# UK faces worsening drug death crisis amid rising mortality in under-50s



The UK is increasingly being characterised as “the sick person of the wealthy world,” a stark observation stemming from a comprehensive report by the Health Foundation thinktank. This research highlights a troubling rise in mortality rates, particularly among individuals under 50, as the nation grapples with soaring incidents of drug-related deaths, suicides, and violence. In fact, while mortality rates for conditions like cancer and heart disease have seen considerable declines, the opposite trend is noted in cases of injuries, accidents, and notably, drug poisonings.

According to this international study, which scrutinised health and death data across 22 affluent nations, the UK's rate of drug-related fatalities was recorded at nearly three times higher in 2019 than the median for other studied countries. This alarming statistic emphasizes the steep trajectory of drug fatality rates in the UK, particularly when juxtaposed against favourable trends elsewhere. In the UK, deaths among women aged 25 to 49 soared by 46% and among men by 31% from 1990 to 2023, marking a distressing shift opposite that seen in 19 of the other participating nations, where mortality has decreased.

Jennifer Dixon, the chief executive of the Health Foundation, asserts that the report serves as a wake-up call that institutions can no longer afford to ignore. “The UK is becoming the sick person of the wealthy world, especially for people of working age,” she remarked, underscoring the stagnation in health improvements compared to the proactive measures adopted by other countries. Dixon pointed to the slowdown in progress regarding death rates since 1990, particularly during the austerity measures enacted following the coalition government's decisions post-2010. Factors such as smoking, alcohol misuse, and poor diet are further complicating the UK's health crisis.

Recent figures from the Office for National Statistics reveal that drug-related deaths in England and Wales reached a staggering 5,448 in 2023, marking an 11% increase from the previous year and hitting the highest level recorded since data collection began in 1993. Almost half of these fatalities involved opiates, such as heroin and morphine, with cocaine-related deaths also surging 30.5% year-on-year, the highest ever reported. Regional disparities exacerbate this crisis, with the North East consistently exhibiting the highest rates of drug-poisoning deaths, three times greater than those in London, which records the lowest incidence.

Echoing this growing alarm, Robin Pollard, head of policy at the drug charity WithYou, stated that improving accessibility to naloxone, a vital emergency antidote for overdoses, is essential in combating these rising fatalities. The charity, alongside the Local Government Association, urges for enhanced support structures that facilitate getting drug users into structured treatment, essential for reducing the death toll.

The Department of Health and Social Care remains on alert regarding drug-related threats, professing a commitment to reducing deaths from drug misuse and supporting recovery. Nonetheless, the rising numbers demand immediate and sustained action.

In Scotland, drug-related deaths were similarly grim, with an increase to 1,172 in 2023, showing a marked rise from previous years. Reports indicate that these deaths, predominantly involving opiates, reflect a nationwide crisis affecting those at a critical stage in life.

This overall pattern paints a troubling picture: the UK's health landscape is fraying, necessitating urgent intervention and a radical overhaul in public health policy to address an epidemic that is becoming increasingly acute. There is a pressing need for the government and society as a whole to confront the stark realities of drug misuse and mortality, fostering a commitment to reversing these negative trends before they deepen further.

### Reference Map

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Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/20/uk-sick-person-of-wealthy-world-deaths-drugs-violence> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/20/uk-sick-person-of-wealthy-world-deaths-drugs-violence> - An article from The Guardian discusses a report by the Health Foundation thinktank, which highlights the UK's rising mortality rates, particularly among individuals under 50. The report indicates that while deaths from cancer and heart disease have decreased, deaths from injuries, accidents, and poisonings have increased, with a significant rise in drug-related fatalities. The UK's drug-related death rate in 2019 was three times higher than the median of 21 other countries studied. The report also notes that deaths among women aged 25 to 49 rose by 46% and among men by 31% between 1990 and 2023.
3. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsrelatedtodrugpoisoninginenglandandwales/2023registrations> - The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reports that in 2023, there were 5,448 deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales, marking an 11% increase from the previous year. The data indicates that nearly half of these deaths involved opiates, such as heroin or morphine. The report also highlights regional disparities, with the North East recording the highest rate of drug-poisoning deaths for the 11th consecutive year, three times higher than London, which had the lowest rate.
4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy5l4nknew0o> - A BBC News article reports that in 2023, England and Wales registered 5,448 deaths related to drug poisoning, an 11% rise from the previous year and the highest level since records began in 1993. The article notes that just under half of these deaths involved opiates such as heroin, while the number of cocaine-related deaths rose for the 12th consecutive year. The North East recorded the highest rate of drug-poisoning deaths by region for the 11th consecutive year, three times higher than London, which had the lowest rate.
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/9d668480-87e4-4eb9-a095-a8f0a6895eae> - The Financial Times reports that in 2023, drug-related deaths in England and Wales reached a record high, with fatalities increasing by 11% to 5,448. The article highlights a significant rise in cocaine-related deaths, which increased by 30.5% to 1,118, marking the 12th consecutive year of rising fatalities. The report also notes that men accounted for almost 80% of fatalities where cocaine was mentioned on the death certificate and that the North East had the highest rate of drug-poisoning deaths among all English regions for the 11th year running.
6. <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/news/2024/drug-misuse-deaths-increase> - National Records of Scotland reports that in 2023, 1,172 people died due to drug misuse, an increase of 121 deaths compared with 2022. The report indicates that drug misuse deaths are more common than they were in 2000, with the rate of drug misuse deaths in 2023 being 4.2 times as high as in 2000. The average age of drug misuse deaths has also increased from 32 to 45 since 2000. Opiates and opioids, including heroin, morphine, and methadone, were implicated in 80% of all deaths.
7. <https://www.priorygroup.com/addiction-treatment/drug-rehab/drug-abuse-statistics-uk> - The Priory Group provides statistics on drug use and drug-related deaths in the UK. In 2023, England and Wales recorded 5,448 drug-related deaths, marking an 11% increase from the previous year. Cocaine-related deaths surged by 30% to 1,118 in 2023, approximately ten times higher than in 2011. Opiate-related deaths, involving substances like heroin, accounted for almost half of the total drug-related deaths in 2023. The report also notes that in 2021, the UK's drug-related death rate was 5.2 per 1,000, higher than the global average of 1.6 but lower than the United States' rate of 19.5.