

Drug deaths now outnumber traffic fatalities in U.S., data show

Fueling the surge are prescription pain and anxiety drugs that are potent, highly addictive and especially dangerous when combined with one another or with other drugs or alcohol.



Lori Smith of Aliso Viejo with photographs of her son Nolan, who died of a drug overdose in January 2009, six months shy of his 16th birthday. A toxicology test turned up Zoloft, which had been prescribed for anxiety, and a host of other drugs that had not been prescribed, including two additional anti-anxiety drugs, as well as morphine and marijuana. (Liz O. Baylen / Los Angeles Times / September 18, 2011)



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By Lisa Girion, Scott Glover and Doug Smith, Los Angeles Times

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Propelled by an increase in prescription narcotic overdoses, drug deaths now outnumber traffic fatalities in the United States, a Times analysis of government data has found.

Drugs exceeded motor vehicle accidents as a cause of death in 2009, killing at least 37,485 people nationwide, according to preliminary data from the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

While most major causes of preventable death are declining, drugs are an exception. The death toll has doubled in the last decade, now claiming a life every 14 minutes. By contrast, traffic accidents have been dropping for decades because of huge investments in auto safety.

Public health experts have used the comparison to draw attention to the nation's growing [prescription drug](#) problem, which they characterize as an epidemic. This is the first time that drugs have accounted for more fatalities than traffic accidents since the government started tracking drug-induced deaths in 1979.

Fueling the surge in deaths are prescription [pain](#) and [anxiety](#) drugs that are potent, highly addictive and especially dangerous when combined with one another or with other drugs or alcohol. Among the most commonly abused are [OxyContin](#), [Vicodin](#), [Xanax](#) and Soma. One relative newcomer to the scene is Fentanyl, a painkiller that comes in the form of patches and lollipops and is 100 times more powerful than morphine.

Such drugs now cause more deaths than [heroin](#) and cocaine combined.

"The problem is right here under our noses in our medicine cabinets," said Laz Salinas, a sheriff's commander in Santa Barbara, which has seen a dramatic rise in prescription drug deaths in recent years.

Overdose victims range in age and circumstance from teenagers who pop pills to get a heroin-like high to middle-aged working men and women who take medications prescribed for strained backs

and bum knees and become addicted.

A review of hundreds of autopsy reports in Southern California reveals one tragic demise after another: A 19-year-old Army recruit, who had just passed his military physical, took a handful of Xanax and painkillers while partying with friends. A groom, anxious over his upcoming wedding, overdosed on a cocktail of prescription drugs. A teenage honors student overdosed on painkillers her father left in his medicine cabinet from a surgery years earlier. A toddler was orphaned after both parents overdosed on prescription drugs months apart. A grandmother suffering from chronic back pain apparently forgot she'd already taken her daily regimen of pills and ended up double dosing.

Many died after failed attempts at rehab — or after using one too many times while contemplating quitting. That's apparently what happened to a San Diego woman found dead with a Fentanyl patch on her body, one of five she'd applied in the 24 hours before her death. Next to her on the couch was a notebook with information about rehab.

The seeds of the problem were planted more than a decade ago by well-meaning efforts by doctors to mitigate suffering, as well as aggressive sales campaigns by pharmaceutical manufacturers. In hindsight, the liberalized prescription of pain drugs "may in fact be the cause of the epidemic we're now facing," said Linda Rosenstock, dean of the UCLA School of Public Health.

In some ways, prescription drugs are more dangerous than illicit ones because users don't have their guard up, said Los Angeles County Sheriff's Sgt. Steve Opferman, head of a county task force on prescription drug-related crimes. "People feel they are safer with prescription drugs because you get them from a pharmacy and they are prescribed by a doctor," Opferman said. "Younger people believe they are safer because they see their parents taking them. It doesn't have the same stigma as using street narcotics."

Lori Smith said she believes that's what her son might have been thinking the night he died six months shy of his 16th birthday. Nolan Smith, of Aliso Viejo, loved to surf, sail and fish with his brother and father. He suffered from migraines and anxiety but showed no signs of drug abuse, his mother said.

The night before he died in January 2009, Nolan called his mother at work, asking for a ride to the girls basketball game at Aliso Niguel High School. Lori told him she couldn't get away.

When Nolan didn't come home that evening, his parents called police and his friends. His body was found the next morning on a stranger's front porch.

A toxicology test turned up Zoloft, which had been prescribed for anxiety, and a host of other drugs that had not been prescribed, including two additional anti-anxiety drugs, as well as morphine and marijuana.

All investigators could give the family were theories.

"They said they will have parties where the kids will throw a bunch of pills in a bowl and the kids take them without knowing what they are," Lori said. "We called all of his friends, but no one would say they were with him. But he must have been with someone. You just don't do that by yourself."

The triumph of public health policies that have improved traffic safety over the years through the use of seat belts, air bags and other measures stands in stark contrast to the nation's record on prescription drugs. Even though more people are driving more miles, traffic fatalities have dropped by more than a third since the early 1970s to 36,284 in 2009. Drug-induced deaths had equaled or surpassed traffic fatalities in California, 22 other states and the District of Columbia even before the 2009 figures revealed the shift at the national level, according to the Times analysis.