

Drug-Related Overdose Deaths among Veterans in California, 2022–2023

Key Points

- Veterans represented 5.3% of all state overdose deaths in 2023.
- There was a 5.8% increase in drug-related California Veteran overdose deaths from 2022 to 2023.
- Among all California Veteran drug-related overdose deaths in 2023, fentanyl was involved in 51.6% and psychostimulants with abuse potential were involved in 54.6% of deaths.
- A majority of California Veteran drug-related overdose deaths were among non-Hispanic Whites and males.

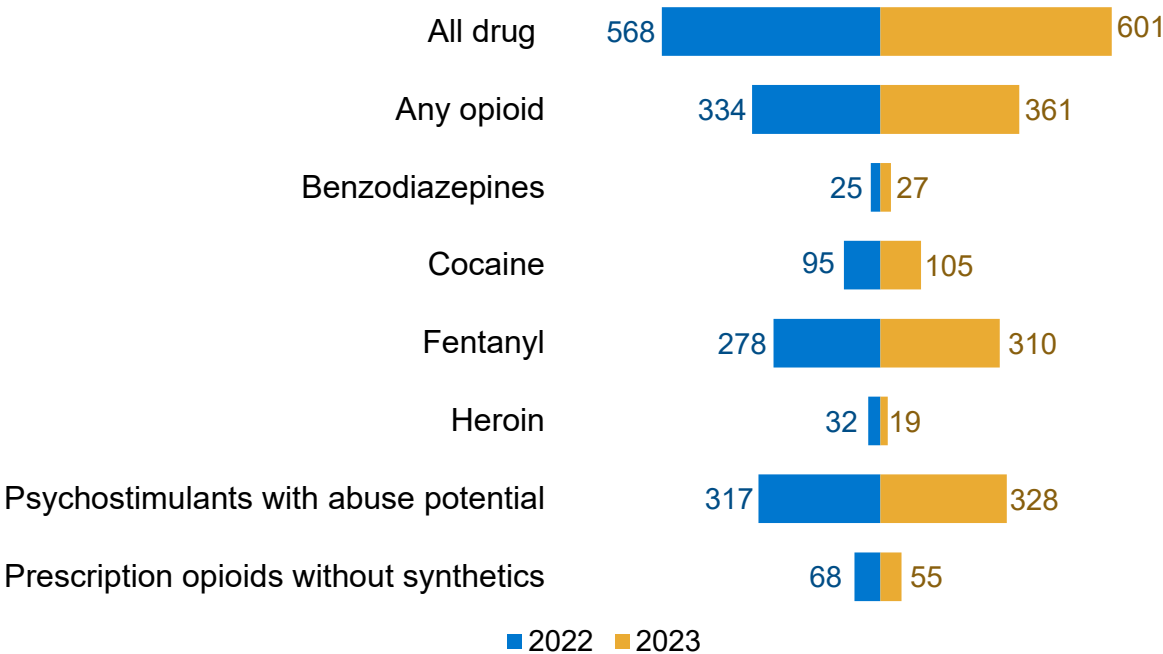
This data brief was created in accordance with Assembly Bill 1462 (Chapter 844, Statutes of 2023), providing data on California Veterans (Californians who have served in the United States Armed Forces) aged 17 and older who had a fatal drug-related overdose in 2022 or 2023. Veterans make up approximately 3.8% of the California population (approximately 1.5 out of 39 million)¹.

Drug-Related Overdose Deaths among Veterans in California by Substance Type in 2022 and 2023

Opioid-related overdose deaths were the leading cause of drug-related overdose deaths among California Veterans, followed by overdose deaths related to psychostimulants with abuse potential.

Drug-related fatal overdoses made up 1.3% of total Veteran deaths in 2023 and 1.1% in 2022. There was a slight increase (5.8%) in drug-related Veteran overdose deaths from 2022 to 2023.

Figure 1. Drug-Related Overdose Deaths among Veterans in California by Substance Type, 2022–2023



Note. Drug overdose data included in this data brief includes all overdose deaths caused by acute poisonings, regardless of intent (e.g., unintentional, intentional, assault, or undetermined).

