



# MEDIA RELEASE

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## **Knox County Forensic Center Releases 2020 Drug-Related Death Report**

*KNOXVILLE, Tenn.*— Today, the Knox County Regional Forensic Center released its 2020 Drug-Related Death Report for Knox and Anderson Counties. The report includes data on drug-related death cases the Center investigated from 2010-2020 and is shared to advance the discussion regarding addiction.

“2020 was a tough year for a lot of people,” said Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs. “Sadly, many of those battling addiction were without the help and support they needed, and the numbers in this report reflect that.”

The number of overdose deaths in Knox County increased 41 percent compared to a 9.8 percent decrease in 2019. In Anderson County, drug overdose deaths increased 82 percent in 2020 compared to the 11.6 percent drop in 2019.

Mixed drug intoxications led the way, but fentanyl, fentanyl analogues, and some of the novel synthetic opioids continue to be the most abused drugs. Among the stimulants, methamphetamine is the drug of choice either alone or in combination with opioids.

“As we began collaborating with a number of nonprofit and governmental agencies to bring awareness to the perils of overprescribing, the numbers of overdoses started to drop,” said Dr. Darinka Mileusnic-Polchan, chief medical examiner. “Our efforts were finally paying off in 2019 as the overdose deaths began to decline. Unfortunately, 2020—the year of Coronavirus pandemic—happened and the rest is history.”

Matters were made worse, Dr. Mileusnic-Polchan said, because a great number of addicted and physically dependent individuals who needed help – whether medical assistance or psychological or physical rehabilitation – were left to their own devices.

“Business closures, job losses, social distancing, stress due to media amplified fears, economic hardship, socioeconomic unraveling of our communities, and lack of access to treatment modalities have not only negated all the head-earned success but have led to a rise in the overall mortality from unnatural causes, including drugs,” she added.

In Knox and Anderson counties, young and middle-age men continued to be disproportionately affected by drug overdose compared to women and, in Knox County, the ratio of black to white overdose deaths is 1 to 9, which reflects the community’s demographic makeup.

“The overdose epidemic in Knox County, like that in the nation overall, continues to grow in magnitude, but is also changing in character,” said Chris Thomas, Senior Director of the Knox County Regional Forensic Center. “In 2020, 413 people died from drug overdose in Knox County compared to 293 in 2019 and 51 people died in Anderson County compared to 28 in 2019. Preliminary data for drug-deaths in 2021 unfortunately indicates an even more upward trend for drug-related death cases in Knox County.”

As outlined in the full text of the report, the data is drawn only from drug-related deaths in Knox and Anderson Counties between 2010 and 2020 that were investigated by the medical examiner. Some key findings from the report include:

- Fentanyl and fentanyl analogues (synthetic opioids) were the most frequently identified drugs in drug-related deaths in 2020.
- Polypharmacy, which is when more than one drug is responsible for death, was involved in 72 percent of Knox County’s and 80 percent of Anderson County’s overdose deaths.
- The five most common drugs identified in drug-related deaths in 2020 were synthetic opioids, methamphetamine, alcohol/ethanol, heroin and cocaine.
- Prescription opioid-related deaths continue to decrease in the Regional Forensic Center jurisdictions.
- People 34-44 years experienced the most drug deaths in Knox County, but the sharpest increase was in individuals age 55 to 64.

The full report is available [here](#).

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