overdose-related ED visits, EMS encounters, and fatalities for 2019-Feb 2021. 2020 fatality data are provisional and available through Q3. Source: Illinois Syndromic Surveillance Data in BioSense Platform, Illinois Vital Statistics, and IDPH Division of EMS and Highway Safety

In 2020, monthly opioid overdose-related ED visits declined in the spring and fall of 2020 when COVID-19 cases were increasing. As COVID-19 activity declined from May-September, opioid-overdose trends increased. During the March-April 2020 increase in COVID-like illness (CLI) visits, opioid overdose-related ED visits declined by 22% before increasing 45% in May. As CLI surged in October, opioid overdose-related visits again declined by 45% from a September high through January 2021 (Fig. 3). Data from syndromic surveillance is provisional.

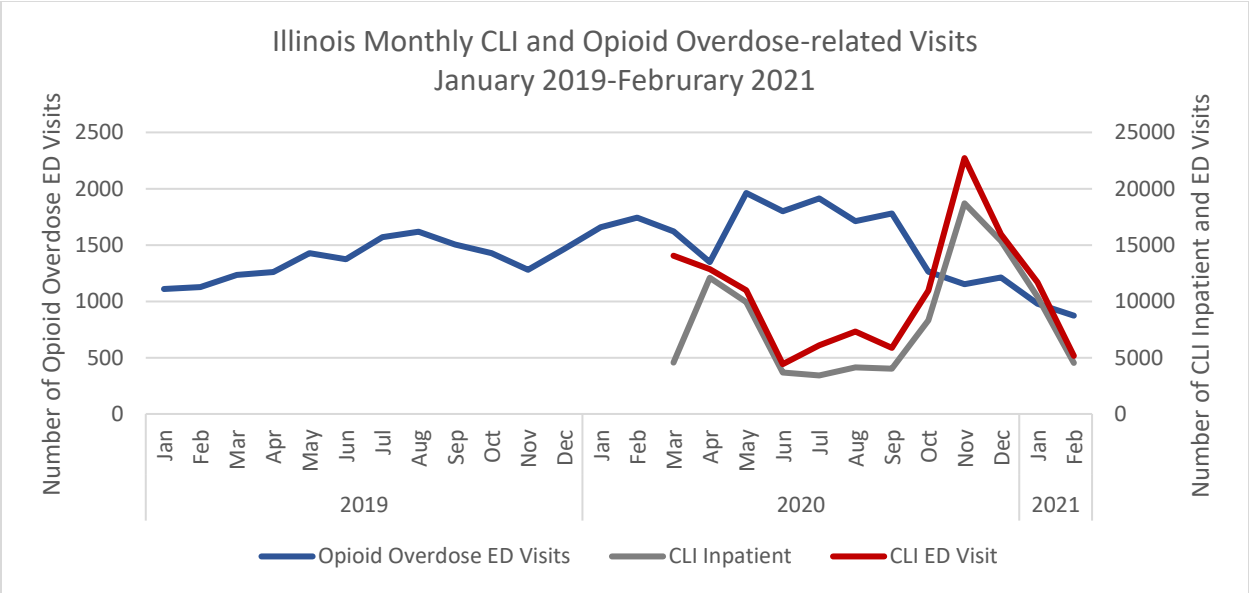


Figure 3. Monthly ED visits for opioid overdose and COVID-like illness (CLI) 2019-2021. Source: Illinois Syndromic Surveillance Data in BioSense Platform

**Urban-Rural Distribution of Overdose Deaths**

County groups have been categorized by population density and rate of growth and placed into four groups: rural, small urban, suburban, and urban<sup>1</sup>. The fatality rate for Q1-Q3 of 2020 has increased across all groups when compared to Q1-Q3 of 2019 (Fig. 4). The urban county group had the largest increase at 55%. The next largest increase was in the rural county grouping at 39%. Small urban and suburban county groups both increased by 11% (Fig. 4).