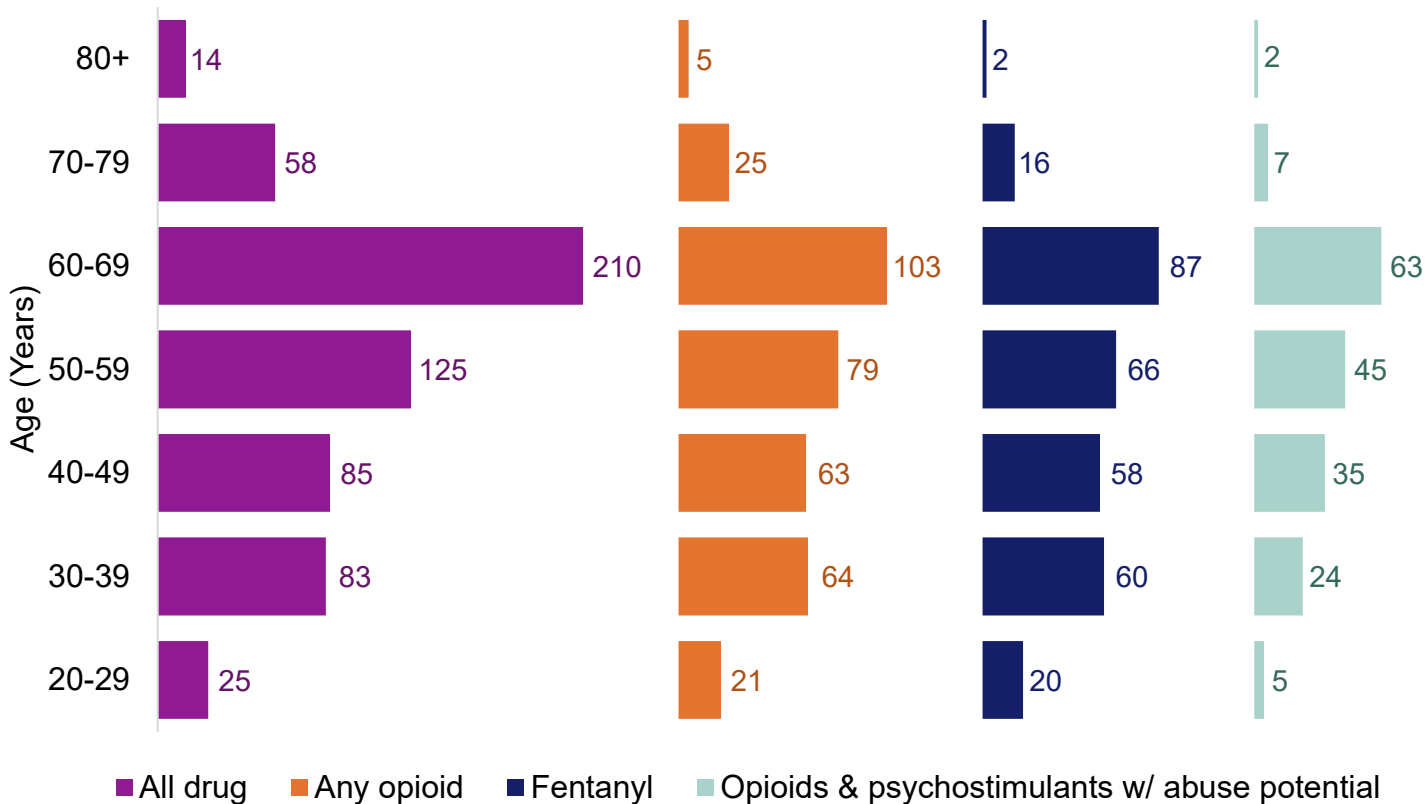
Opioid-Related Overdose Deaths among Veterans in California by Substance Type and Age, 2023

Veterans 60 to 69 years old had the highest number of all drug and opioid-related overdose deaths in 2023, as compared with other age ranges.

Among 60 to 69-year-olds, there were 103 opioid-related overdose deaths, 87 fentanyl-related overdose deaths, and 63 deaths related to both opioids and psychostimulants with abuse potential.

Overdose trends among California Veterans by substance type and age remained stable from 2022 to 2023. In 2022 (2022 age data not presented in this brief), 60 to 69-year-olds also had the highest number of all drug-related overdose deaths (193). Among 60 to 69-year-olds in 2022, there were 83 opioid-related overdose deaths, 65 fentanyl-related overdose deaths, and 40 overdose deaths related to use of both opioids and psychostimulants with abuse potential.

Figure 2. Drug-Related Overdose Deaths among Veterans in California by Substance Type and Age Group, 2023



Note. Each category in Figure 2 is displayed in the same order as the key. There were 0 drug-related overdose deaths among 17–19-year-old Veterans in 2023.

Drug-Related Overdose Deaths among Veterans in California by Race/Ethnicity and Sex, 2022-2023

Among California Veterans, White individuals and males had a greater number of drug-related overdose deaths in 2023.

The majority of Veteran drug-related overdose deaths were among non-Hispanic White individuals (57.6%, 346 deaths), followed by non-Hispanic Black/African American (21.1%, 127 deaths) and Hispanic/Latinx individuals (16.3%, 98 deaths). From 2022 to 2023, deaths among Hispanic/Latinx Veterans increased 36.1% (72 deaths in 2022, 98 deaths in 2023) and deaths among Black/African American Veterans increased 10.4% (115 deaths in 2022, 127 deaths in 2023).

Figure 3. Drug-Related Overdose Deaths among California Veterans by Race/Ethnicity, 2022-2023

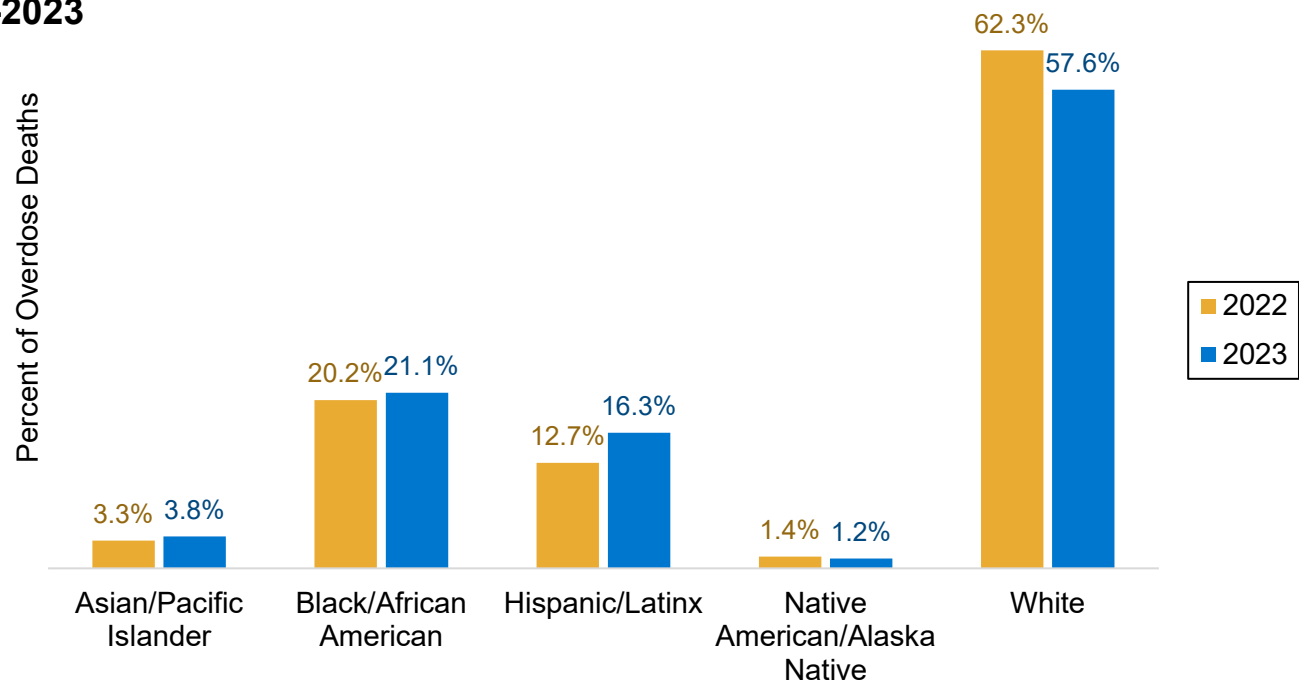
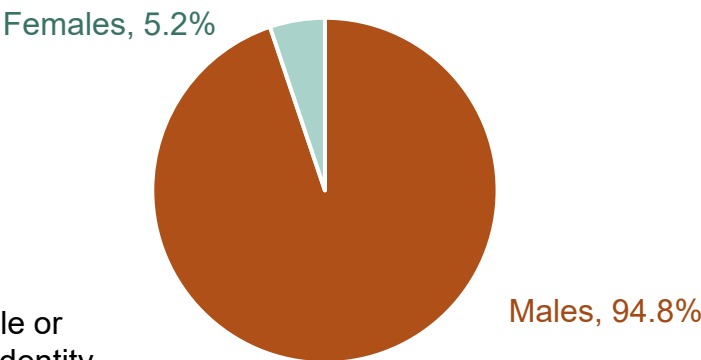