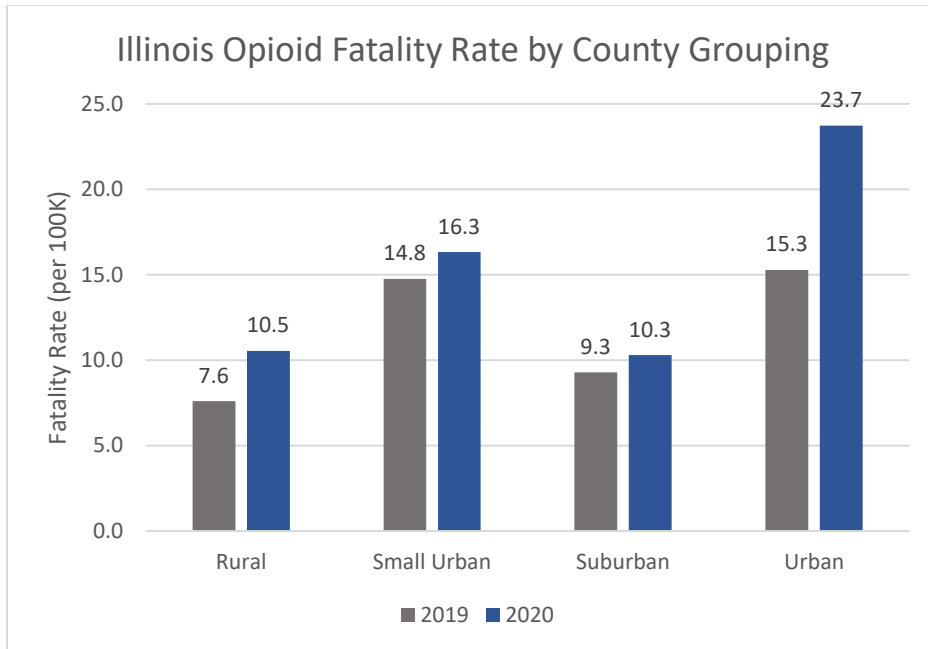


Figure 4. Fatality Rate per 100,000 population based upon county groups: rural, small urban, suburban, and urban, Q1-Q3 2020. 2020 fatality data are provisional. Source: Illinois Vital Records System

### **Demographics of Overdose Deaths**

In Q1-Q3 of 2020, the age-specific fatality rates demonstrated a marked disparity (Fig. 5). The rate of opioid overdose fatalities disproportionately occurred in the non-Hispanic (NH) Black or African American population in the 45-64 age range. In fact, the highest fatality rate in each age group occurred in the NH Black or African American population, with the exception of the 25-34 age group, where the NH White population had the highest fatality rate.

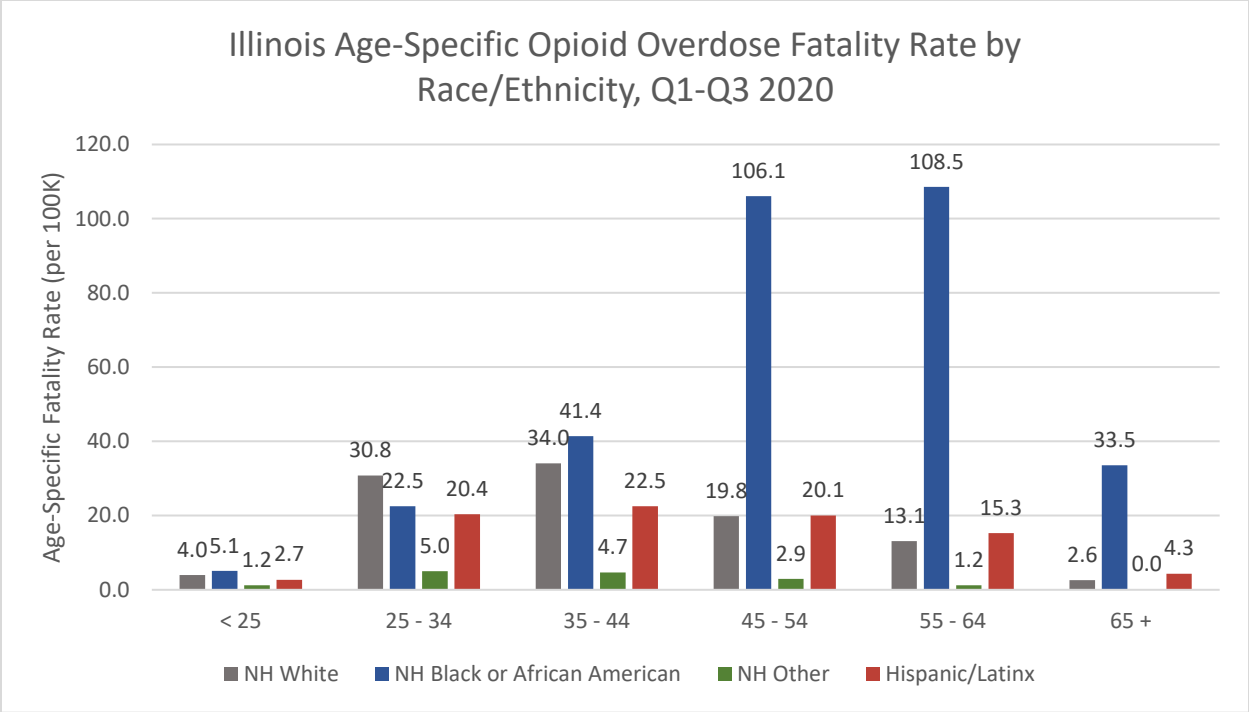


Figure 5. Age-specific rate of opioid overdose fatalities by race/ethnicity for Q1-Q3 of 2020. 2020 fatality data are provisional. Source: Illinois Vital Records System

Continuing reporting, updates, and information may be found on the IDPH website at <http://dph.illinois.gov/opioids/home> and <https://idph.illinois.gov/OpioidDataDashboard/>

If you or someone you know is struggling with substance use disorder, help is available. Call 833-234-6343, text “HELP” to 833234, or visit [helplineil.org](http://helplineil.org) to chat or find more information on treatment and harm reduction services.

**References**

1. Illinois State Cancer Registry. Cancer Incidence Public Dataset (21<sup>st</sup> edition). Illinois Department of Public Health, pp 24-29. <http://www.idph.state.il.us/cancer/14/READMEV21.pdf>