Figure 4. Drug-Related Overdose Deaths among California Veterans by Sex, 2023

Relative to drug-related overdose deaths among female Veterans (5.2%, 31 deaths), the majority of drug-related Veteran overdose deaths were among males (94.8%, 570 deaths).



Note. All individuals were reported as being either male or female. Zero were reported as being another gender identity.

Drug Overdose Deaths among Veterans in California by Demographic Characteristic and Substance Type, 2022–2023

In both 2022 and 2023, fatal drug-related overdoses among Veterans occurred more often within specific demographic groups, such as 60–69-year-old individuals, those identifying as White, and males. Most fatal Veteran overdoses were attributable to any opioid (predominantly fentanyl) and psychostimulants with abuse potential.

Table 1. Percentage of All Drug-Related Overdose Deaths by Demographic Characteristic and Substance Type Among Veterans, 2022–2023

	2022	2023
	% (n)	% (n)
Sex		
Male	93.1% (529)	94.8% (570)
Female	6.9% (39)	5.2% (31)
Age (years)		
20–29	3.9% (22)	4.2% (25)
30–39	15.7% (89)	13.8% (83)
40–49	11.8% (67)	14.1% (85)
50–59	22.4% (127)	20.8% (125)
60–69	34.0% (193)	34.9% (210)
70–79	9.5% (54)	9.7% (58)
80+	2.8% (16)	2.3% (14)
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.3% (19)	3.8% (23)
Black/African American	20.2% (115)	21.1% (127)
Hispanic/Latinx	12.7% (72)	16.3% (98)
Native American/Alaska Native	1.4% (8)	1.2% (7)
White	62.3% (354)	57.6% (346)
Substance Type		
Any opioid	58.8% (334)	60.1% (361)
Benzodiazepines	4.4% (25)	4.5% (27)
Cocaine	16.7% (95)	17.5% (105)
Fentanyl	48.9% (278)	51.6% (310)
Heroin	5.6% (32)	3.2% (19)
Psychostimulants w/ abuse potential	55.8% (317)	54.6% (328)
Rx opioids w/o synthetics	12.0% (68)	9.2% (55)
Total	568	601

Note. Substance type indicators are not mutually exclusive. Subgroups of Asian/Pacific Islander individuals are not included to prevent potential identification through reporting of small numbers of deaths.

Drug-Related Overdose Deaths among Veterans in California by County, 2022–2023

Most counties remained relatively stable from 2022 to 2023. Notably, Los Angeles county experienced a decrease in fatal drug-related Veteran overdose deaths. Butte, Contra Costa, Kern, Orange, San Francisco, Stanislaus and Tulare counties experienced increases.

In 2023, the counties with the highest percentage of drug-related Veteran fatal overdoses among all fatal overdoses included: Kings (11.1%), Solano (10.8%), Tulare (9.3%), and Madera (9.1%).

Table 2. Drug-Related Overdose Deaths among California Veterans by County of Residence, 2022–2023

County of Residence	2022	2023	County of Residence	2022	2023
Alameda	24	23	Placer	5	1
Alpine	0	0	Plumas	0	0
Amador	0	0	Riverside	41	46
Butte	4	10	Sacramento	37	39
Calaveras	*	*	San Benito	*	*
Colusa	0	0	San Bernardino	26	24
Contra Costa	8	15	San Diego	74	70
Del Norte	*	0	San Francisco	27	33
El Dorado	3	3	San Joaquin	6	10
Fresno	13	13	San Luis Obispo	4	4
Glenn	0	*	San Mateo	9	8
Humboldt	5	2	Santa Barbara	7	10
Imperial	2	0	Santa Clara	17	17
Inyo	*	*	Santa Cruz	9	11
Kern	24	32	Shasta	1	4
Kings	1	3	Sierra	0	0
Lake	*	0	Siskiyou	*	0
Lassen	*	*	Solano	11	15
Los Angeles	115	98	Sonoma	6	7
Madera	3	3	Stanislaus	3	9
Marin	3	5	Sutter	*	*
Mariposa	*	0	Tehama	*	*
Mendocino	*	*	Trinity	0	0
Merced	2	2	Tulare	4	10
Modoc	0	0	Tuolumne	*	*
Mono	*	0	Ventura	10	13
Monterey	7	5	Yolo	3	0
Napa	1	1	Yuba	*	*
Nevada	1	1	Unknown	5	12
Orange	18	24	Total	568	601

Note. * indicates masked numbers. See Technical Note on Page 6 for more information.

Data retrieved from:

California Comprehensive Master Death File 2022 and 2023

Technical Note:

- Drug overdose includes all overdose deaths caused by acute poisonings regardless of intent (e.g., unintentional, intentional, assault, or undetermined). Overdose deaths involving fentanyl and fentanyl analogs were identified using a text search algorithm. For more information on the data definitions please visit the [California Overdose Surveillance Dashboard](#).
- As required by the California Health and Human Services, Data De-Identification Guidelines (DDG), Version 1.0, (September 23, 2016), small numbers may be masked to prevent potential identification. In the case of county breakdowns in Table 2 (Page 5), cells are masked when the number of deaths and the resident population are small.

Limitations:

- This report identifies Veteran status based on responses to a single item on the death certificate (“ever in United States Armed Forces?”). Thus, responses to this item include both current and former service members. This definition of Veteran status may differ from other definitions that exclusively include individuals who have been activated for federal military service and are not in service at the time of death. The Veteran status information on death certificates may be inaccurate if those completing the form (e.g., Coroners, Funeral Homes) did not have sufficient information on the decedent’s history.
- Rates were not included in this report due to discrepancies between the definition of Veteran in data available for all California Veterans and the California Comprehensive Master Death File.
- Data are compiled from limited information on death certificates in the California Comprehensive Master Death Files produced by CDPH’s Center for Health Statistics and Informatics.
- California Assembly Bill 959 note: Sexual orientation of Veteran drug-related overdose decedents are not presented, as 2022 and 2023 California death certificate data did not include sexual orientation.
- California Assembly Bill 1726 note: Data on expanded Asian and Pacific Islander groups are not presented due to small cell sizes, which could compromise data reliability and confidentiality.

About the Overdose Prevention Initiative (OPI):

OPI works on the complex and changing nature of the drug overdose epidemic through prevention and research activities. This initiative aims to advance and amplify CDPH's unified response to reduce the harms from substance misuse and end the evolving drug overdose crisis in California through seven core strategies: 1) improve CDPH and state agency coordination, 2) improve state and local surveillance, 3) support individual and community resiliency by addressing upstream drivers of health, 4) increase public awareness and education, 5) expand naloxone access, saturation, and education, 6) promote harm reduction and drug checking services, and 7) promote treatment and reduce stigma.

Suggested Reference

Simon SG, Demeter NE, Pinsker EA, Hess C. Drug-Related Overdose Deaths among Veterans in California, 2022–2023. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Public Health, March 2025.

References

1. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2023). NCVAS State Summary California FY2023. <https://www.data.va.gov/stories/s/NCVAS-State-Summary-California-FY2023/js9q-3wam/>